

Stories and Significations: Interpreting the Legacies of Count Basie and His Music

by

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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

Approved April 2023 by the  
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2023

## ABSTRACT

William “Count” Basie (1904-1984) is one of the most beloved and imitated figures in American music. His name has long been ubiquitous among jazz scholars, critics, and practitioners. Basie’s sparse, minimalistic piano idiolect is immediately recognizable, and the 4/4 swing aesthetic of his Kansas City-born jazz orchestra is a cornerstone of the big band idiom. “Stories and Significations” critically examines prevailing narratives about Basie’s biography and musical output, many of which have not been substantively reconsidered since the 1980s. Through an interdisciplinary synthesis of methods ranging from Afrodiasporic modes of musical analysis, archival research, critical historiography, and African American literary theory, this project serves to enrich Basie’s legacy while also critiquing the mythology surrounding it. By signifying on the traditional “Life and Music” paradigm of jazz biography, in “Stories and Significations” I use preexisting scholarly and critical discourses as points of departure for critique while also offering scholars and practitioners new ways to write, talk, and think about Basie. In doing so, I bring Basie, the stories of his life, and the Significations in his music into the rich scholarly discourse of the New Jazz Studies that has added such valuable depth and detail to the legacies of numerous other figures in jazz history such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Miles Davis.

## DEDICATION

To my wife Jordanna: an angel, standing in a shaft of light.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As a student of Arizona State University, I acknowledge that the Tempe campus sits on the ancestral homelands of those American Indian tribes that have inhabited this place for centuries, including the Akimel O’odham (Pima) and Pee Posh (Maricopa) peoples. This work would not have been possible without my faculty mentors at ASU: Christi Jay Wells, Michael Kocour, Catherine Saucier, Peter Schmelz, Julie Krause, Kay Norton, Ted Solís, Jeff Libman, Dom Moio, Dennis Monce, and Lewis Nash. Their collective support across the disciplines of musicology and jazz performance and the opportunities they have granted me have fostered my growth as a scholar, performer, and pedagogue. In particular, I thank Dr. Wells for seeing the scholarly potential in me and working so consistently to cultivate it. Thank you to my mother for instilling in me a love of music and a thirst for knowledge. I also owe a great deal to my colleagues in the Phoenix music scene who have helped guide me through this doctorate, particularly Dan Puccio and his generous sharing of knowledge and experience. To the staff of the Wandering Tortoise, I am grateful for such a comfortable space to write a good deal of this dissertation, and to the Hamilton family, thank you for the incredibly convenient parking. And finally, I thank my wife Jordanna for the constant encouragement, inspiration, and for inadvertently becoming an expert on my research.

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## INTRODUCTION

Jazz is a storyteller's music. From social interactions between sets and reminiscing about bygone eras and players to the well-known analogies that liken improvising to "telling a story," this vein of Black American music is inseparable from the act of communicating narratives. It is within this rich vernacular discourse that jazz musicians' legacies are formed, enshrined, and questioned over the course of generations. At times, fresh narratives arise which result in a new appreciation for previously misunderstood artists; at others, shifting value systems upend formerly unquestionable legacies. Vernacular legacy-making is indeed part of the fabric of jazz culture, but over the past thirty years, scholars have also pushed the boundaries of this discourse. In the wake of Scott DeVeaux's groundbreaking 1991 essay on the myopic rigidity of the "jazz tradition" constructed throughout the twentieth century, scholars of the "New Jazz Studies" have adopted interdisciplinary approaches geared toward critiquing received knowledge surrounding the legacies of jazz musicians such as Duke Ellington, Mary Lou Williams, Billy Strayhorn, Fletcher Henderson, Billie Holiday, Bud Powell, Charles Mingus, Thelonious Monk, Lester Young, and Ella Fitzgerald.<sup>1</sup> Thanks to in-depth

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<sup>1</sup> Scott DeVeaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography," in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 483-512. On Ellington, see: Harvey G. Cohen, *Duke Ellington's America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Douglas Malcolm, "'Myriad Subtleties': Subverting Racism through Irony in the Music of Duke Ellington and Dizzy Gillespie," *Black Music Research Journal* 35, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 185-227; Mark Tucker ed., *The Duke Ellington Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Mark Tucker, *Ellington: The Early Years* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995). On Williams, see: Tammy Kernodle, "Anything you are shows up in your music," (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1997), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global; Tammy Kernodle, "Black Women Working Together: Jazz, Gender, and the Politics of Validation," *Black Music Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (2014): 27-55; Tammy Kernodle, *Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004). On Strayhorn, see: Lisa Barg, "Queer Encounters in the Music of Billy Strayhorn," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66, no. 3 (2013): 771-824; Lisa Barg, "Working Behind the

musical analysis, historiographical scrutinization, and the introduction of sociological lenses for interrogating gender, race, sexuality, and socioeconomics, the narratives of such jazz musicians have become richer, more complicated, and more worthy of retelling.

Yet within this storytelling also lie the legacies of figures in jazz history that remain conspicuously unchanged, as if held in hagiographic suspended animation. The legacy of one such individual—William “Count” Basie (1904-1984)—is the focus of this project. Basie is one of the most beloved and imitated figures in American music. His name has long been ubiquitous among jazz scholars, critics, and practitioners. His sparse, minimalistic piano idiolect is instantly recognizable and the 4/4 swing aesthetic of his Kansas City-born jazz orchestra is a cornerstone of the big band idiom. Yet, since the middle of the twentieth century, the narratives surrounding Basie’s legacy have remained largely constant. Significantly, the scholarly discourse surrounding Basie came to a halt just before the New Jazz Studies paradigm shift, so Basie’s life and music have received

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Scenes: Gender, Sexuality, and Collaboration in the Vocal Arrangements of Billy Strayhorn,” *Women & music* 18, no. 1 (2014): 24-47; Walter van de Leur, *Something to Live For: The Music of Billy Strayhorn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). On Henderson, see: Jeffrey Magee, *The Uncrowned King of Swing: Fletcher Henderson and Big Band Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). On Holiday, see: Maya C. Gibson, “Alternate Takes: Billie Holiday at the Intersection of Black Cultural Studies and Historical Musicology,” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global; Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery* (New York: Free Press, 2001); Robert G. O’Meally, *Lady Day: The Many Faces of Billie Holiday* (New York: Arcade, 1991). On Powell, see: Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *The Amazing Bud Powell: Black Genius Jazz History, and the Challenge of Bebop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013). On Mingus, see: Nichole Rustin-Paschal, *The Kind of Man I Am: Jazzmasculinity and the World of Charles Mingus Jr.* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017). On Monk, see: Robin D. G. Kelley, *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original* (New York: Free Press, 2009). On Young, see: Lewis Porter, *Lester Young* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005). On Ella Fitzgerald, see: Christi Jay Wells (née Christopher J. Wells), “‘A Dreadful Bit of Silliness’: Feminine Frivolity and Ella Fitzgerald’s Early Critical Reception,” *Women and Music* 21 (2017): 43-65).

scant critical engagement.<sup>2</sup> An excerpt from Raymond Horricks' 1957 book *Count Basie and His Orchestra* encapsulates a good deal of the discourse on Basie that would follow:

Count Basie has led a private life and a musical one remarkably free from complication...Simplicity is perhaps the surest keyword to his personality—as indeed it is to his singular musical style. Just as his piano playing is devoid of glamorous cascades of notes and superfluous runs, and his orchestra free from unnecessary technical displays, so his life has escaped being cluttered up to choking point with intrigues, enormous affectations of manner and even the shoulder chips of tree-like proportions which so many artistic figures deliberately make a part of their daily burden.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, Horricks' assessment of Basie's musical style is generally accurate, and Basie's autobiography *Good Morning Blues* certainly communicates no obvious "shoulder chips."<sup>4</sup> As a result, the knowledge from mid-century critics and scholars—the very target of New Jazz Studies' critical methodology—has often stood in place of scrutinization and interpretation of Basie's legacy. A primary purpose of this dissertation is to critically examine such prevailing narratives about Basie's biography and musical body of work. Through an interdisciplinary approach featuring critical historiography, archival research, African American literary theory, and Afrodiasporic modes of musical analysis, I provide new avenues for interpreting Basie's life and music that build upon the New Jazz Studies paradigm. Furthermore, I build upon of this scholarly discourse by

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<sup>2</sup> One notable exception is Mark Tucker's insightful essay on Basie's piano style. Though it predates DeVaux's seminal essay, Tucker's critiques of Eurocentric conceptualizations of Basie's idiolect are certainly in line with the New Jazz Studies paradigm. Mark Tucker, "Count Basie and the Piano That Swings the Band," *Popular Music* 5 (1985): 45-79.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Horricks, *Count Basie and His Orchestra* (New York: Citadel Press, 1957), 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> Count Basie and Albert Murray, *Good Morning Blues: The Autobiography of Count Basie, As Told to Albert Murray* (New York: Random House, 1985). For more on *Good Morning Blues*, its reception, and the related collaboration between Basie and Murray, see chapter two of this dissertation.

demonstrating subjective, interpretive approaches to discussing Basie through which I read between the lines of unknowable aspects of his life and music.

This dissertation is divided into two parts: “Stories” and “Significations.” The first two chapters—“Stories”—address Basie’s biographical narrative as it was conveyed during his lifetime. By drawing from numerous primary sources such as *The Chicago Defender*, *Life*, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, and *Down Beat*, I shed light on an overlooked portion of Basie’s biography by framing it within a broader tapestry of cultural, artistic, and professional circumstances.<sup>5</sup> I also examine Basie’s own rendering of his career: his autobiography *Good Morning Blues*, which he co-authored with literary, cultural, and musical critic Albert Murray. In interpreting *Good Morning Blues* alongside Murray’s contemporaneous ideological stances, I offer fresh pathways for hermeneutical engagement with Basie’s autobiography. The second half of this document—“Significations”—deals with Basie’s music and the ways it has been written about by musicologists and critics. I place various elements of Basie’s music, commonly reduced to the broad aesthetics of his orchestra, into dialogue with Afrodiasporic literary and musical theories traceable to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s concept of Signifyin(g). In so doing, I demonstrate that the individual and collective styles of Basie and his orchestra may be usefully interpreted through analytical frameworks which lie beyond the confines of European formalism. Ultimately, a unifying theme emerges between the two sections: collaboration. Whether it be the partnerships between Basie and his musical contemporaries or with his autobiographical co-author, or those of the intergenerational rhetorical and musical discourses which—as I show in chapters three and four—are

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<sup>5</sup> For a full list of cited publications, see page 245.

foundational to Black American musical idioms, each narrative I illustrate in this dissertation shows how the complexities of Basie's life and music are better understood when viewed as products of a constellation of motivating factors and discursive collaborations.

## **Literature Review**

### **Count Basie**

Raymond Horricks' 1957 book *Count Basie and His Orchestra* is the first substantial work on Basie and his ensemble.<sup>6</sup> The first section of the book addresses Basie's Kansas City style as well as his identities as a pianist and a bandleader. The latter half is made up of miniature biographies of the sidemen in the "Old Basie Band" and the "New Basie Band." This bifurcation of Basie's narrative—often referred to as the "Old Testament" (1936-1950) and "New Testament" (1952-1984) Basie bands—is extremely common in Basie discourse, and I address this paradigm and its implications in this dissertation's first chapter. That this two-act narrative from 1957 remains the primary framework for understanding Basie's life underlines the degree to which his biographical legacy has remained unchanged since the middle of the twentieth century. Horricks' discography was compiled by Alun Morgan who would go on in 1984 to publish his own brief biography of Basie with a more robust discography.<sup>7</sup> After Horricks in 1957, the next jazz writer to pen a book on Basie was Stanley Dance in 1980: *The World of Count*

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<sup>6</sup> Horricks, *Count Basie and His Orchestra*.

<sup>7</sup> Morgan, *Count Basie*.

*Basie*.<sup>8</sup> An assemblage of oral histories more than a chronological biography, this book’s bibliography—devoid of Black authors—underlines what George Lipsitz has termed the “possessive investment in whiteness” that shaped much of jazz discourse from this time.<sup>9</sup> In chapter one, I address how “possessive investments” by mid-century jazz critics shaped the legacies of Basie and his contemporaries during this period. Five years after Dance’s book was released, Basie published his autobiography entitled *Good Morning Blues*.<sup>10</sup> Co-written by literary, musical, and cultural critic Albert Murray, this widely cited book is informed by Murray’s extensive archival and ethnographic research as well as by his interviews with Basie, who was himself well-versed in Murray’s writings on Black American music (as I discuss in depth in chapter two). Chris Sheridan’s *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography* from 1986 is the most robust scholarly work on Basie to date and was invaluable to this dissertation.<sup>11</sup> In over thirteen-hundred pages, Sheridan provides a life-spanning discography and tour itinerary, complete lists of musical arrangements and collaborators, and relevant historical contextualization peppered throughout. These works by Horricks, Dance, Sheridan, and Morgan, while often valuable for their historical insights and encyclopedic information, exemplify the sort of “great man” analytical paradigm that I critique throughout this project.

Basie is also addressed substantively in broader musicological and jazz studies. André Hodeir voices early criticisms in 1962 vis-à-vis Basie’s piano style and the

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<sup>8</sup> Dance, *The World of Count Basie*.

<sup>9</sup> George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*.

<sup>11</sup> Chris Sheridan. *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, *Discographies 22*, ed. Michael Gray (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986).

aesthetic of the Basie Orchestra in his essays “The Count Basie Riddle” and “Basie’s Way” from *Toward Jazz*.<sup>12</sup> Two decades later, musicologist Mark Tucker offered an insightful counter to Hodeir’s brusque conclusions about Basie’s music that foreshadow the New Jazz Studies paradigm of the subsequent decades.<sup>13</sup> Offering a more traditional view of Basie and Kansas City, Eileen Southern’s *The Music of Black Americans: A History* includes a subsection in which she outlines how Basie’s Old Testament band exemplifies the stylistic hallmarks of the Kansas City jazz scene during the early 1930s through the mid-1940s.<sup>14</sup> More recent histories of music in the Southwestern territories such as Douglas Henry Daniels’ *Kansas City Jazz: From Ragtime to Bebop — A History* and Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix’s *One O’clock Jump: The Unforgettable History of the Oklahoma City Blue Devils* also offer rich insights into the sociocultural context of Basie’s early career.<sup>15</sup> Gunther Schuller mentions Basie in relation to the Blue Devils and the Bennie Moten Orchestra in *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development*, but Schuller says little about Basie himself in this book.<sup>16</sup> Yet, Schuller’s 1989 sequel *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz 1930-1945* delves far deeper into Basie and his music. Here, Schuller analyzes the musical character of Basie’s piano playing and his orchestra’s rhythm section, draws lines of influence between Basie and other

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<sup>12</sup> Hodeir, *Toward Jazz*, 97-108, 109-116.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Tucker, “Count Basie and the Piano That Swings the Band,” *Popular Music* 5 (1985): 45-79.

<sup>14</sup> Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971).

<sup>15</sup> Douglas Henry Daniels, *One O’clock Jump: The Unforgettable History of the Oklahoma City Blue Devils* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006). Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz: From Ragtime to Bebop — A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Lewis A. Erenberg, *Swingin’ the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Schuller’s most substantial writing on Basie in this book is found in his discussion of the Bennie Moten Orchestra: Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 295-297.

contemporaneous musicians, discusses Basie's collaborations with Benny Goodman, and compares Basie's band from the 1930s-1940s with that from the 1950s-1960s, once again reinforcing the bifurcated biographical narrative that I interrogate critically in chapter one.<sup>17</sup>

Basie also appears frequently in twentieth-century jazz critical discourse. Dave Dexter Jr.'s 1946 *Jazz Cavalcade: The Inside Story of Jazz*—one of the earliest works of jazz history published in the United States—is one of the few secondary sources involving Basie written during his Old Testament period.<sup>18</sup> George T. Simon's later book *The Big Bands* is structured similarly, but includes a much more robust section on Basie which frames his Kansas City style as a nostalgic balm to new stylistic currents during the 1960s.<sup>19</sup> In 1977, Gary Giddens lamented the New Testament Basie band's ostensible loss of this antiquated charm, claiming that the contemporaneous iteration of the ensemble played too loud and placed insufficient emphasis on heroic individual soloists.<sup>20</sup> Giddens' prioritization of the Old Testament aesthetic resembles Albert Murray's perspective on Basie in his book *Stomping the Blues*, in which Murray argues that the musical elements of improvisatory arrangements known as "head charts," compounding of repeated riffs, and the "Four/Four" rhythmic pattern—all cornerstones of Basie's Kansas City-born Old Testament style—synthesized to symbolically evoke the

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<sup>17</sup> On Basie's piano playing: Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 244-245. On the Basie rhythm section: Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 226-230, 240-241, 244-245. On influence of Basie band: Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 764-767. On Basie and Goodman: Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 240-241. On Basie's band 1930s-1940s: Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 228-260. On Basie's band 1950s-1960s: Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 260-262.

<sup>18</sup> Dexter, *Jazz Cavalcade*.

<sup>19</sup> George T. Simon, *The Big Bands* (1967; repr., New York: Collier Books, 1974).

<sup>20</sup> Gary Giddens, "The Institutionalization of Count Basie," In *Riding on a Blue Note: Jazz and American Pop* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2000), 87.

celebratory effect of African American social gatherings. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. also pointed to these aspects of Basie's Old Testament Kansas City style as analogous to the cyclical process of revision via formal repetition central to his theorization of African American vernacular rhetoric. Throughout chapters three and four, I use Gates' theory of Signifyin(g) and the musicological theories and music analytical paradigms derived from it to critique this prevailing discourse that frames the styles of Basie's Old and New Testament eras as neatly distinct from each other.

### **Jazz Historiography**

All the books written solely about Count Basie's life and career were published between the 1950s and the 1980s, so they predate the New Jazz Studies methodologies that revolutionized scholarly jazz studies in the 1990s. Since each chapter of this dissertation critiques and recontextualizes various elements of the historiography of Basie's life and music, I draw substantial methodological and ideological inspiration from the works of New Jazz Studies scholars such as Scott DeVaux, Ingrid Monson, Sherrie Tucker, Krin Gabbard, Mark Tucker, and Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., all of whom have endeavored to complicate twentieth-century renderings of jazz history by authors such as Martin Williams, Hughes Panassié, Dave Dexter, Jr., and André Hodeir that emphasize a linear, evolutionary progression of canonic figures.<sup>21</sup> DeVaux has argued that jazz history has been heavily shaped by historians and critics who sought to frame

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<sup>21</sup> Dave Dexter Jr., *Jazz Cavalcade: The Inside Story of Jazz* (New York: Criterion, 1946). André Hodeir, *Toward Jazz* (New York: Grove Press, 1960). Hugues Panassié, *Hot Jazz: The Guide to Swing Music* (1936; repr., Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1970). Hugues Panassié, *The Real Jazz* (1942; repr., Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1960). Martin Williams, *The Jazz Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

jazz with the same “platitudinous certainty” common to western European music history.<sup>22</sup> This critical perspective has been essential to scrutinizing neo-traditionalist tellings of jazz history—such as Ken Burns’ widely viewed 2001 PBS documentary *Jazz*—which hold the view that avant-garde currents and stylistic fusions constitute a loss of the music’s ostensibly “true” identity.<sup>23</sup> As George Lipsitz writes, the Burns *Jazz* docuseries “paralyzes the present by locating all worthy achievement in the past.”<sup>24</sup> Notably pushing the boundaries these scholars have identified, Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., has shown that a holistic methodology based in history, ethnography, and analysis offers avenues for connecting seemingly disparate musical expressions together under the broad rubric of Black American music: an approach I apply to Basie’s music in chapters three and four.<sup>25</sup>

Researchers have also expanded the parameters of jazz scholarship to include contexts ignored by traditional, formalist conceptions of the music. Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, Sherrie Tucker, and Christi Jay Wells have broadened the scope of jazz history by focusing on the significantly related, yet often marginalized, realm of Black vernacular dance.<sup>26</sup> Krin Gabbard has studied American cinema to examine how the

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<sup>22</sup> DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” 528.

<sup>23</sup> Geoffrey Jacques, Bernard Gendron, Sherrie Tucker, Krin Gabbard, and Scott DeVeaux, “Call and Response: A Roundtable on Ken Burns Jazz,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 13, no. 2 (2001): 207-225.

<sup>24</sup> George Lipsitz, “Jazz: The Hidden History of Nationalist Multiculturalism,” reprinted in Robert Walser ed., *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 416.

<sup>25</sup> Ramsey, *Race Music*.

<sup>26</sup> Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin’: The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990). Sherrie Tucker, *Dance Floor Democracy: The Social Geography of Memory at the Hollywood Canteen* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). Christi Jay Wells, *Between Beats: The Jazz Tradition and Black Vernacular Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

medium has solidified a general understanding of jazz music as being a matter of “race, sexuality, and spectacle.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, ethnomusicological perspectives have also come to the forefront in the more recent jazz scholarship of Monson, Ramsey, Patrick Burke, Travis A. Jackson, and Paul F. Berliner, who offer insights on how performers learn, perceive, and approach the music. I apply Ramsey’s memory-based methodology for musical analysis in chapters three and four, furthering the ethnomusicological connection with Afrodiasporic theorizations of jazz works.

Also essential to critiquing constructed musical canons has been feminist musicology, which has come to factor significantly into the critical impetus of New Jazz Studies. For example, in her influential expansion of DeVeaux’s essay, Sherrie Tucker argues that critiques of the linear organization of jazz history serves to “[bridge] jazz studies and feminist historiography.”<sup>28</sup> Tucker refers to an “analytic of power” which enables jazz scholars to “understand *why* certain artists, musics, and histories had been overshadowed, [and] why the straight line of one genius/one style leading to another prevailed as a dominant narrative.”<sup>29</sup> Tucker warns, though, that jazz scholars who endeavor to disrupt such historical certainty must ensure that their work does not become so esoteric that it fails to reach new generations of scholars and performers:

As specialists, we may rejoice in our clever attempts to invent porous bottles—narrative strategies that are multifocal and “relentlessly critical” and that refuse to hold our “subjectless subjects.” But while these experiments in leaky vessels may

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<sup>27</sup> Krin Gabbard, *Jammin’ on the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Sherrie Tucker, “Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition: The ‘Subjectless Subject’ of New Jazz Studies,” In *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries*, ed. David Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Goldmark (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 207.

<sup>29</sup> Tucker, “Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition,” 209.

stimulate us as scholars, to what do we serve our students who may never have tried jazz before taking our course?<sup>30</sup>

Tucker's feminist approach to jazz scholarship in *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s* demonstrates how "multifocal" narratives can successfully walk this line by foregrounding the lived, practical experiences of marginalized individuals.<sup>31</sup> This approach bolsters Kimberly Francis' claim that feminist-inspired methodology can usefully complicate received canonic knowledge when scholars "displace [canonic figures] from their central location as isolated geniuses and instead [portray] them as interdependent upon those within their cultural mosaic."<sup>32</sup> Beginning around 2005, New Jazz Studies scholars such as Nichole Rustin-Paschal, Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., and Jeffrey Magee have taken inspiration from such feminist musicological discourse in order to present biographical works of jazz musicians, situating their subjects within broader cultural tapestries.<sup>33</sup> Such scholarship has heavily influenced my research on Basie, who is indeed the quintessence of a canonic figure whose legacy has been heretofore "isolated" from its "cultural mosaic."<sup>34</sup> Additionally, in their edited collection *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, Tucker and Rustin-Paschal show how actively interrogating gender "not just as a peripheral, extra, or 'special interest' subtopic in jazz studies" constitutes such an active push for decentralizing the male-dominated jazz

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<sup>30</sup> Tucker, "Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition," 212.

<sup>31</sup> Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> Francis, "Her-Storiography," 170.

<sup>33</sup> Magee, *The Uncrowned King of Swing*. Ramsey, *The Amazing Bud Powell*. Rustin-Paschal, *The Kind of Man I Am*.

<sup>34</sup> Francis, "Her-Storiography," 170.

canon.<sup>35</sup> This perception in jazz was foreshadowed years before by feminist scholars of western European classical music. For example, Marcia J. Citron asserts that musical canons “embody the value systems of a dominant cultural group that is creating or perpetuating the repertoire,” and thus “provide ‘a means by which culture validates social power.’”<sup>36</sup> These scholars’ perspectives are geared toward demarginalizing women in the musical canon, but as I show in chapter one, such feminist theory also serves to add previously unobserved depth and detail to the narratives of canonic men such as Basie.

Critiques of omnipresent whiteness in jazz historiography have also contributed greatly to reconceiving jazz discourse, so they are essential to my historiographic critiques, particularly in chapters one and two. In his essay “Jazz and the White Critic,” Amiri Baraka argues that “the critic’s commitment...to his *appreciation* of the music rather than to his understanding of the attitude which produced it...strips the music too ingenuously of its social and cultural intent.”<sup>37</sup> Ingrid Monson and John Gennari have also condemned the way mainstream—usually white—critics viewed jazz discourse as “their own special preserve,” to quote Ralph Ellison, in which matters of race and cultural ownership were considered inappropriate or distasteful.<sup>38</sup> In place of this outsider

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<sup>35</sup> Nichole Rustin-Paschal (née Nichole T. Rustin) and Sherrie Tucker, introduction to *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 1.

<sup>36</sup> Marcia J. Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (1993; repr., Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 20. Marcia J. Citron, “Gender, Professionalism, and the Musical Canon,” *The Journal of Musicology* 8, no. 1 (1990): 102-117.

<sup>37</sup> Amiri Baraka, “Jazz and the White Critic,” in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 138-139.

<sup>38</sup> Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray, *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray*, eds. Albert Murray and John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 195. John Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Ingrid Monson. “The Problem with White Hipness: Gender, Race, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 396-422.

perspective, Baraka parallels the histories of Black American people and Black American music in his book *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*.<sup>39</sup> Though critical of *Blues People*, Ellison also highlights Black American culture in his discussions of jazz in essays such as “Homage to Duke Ellington on His Birthday,” “The Charlie Christian Story,” and “Remembering Jimmy.”<sup>40</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I address various instances in which scholars and critics have drawn incomplete or problematic conclusions vis-à-vis Basie and his music due to Eurocentric perspectives.

### **Biographical Jazz Scholarship**

The following literature on individual jazz artists exemplifies the New Jazz Studies paradigm from the past three decades due to their interdisciplinary methodologies, critical tone, and/or broad intersections with sociocultural elements such as race, gender, and sexuality. While my project does not necessarily deal with each of these elements in equal measure, the works in this section demonstrate the way scholarship on individual jazz artists can provide new perspectives on historiography, music analysis, and sociocultural paradigms. Rather than seeking complete biographical coverage, these scholars illuminate in their works broader questions about Black

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<sup>39</sup> Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963; repr., New York: Harper Perennial, 2002).

<sup>40</sup> Ralph Ellison, “The Charlie Christian Story,” in *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison’s Jazz Writings*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 34-42. Ralph Ellison, “Homage to Duke Ellington on His Birthday,” in *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison’s Jazz Writings*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 77-86. Ralph Ellison, “Remembering Jimmy,” in *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison’s Jazz Writings*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 43-49.

American music and culture, and I have drawn substantial methodological inspiration from them in this project.

Some works focused on individual artists have adhered to a traditional format of chronological biography while still employing a critically minded approach. Walter van de Leur's analysis of Billy Strayhorn's music in his biography *Something to Live For* places Strayhorn's compositions in dialogue with those of Duke Ellington, upending the traditional discourse that positions the two men as compositional rivals.<sup>41</sup> And Lisa Barg has contributed substantial refinement, via the field of queer studies, to Strayhorn's biography.<sup>42</sup> Tammy Kernodle's biographical work on Mary Lou Williams scrutinizes Williams' legacy, highlighting her intersectionality as well as her chameleon-like musical identity.<sup>43</sup> In his biography of Fletcher Henderson, Jeffrey Magee fleshes out new perspectives on Henderson and his music—as well as the discourses on Henderson's collaborators such as and Don Redman and Benny Goodman—by coupling extensive musicological analyses with multiple non-traditional paradigms such as Signifyin(g) and Magee's own framework for analyzing “inside the strain” stock chart rearrangements.<sup>44</sup> Both Mark Tucker and Thomas Brothers have shown that biographies which focus on a

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<sup>41</sup> Walter van de Leur, *Something to Live For: The Music of Billy Strayhorn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>42</sup> Lisa Barg, “Queer Encounters in the Music of Billy Strayhorn,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66, no. 3 (2013): 771-824. Lisa Barg, “Working Behind the Scenes: Gender, Sexuality, and Collaboration in the Vocal Arrangements of Billy Strayhorn,” *Women & music* 18, no. 1 (2014): 24-47.

<sup>43</sup> Tammy Kernodle, “Anything you are shows up in your music,” (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1997). Tammy Kernodle, “Black Women Working Together: Jazz, Gender, and the Politics of Validation,” *Black Music Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (2014): 27-55. Tammy Kernodle, *Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004).

<sup>44</sup> Jeffrey Magee, *The Uncrowned King of Swing: Fletcher Henderson and Big Band Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). I address Signifyin(g) in the following subsection on Black American literary theory, as well as in chapters three and four of this dissertation.

subject's early life offer valuable insights into contexts that may be overshadowed by lifetime-spanning studies.<sup>45</sup> Significantly, the approaches of such critical jazz biographies have also been adopted in less academically-oriented works; for example, Cary Ginell consistently contextualizes Billy Eckstine's life through with considerations of race, gender, and sexuality.<sup>46</sup>

Other biographers from the past thirty years have focused more on reframing, complicating, or completely upending the prevailing narratives associated with specific jazz musicians. Joshua Berrett demonstrates how the disparate legacies of two figures in jazz history—Louis Armstrong and Paul Whiteman—may be better understood when placed alongside each other.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, I place the professional situations of Basie and singer Billy Eckstine during the early 1950s alongside each other in chapter one.

Additionally, Robin D. G. Kelley “peel[s] back the legends in order to reveal the truth” in his definitive biography of Thelonious Monk, and David Hajdu endeavors to “extricate Billy Strayhorn from the world of myth.”<sup>48</sup> Lewis Porter explicitly disregards ostensibly apocryphal works in his biography of John Coltrane, instead relying on his own ethnographic research and translations of interviews with Coltrane only published in French.<sup>49</sup> Porter has also contributed to understandings of Lester Young's life by

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<sup>45</sup> Thomas David Brothers, *Louis Armstrong's New Orleans* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006). Mark Tucker, *Ellington: The Early Years* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

<sup>46</sup> Cary Ginell, *Mr. B: The Music and Life of Billy Eckstine* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2013).

<sup>47</sup> Joshua Berrett, *Louis Armstrong and Paul Whiteman: Two Kings of Jazz* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

<sup>48</sup> David Hajdu, *Lush Life: A Biography of Billy Strayhorn* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1996). Robin D. G. Kelley, *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original* (New York: Free Press, 2009).

<sup>49</sup> Lewis Porter, *John Coltrane: His Life and Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998).

challenging the prevailing narrative that Young's playing significantly decreased in quality after 1941.<sup>50</sup> Through analyzing Young's output as a soloist, Porter blurs the neatly bisected narrative of Young's biography, a point which also resonates substantially with this dissertation's first chapter. In her book on Billie Holiday entitled *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery*, Farah Jasmine Griffin builds upon existing critical biographies while simultaneously codifying and deconstructing the highly problematic narratives long associated with Holiday by scholars and critics.<sup>51</sup> Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., examines a vast array of cultural contexts in order to frame Bud Powell's artistic contributions to a seismic cultural shift within African American communities in the 1940s and 1950s, a methodology which distinctly resonates with Ramsey's prioritization of "specific historical moments" when analyzing musical meaning in his prior book *Race Music*.<sup>52</sup> I build upon Ramsey's unique methodologies in my examinations of Basie's music and its legacy in chapters three and four.

### **African American Literary Theory**

My framing of Basie's musical output is directly related to numerous African American literary theories. Most significant is Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s theory of Signifyin(g) as articulated in his book *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*.<sup>53</sup> Signifyin(g) represents a dialogic, social process for

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<sup>50</sup> Lewis Porter, *Lester Young* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

<sup>51</sup> Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery*.

<sup>52</sup> Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *The Amazing Bud Powell: Black Genius, Jazz History, and the Challenge of Bebop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013). Ramsey, *Race Music*, 3.

<sup>53</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

conceiving of the present through relating it to a vernacular tradition of reference and allusion. A forerunner to this theory is Houston A. Baker's "blues matrix," which utilizes the blues as an overarching analogue to Black American cultural expressions. In *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, Baker theorizes:

Afro-American culture is a complex, reflexive enterprise which finds its proper figuration in blues conceived as a matrix, [where the] matrix is a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit. American blues constitute such a vibrant network...They are the multiplex, enabling *script* in which Afro-American cultural discourse is inscribed.<sup>54</sup>

Alfonso W. Hawkins, Jr.'s book *The Jazz Trope: A Theory of African American Literary and Vernacular Culture* is reminiscent of Baker's work in that it theorizes the "vernacular language of the African American lifestyle" through the scope of the "jazz trope" as opposed to Baker's blues matrix.<sup>55</sup> Baker's broad conceptualization of the blues as, "work songs, group seculars, field hollers, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humor, elegiac lament, and much more," laid the groundwork for Gates' tropological Signifyin(g) framework, which is central to my rhetorical, social, and musical analyses in chapters three and four. Although Gates points out elsewhere that, "[r]ace is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application," he nevertheless articulates that European-oriented methods of evaluating Black American creative expressions such as literature lack crucial contexts:

My position is that for a critic of black literature to borrow European or American theories of literature...is for that critic to be trapped in a relation of intellectual indenture or colonialism...One must *know* one's textual terrain before it can be

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<sup>54</sup> Houston A. Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3-4.

<sup>55</sup> Alfonso W. Hawkins, Jr., *The Jazz Trope: A Theory of African American Literary and Vernacular Culture* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), ix.

explored; one must know one's literary tradition before it can be theorized about.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the fact that Gates rarely addresses music in his writings, in *The Signifying Monkey*, he cites Basie as a prime example of Signifyin(g) rhetoric in Black American music, underlining the applicability of Signifyin(g) in musical contexts and laying the groundwork for musical Signifyin(g) analyses by scholars such as Robert Walser, Jeffrey Magee, Alan Stanbridge, Gary Tomlinson, and Jamie Fyffe.<sup>57</sup> Later, Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. adopted the framework of Signifyin(g) in order to provide a more direct means of theorizing about Black American music.<sup>58</sup> In the same way Gates framed Signifyin(g) as a master trope in the context of Black vernacular rhetoric, Floyd coined the term "Call-Response" in order to broadly theorize about Black musical tropes such as call-and-response, blue thirds, and instrumental imitations of vocal qualities.<sup>59</sup> Building upon Floyd's and Gates' theories, Ramsey argues in *Race Music* that Call-Response and Signifyin(g) analyses may provide even further clarity vis-à-vis musical meaning when it is "indexed" within the contemporaneous aesthetic, socioeconomic, and political contexts.<sup>60</sup> Taken together, the rhetorical/musical lineage of Gates, Floyd, and Ramsey is

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<sup>56</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *"Race," Writing, and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 4-5, 406.

<sup>57</sup> Jamie Fyffe, "Uniqueness, Signifyin(g) and Compositional Process in 'Blue and Green,'" *Jazz Perspectives* 8, no. 2 (May 4, 2014): 185-208. Krin Gabbard, "Signifyin(g) the Phallus: *Mo' Better Blues* and Representations of the Jazz Trumpet," in *Representing Jazz*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995). Alan Stanbridge, "A Question of Standards: 'My Funny Valentine' and Musical Intertextuality," *Popular Music History* 1, no. 1 (February 4, 2004): 83-108. Gary Tomlinson, "Cultural Dialogics and Jazz: A White Historian Signifies," *Black Music Research Journal* 22, no. 1 (2002): 71-105; Robert Walser, "Out of Notes," in *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History*, ed. Robert Walser (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 343-365.

<sup>58</sup> Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*. Floyd, "Ring Shout!"

<sup>59</sup> I build upon Gates' and Floyd's theories in chapters three and four of this dissertation.

<sup>60</sup> Ramsey, *Race Music*, xii.

my primary mode of theorizing about Basie's music in the second half of this dissertation.

Black literary conceptions of modernism and Afro-modernism during the mid-twentieth century are essential to this project, because I focus on critical perspectives which frame Basie's music as modernist and/or antiquated, particularly in chapter one. Baker points out that the term "modernism" is challenging as its meaning is often taken for granted or conflated with discussions of scientific and technological advances.<sup>61</sup> Writing about twentieth-century American modernism, Michael Borshuk offers some clarity in this regard by comparing the aesthetics of jazz and American modernist literature.<sup>62</sup> Borshuk cites Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane's influential literary essay "The Name and Nature of Modernism," in which they claim that modernist Western literature displays "a quality of abstraction and highly conscious artifice, taking us behind familiar reality, breaking away from familiar functions of language and conventions of form."<sup>63</sup> Such a "breaking away" from the mores of the European tradition—coupled with what Bradbury and McFarlane describe as a "remarkably high degree of self-signature"—coalesced into a modernist aesthetic which, Borshuk argues, is "uncannily close to the characteristics Ralph Ellison argues define jazz."<sup>64</sup> Indeed, Ellison—the quintessential author of Black American modernist realism during the twentieth century—wrote in his influential 1958 essay "The Charlie Christian Story" that

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<sup>61</sup> Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, 1.

<sup>62</sup> Michael Borshuk, *Swinging the Vernacular: Jazz and African American Modernist Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>63</sup> Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, "The Name and Nature of Modernism," 1976, quoted in Borshuk, *Swinging the Vernacular*, 3.

<sup>64</sup> Borshuk, *Swinging the Vernacular*, 3-4.

jazz is ““swift and traumatic in its developments.””<sup>65</sup> Additionally, Michael Borshuk has synthesized modernist literature and mid-century Afro-modernist musical expressions by identifying “a strand of African American modernist literature influenced by jazz, manifest in the work of Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, Michael S. Harper, and Albert Murray.”<sup>66</sup> By utilizing Afrodiasporic modes of musical and rhetorical analysis in chapters three and four, I displace Basie’s modernistic musical output from the confines of the musicological formalism which has often framed it as antiquated and less worthy of robust analysis than works which align with the compositional values of the Western musical tradition.

## **Chapter Outlines**

### **Chapter One — Symbiosis at the Capitol Lounge: Count Basie, Billy Eckstine, and Artistic Interdependency**

In this chapter, I argue that a complex web of individual motivations between Basie and singer Billy Eckstine collectively formed ideal conditions for the 1952 rebirth of the Basie Orchestra following its two-year hiatus. The history of the Basie Orchestra is typically divided into two eras: 1936-1950 and 1952-1984.<sup>67</sup> During the late 1940s, the

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<sup>65</sup> Ellison, “The Charlie Christian Story,” quoted in Borshuk, *Swinging the Vernacular*, 4. For more on how Ellison, Albert Murray, and Robert G. O’Meally perceived this process to be one of heroism, conflict, and “antagonistic cooperation,” see chapter two.

<sup>66</sup> Borshuk, *Swinging the Vernacular*, 13.

<sup>67</sup> Examples of historical works that adhere to this framing include: William “Count” Basie and Albert Murray, *Good Morning Blues: The Autobiography of Count Basie* (New York: Random House, 1985). Stanley Dance, *The World of Count Basie* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1980). Horricks, *Count Basie and His Orchestra*. Alun Morgan, *Count Basie* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1984).

American public's interest in swing music steadily declined, and many big bands shuttered as a result. The Basie Orchestra held on for longer than most, but in 1950, Basie officially disbanded the landmark big band he brought north from Kansas City in 1936, closing the book on the Old Testament era. Over the course of the next two years, Basie led a small group made up of jazz stars such as Clark Terry and Buddy DeFranco, which was successful in its own right and also relieved Basie of the financial and logistical pressures of leading a full-time big band. Virtually every historical account of the Basie Orchestra mentions this orchestral intermission, but none have significantly examined the circumstances that led to Basie's decision to reform his full-time big band in 1952. As a result, the New Testament era—with all its commercial successes—is often portrayed as an inevitable development.

In his autobiography, Basie articulates that “[t]he main one who was really responsible for me deciding to get a full band back together when I did was Billy Eckstine.”<sup>68</sup> Indeed, two national tours with Eckstine—a highly successful crooner of popular romantic songs at that time—were the New Testament Orchestra's first significant bookings. By drawing upon secondary scholarship and first-hand evidence from publications such as *Life*, the *Chicago Defender*, and *Down Beat*, I demonstrate that Basie and Eckstine both had professional needs during this time that were symbiotically fulfilled by the other and that this mutually beneficial collaboration may be understood to be an integral aspect of Basie's career.

I begin this chapter by outlining the way Basie's hiatus period from 1950-1952 has been glossed over by many historians and critics, often resulting in oversimplified

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<sup>68</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 289.

conclusions vis-à-vis the aesthetics of one Testament era versus the other. By foregrounding this paradigm at the outset, I demonstrate how such a bisected framing of Basie's career excludes much of the stylistic overlap between the two periods. I then spend the majority of the chapter closely examining the intervening period of 1950-1952. First, I examine the circumstances surrounding Basie's decision to dissolve his big band in 1950. Drawing on a variety of primary sources, I detail how Basie frequently had to cope with inequitable, often humiliating business practices while leading his orchestra during the 1940s. I also point to contemporaneous issues of *Down Beat* to show that many jazz critics viewed Basie's move to a small group in 1950 to be confirmation that his most significant artistic contributions were behind him. In doing so, I argue that Basie only sought to reform his big band again if he could do so with a high likelihood of commercial and critical success and with robust financial and logistical support. During the early 1950s, Eckstine was one of the most commercially successful and well-connected figures in American popular music, and Basie's partnership with Eckstine proved useful in reconstituting a more financially stable version of his orchestra.

Though Eckstine was at the height of his musical career in the early 1950s, critical denunciations of his romantic crooning repertoire and a series of racist media scandals compounded one another, resulting in a complex public relations crisis around the time he approached Basie with the offer of a joint, months-long national tour in 1952. White supremacist perceptions of Eckstine's appeal among white female listeners resulted in a dramatic limiting of Eckstine's national marketability, and his identity as a romantic crooner invited paternalistic critiques of his authenticity as a Black artist. I propose that Eckstine sought collaboration with Basie as a solution for both these issues,

as Basie—even during his hiatus—was regarded as a paradigm of both musical authenticity and Black respectability. In short, Basie and Eckstine each fulfilled professional needs for the other throughout their partnership during the early 1950s. Moreover, within the traditional jazz canon, Basie vastly overshadows Eckstine, so my attributing to Eckstine such a high degree of importance within Basie’s narrative furthers the critical scholarly discourse surrounding the “constructed” jazz tradition, to again use DeVaux’s term.<sup>69</sup> From this perspective, inquiries into the histories of artists whose names carry less canonic weight may serve to usefully add complexity to traditional jazz narratives.

Along with supplementing Basie’s professional biography, such a framework also serves to enrich the narratives of musicians such as Eckstine who continue to be glossed over in the jazz tradition. Along with DeVaux, Tucker, and Francis, Thomas Brothers echoes this in his research on Louis Armstrong, arguing that, “Most writers have been more interested in lineages of great masters passing on genius, one to the other, than in the entanglement of jazz within everyday life.”<sup>70</sup> I take my methodological inspiration from this discourse to spotlight his professional association with Billy Eckstine in the early 1950s, a commonly overlooked connection within Basie’s “cultural mosaic.” In doing so, I illustrate how Basie and Eckstine’s symbiotic fulfillment of professional and personal needs was one of the primary driving forces behind the rebirth of the Basie Orchestra.

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<sup>69</sup> DeVaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition.”

<sup>70</sup> Thomas Brothers, *Louis Armstrong’s New Orleans* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 56.

## Chapter Two — “The Poet, The Priest, and The Medicine Man”: Count Basie, Albert Murray, and *Good Morning Blues*

In this chapter, I examine the way Basie crafted his own legacy in his autobiography *Good Morning Blues*. Upon its release in 1985—roughly one year after Basie’s death—critics bemoaned the book’s temperate, non-confrontational framing of Basie’s narrative. Basie’s co-writer Albert Murray—a prolific social, musical, and literary critic—recalls that Basie wanted his memoir to be a celebration of his achievements, not a meditation on the obstacles he faced. Given Basie’s lifelong aversion to publicly divulging personal information, *Good Morning Blues* was considered by many a disappointingly tight-lipped capstone to Basie’s legacy. Yet despite Basie’s reticence with journalists, I argue that *Good Morning Blues* may be interpreted as Basie’s attempt to explicitly shape his own biographical legacy and that this is evident through a close comparison of *Good Morning Blues* with the social, literary, and musical critiques Murray expressed in his own body of work.

Situating my argument within the extensive discourse surrounding Black Americans’ use of masking in order to negotiate personal agency, I begin by examining the way Basie sometimes steered interactions with journalists via what Houston A. Baker terms a “minstrel mask”: a posture of acquiescence which plays into race-based expectations in order to implicitly achieve a desired end.<sup>71</sup> Though I show that Basie appears to have placed a great deal of value on the ingenuity required to partake in this form of social improvisation, I argue that Basie’s laconic presentation toward the end of

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<sup>71</sup> Houston A. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987): 38.

his life was less a matter of undermining racial hegemony as it was about avoiding the saccharine overtures of gushing interviewers.

Some critics of *Good Morning Blues* interpreted its indefatigably positive tone as little more than another instance of Basie withholding his innermost thoughts. In turn, Murray was sometimes accused of being unable to push Basie out of this comfort zone in the name of ostensibly composing a more “complete” narrative, full of scores to settle and lamentations about how much he had struggled throughout his life. For the remainder of this chapter, I offer a counterpoint to this interpretation of *Good Morning Blues*. Basie was almost certainly familiar with Murray’s writings and ideologies prior to their collaboration, and Murray remembers Basie offering him the job of co-writer within minutes of their first in-person meeting. These recollections support the notion that Basie considered Murray’s ideological paradigm conducive to the sort of narrative he wanted to portray in his legacy-cementing autobiography. Therefore, since Basie was drawn to Murray as a co-writer because of his familiarity with Murray’s ideologies, I closely analyze three of Murray’s pre-*Good Morning Blues* works—*The Omni-Americans* (1970), *The Hero and the Blues* (1973), and *Stomping the Blues* (1976)—reading them as sources of clarifying context vis-à-vis Basie’s authorial posture in the creation of *Good Morning Blues* and counteracting the common criticism that it lacks depth. To be sure, if one reads *Good Morning Blues* hoping for textbook historical clarity or scandalous gossip, one will certainly be disappointed. But such intentions fell outside Basie’s aim when crafting his memoir. As Murray writes, an autobiography “is really a species of

*fiction*. It is a story with an explicit or implicit moral.”<sup>72</sup> Basie seems to have been sympathetic to his co-writer’s perspective, so I assert that, more than anything, *Good Morning Blues* crystalizes how Basie’s vision of his own legacy contrasted with much of the contemporaneous discourses regarding jazz history, blues aesthetics, and race relations in the U.S.

*The Omni-Americans* was Murray’s first published work, and it immediately situated him as an intellectual outsider among post-Civil Rights Era Black intellectuals. In short, Murray considered the polemics, protest fiction, and social science surveys of what had by that time become mainstream Black discourse to be highly problematic because he felt they portrayed Black Americans as a people in a perpetual state of victimhood. This pathological depiction, in Murray’s view, of Black Americans ultimately reinforced notions of white supremacy. To counter this discursive trajectory, Murray claims that Black American culture and mainstream American culture are not separate entities that need to be weighed against each other; rather, he views Black American life as a cornerstone of American culture, and he claims that its stylistic, artistic, and intellectual expressions are as much a part of the country’s fabric as are those from western Europe. I assert that Murray’s ideologies help contextualize *Good Morning Blues*’s conspicuously centrist framing of racial dynamics and that *Good Morning Blues* may be interpreted as an effort on both Murray and Basie’s parts to counter polemical currents in contemporaneous jazz discourse.

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<sup>72</sup> Albert Murray, “Comping for Count Basie,” in *The Blue Devils of Nada* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 36.

As he articulates in *The Omni-Americans*, Murray felt that polemics and protest fiction were detrimental to society. Furthermore, he claims that any piece of literature, including an autobiography, should serve to provide society with narratives which showcase characters overcoming strife. Therefore, I next consider Murray's most substantial work addressing literary narrative: *The Hero and the Blues*. Over the course of this trilogy of published lectures, Murray argues that heroism is defined by triumph and that narratives which center around convincing antagonistic forces that they are wrong are essentially anti-heroic. This point certainly resonates with his condemnations in *The Omni-Americans* of the ostensible self-victimization in many works of racial polemics and protest fiction. Through my reading of *The Hero and the Blues*, I demonstrate that Basie's consciously positive framing of his biographical narrative in *Good Morning Blues* may be read as a heroic narrative on par with the literary works Murray describes in his lectures. To be clear, this is not a claim vis-à-vis the ostensible heroism of Basie as an historical figure; rather, I claim that *Good Morning Blues* may be interpreted as an effort on Basie's part to define his legacy through heroic triumphs rather than the proverbial dragons which stood in his way.

Lastly, I read *Good Morning Blues* alongside *Stomping the Blues*: Murray's manifesto on Black American music. In *Stomping the Blues*, Murray observes that humans across cultures possess a primordial instinct to ritualistically chase away individual and collective sorrows and that artists such as novelists, blues musicians, poets, and shamans all serve the same essential societal role of providing others with the means to do so. The blues, he emphasizes, should be understood as Black Americans' particular brand of this cultural practice of heroic, life-affirming celebration.

Significantly, in *Good Morning Blues*, Basie consistently situates his musical colleagues as bringers of joy and not as tortured artists. Furthermore, since Murray argues that the blues musical idiom has been commonly and incorrectly conflated with despair and powerlessness due to ill-informed interpretations of its lyrical content and aesthetic character, Basie's penchant for associating blues and jazz musicians with delight throughout *Good Morning Blues* resonates with Murray's heroic conceptualization of Black American music.

### **Chapter 3 — Responding to the Calls: Black American Analytical Theories and the Music of Count Basie**

While the general aesthetics and soloistic expressions of the Basie Orchestra have been widely discussed by scholars and critics alike, the band's actual repertoire has often been analyzed by scholars via Eurocentric aesthetic values which prioritize the individual brilliance of a lone composer. Such conclusions remain entrenched in the jazz studies curricula of many academic institutions while the music's Afrodiasporic characteristics are often pushed to the margins of the discourse. To combat this, in this chapter I utilize Afrodiasporic theories of vernacular music and rhetoric to analyze three stylistically contrasting works from the New Testament Basie Orchestra: "April in Paris," "Blues in Hoss' Flat," and "Signifying." In doing so, I demonstrate that works from the Basie Orchestra's repertoire possess discursive and referential dimensions which often fall outside the confines of European aesthetics.

The first method I utilize is Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s rhetorical theory of Signifyin(g). Essentially, Signifyin(g) is a meta framework within which individual Black rhetorical tropes such as rapping, the dozens, or signifying all adhere to a unifying

principle: that the cultural resonances of such Black vernacular expressions are predicated on practitioners' ability to refer to and recontextualize preexisting idiomatic gestures which may be years, decades, or centuries old. Though it is not a musical theory, per se, other scholars have used Gates' tropological framework as a basis for Afrodiasporic theorizations of Black American music. Before I apply such musical frameworks to the music of the Basie Orchestra, I show that a Signifyin(g) tropology functioned as the primary mechanism in the formation of the ensemble's off-stage social hierarchy throughout the twentieth century.

Having demonstrated the degree to which Signifyin(g) processes were baked into the structure and approach of the Basie Orchestra, I apply Samuel A. Floyd Jr.'s theory of Call-Response—a musicological paradigm developed from Gates' theory—to “April in Paris” and “Hoss' Flat.” In doing so, I demonstrate how even polished arrangements in the later Basie repertoire constitute Responses to the intertemporal musical Calls of bygone musicians, ensembles, and eras. I then turn to Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.'s dynamic, oral-history-rooted expansion of the Call-Response methodology to analyze a unique piece in Basie's body of work—a piano feature composed by Basie significantly titled “Signifying.” By drawing on Basie's memories in *Good Morning Blues*—which, significantly, he was creating at the time this piece was recorded—I perform a Call-Response-inspired analysis of “Signifying” which foregrounds the context in which the work was conceived and recorded. Just as Ramsey uses this sort of holistic approach to Call-Response in his own research, I take Christopher Small's influential question as my point of departure in my analysis of “Signifying”: “What does it mean when this performance (of this work) takes place at this time, in this place, with these

participants?”<sup>73</sup> By utilizing the Afrodiasporic theoretical lineage of Gates, Floyd, and Ramsey, I show how the Basie Orchestra’s music may be understood to operate within an extensive, intergenerational matrix of Black American music in which preexisting musical material is revised—ironically or sincerely—through repetition and recontextualization. Given the scant scholarship on the Basie Orchestra’s repertoire, this chapter constitutes a significant step toward reshaping scholars’ understanding of this music.

#### **Chapter 4 — “Emptiness of Content”: Navigating Eurocentric Perspectives on Count Basie**

In this chapter, I build upon the research in chapter three to show how Call-Response and Signifyin(g) analyses may also be employed to scrutinize scholarly critiques of Basie’s music. Here, I shift my focus to an additional dimension of Samuel Floyd’s methodology: namely, the use of Call-Response to build upon preexisting, European-oriented critiques of Black American musical works. Floyd argues that Afrodiasporic and European methodologies collectively offer a useful, culturally pluralistic means to analyze Black American music. Floyd convincingly demonstrates this in his application of Call-Response to Gunther Schuller’s analysis of Jelly Roll Morton’s Red Hot Peppers’ 1926 recording of “Black Bottom Stomp.”<sup>74</sup> In the case of

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<sup>73</sup> Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performance and Listening* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1998), quoted in Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 17.

<sup>74</sup> Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., “Ring Shout! Literary Studies, Historical Studies, and Black Music Inquiry,” *Black Music Research Journal* 11, no. 2 (Fall 1991): 265-287, reprinted in Walser, *Keeping Time*, 324-332.

Morton's tightly-controlled, theme-driven composition, Schuller's Eurocentric aesthetic values resonate with this particular work, and Floyd compliments Schuller's conclusions by framing the music's Call-Response tropes within a broader context of Afrodiasporic vernacular expression.

Underlining the conditions of such a methodological synthesis, Floyd writes: "The more African-derived the piece, the more the Signifyin(g) approach will be relied on; the more European-derived, the more traditional analytical strategies will suffice."<sup>75</sup> Drawing on Floyd's insights, I argue that Schuller's assessment of one of the Basie Orchestra's 1936 recordings of "Honeysuckle Rose" is significantly less useful than his analysis of "Black Bottom Stomp," because—as a dialogically reference-laden piece—the former did not conform to Schuller's rigid, Eurocentric view of what constituted compositional and artistic value. Furthermore, I show how applying Afrodiasporic theories to such incomplete conclusions serves to both critique and reframe them. Though Schuller's critiques are decades old, his perspectives on Basie and jazz in general still strongly resonate in jazz performance discourse. In order to provide jazz practitioners and pedagogues with more dynamic, culturally informed methods of conceiving of Basie's music, I place the insights of Gates, Floyd, and Ramsey into dialogue with three of Schuller's primary critiques regarding "Honeysuckle Rose": "an inept modulation to Prez's [Lester Young's] solo and an unwarranted banal overlay of 'Tea for Two' on Waller's 'changes,' plus some further borrowings from [Fletcher] Henderson's famous

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<sup>75</sup> Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 261.

arrangement of ‘King Porter Stomp.’”<sup>76</sup> Notably, all three of these critiques reflect Schuller’s formalist approach in that they each deal with elements derived from the score itself. By applying Signifyin(g) and Call-Response theorizations to Schuller’s analysis, I show how works such as “Honeysuckle Rose” may be understood as a nexus for numerous references, allusions, and recontextualizations of preexisting musical material.

## Conclusion

This project’s synthesis of methods from musicology, jazz historiography, and African American literary theory serves to enrich Basie’s legacy, which has often been oversimplified and mythologized. While I do provide fresh historical insights, my primary aim in this dissertation is not to completely deconstruct previous works on Basie. Much like Farah Jasmine Griffin writes in her study of Billie Holiday, “Stories and Significations” is not a biography of Basie.<sup>77</sup> Rather, my research critically examines prevailing narratives about Basie’s biography and music, many of which have not been reconsidered since the middle of the twentieth century. As an explosion of scholarly interest on Basie is likely forthcoming given the impending availability of his archives at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University, this dissertation constitutes a significant foray into this research.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Gunther Schuller, *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz 1930-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 235.

<sup>77</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery* (New York: Free Press, 2001), xiii.

<sup>78</sup> “Institute of Jazz Studies shares digital archive of Count Basie papers,” Central Jersey, last modified December 20, 2022, <https://centraljersey.com/2022/12/20/institute-of-jazz-studies-shares-digital-archive-of-count-basie-papers/>.

Moreover, I consider “Stories and Significations” to constitute a Signification on the traditional “Life and Music” paradigm. Rather than outlining chronological biographical events and providing encyclopedic discographic information, I use preexisting scholarly and critical discourses as points of departure for critiquing said discourses while also providing scholars and practitioners new ways to write, talk, and think about Basie. In short, “Stories and Significations” demonstrates new avenues, rooted in the collaborative layering of narrative and legacy at the heart of jazz storytelling, for interpreting and analyzing the legacies of Basie’s life and music.

PART ONE

STORIES

## CHAPTER 1

### SYMBIOSIS AT THE CAPITOL LOUNGE: COUNT BASIE, BILLY ECKSTINE AND ARTISTIC INTERDEPENDENCY

In his influential 1980 book *The World of Count Basie*, Stanley Dance observes that jazz historians typically split the history of the Basie Orchestra into two acts: the so-called “Old Testament” (1936-1950) and “New Testament” (1952-1984) periods.<sup>79</sup> As Dance points out, distinct stylistic hallmarks are typically associated with each of these two eras:

Before 1950, despite many personnel changes, the band retained much of the character of the original. It was looser, and the contributions of the individual soloists, as compared with that of the ensemble, were stressed more. From 1952, as the new personnel stabilized, there was more emphasis on ensemble precision, and a very high standard has consistently been maintained in this area ever since.<sup>80</sup>

During the intervening years of 1950-1952, Basie disbanded his full-time orchestra due to financial strains brought on by a severe decrease in public interest in swing music. In its place, he led a small group made up of marquee names in jazz such as Buddy DeFranco and Clark Terry until reforming his full-time orchestra in 1952. “The small group in 1950 separates the story of the Basie band into two different chapters,” Dance writes, “and more definitely than might be expected of such a brief hiatus.”<sup>81</sup> Yet, for all the emphasis that has been placed on this two-year intermission as a dividing line between two distinct eras of the Basie Orchestra, very little has been written about the practical reasons behind Basie’s decision to reform his full orchestra in 1952, resulting in a relatively disjointed telling of Basie’s career.

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<sup>79</sup> Stanley Dance, *The World of Count Basie* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1980), xviii.

<sup>80</sup> Dance, *The World of Count Basie*, 14-15.

<sup>81</sup> Dance, *The World of Count Basie*, 15.

While the Old Testament band was highly influential during the Swing Era, the commercial success of the New Testament band catapulted Basie to a new level of reverence, making him a touchstone of twentieth-century American culture. Such an achievement was far from guaranteed, though, so what compelled Basie to reform the full-time big band which he had shuttered less than two years before? According to Basie, one of his contemporaries factored heavily into this decision:

The main one who was really responsible for me deciding to get a full band back together when I did was Billy Eckstine. I have to give him a whole lot of credit for that. And no matter how much I give him, it will never really be enough.

“I need you out here with me, Base,” [Eckstine] said, and he told me that he was getting ready to go back out on another tour to play a whole string of about 131 concerts, which, he said, was enough work for a new band to establish itself.<sup>82</sup>

And establish it they did. Enabled by Eckstine’s elite financial and logistical resources, he and Basie toured multiple times in the early 1950s, providing the Basie band the momentum it needed to retake its place as one of the dominant forces in large-ensemble jazz. Given Eckstine’s immense popularity and profitability during this time, it might seem surprising that he was the one who approached Basie, who was arguably at the nadir of his career.<sup>83</sup>

But cracks were beginning to form in Eckstine’s public image at this time, and I argue that racist contemporaneous media coverage likely contributed to Eckstine’s dogged determination to convince Basie to reform his full orchestra. I describe multiple

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<sup>82</sup> William “Count” Basie and Albert Murray, *Good Morning Blues: The Autobiography of Count Basie* (New York: Random House, 1985), 289-291.

<sup>83</sup> In an interview with Albert Murray, Eckstine confirms Basie’s recollection of these events. Albert Murray and Billy Eckstine, “‘Basie’s a Special Guy’: Interview with Billy Eckstine,” in *Murray Talks Music: Albert Murray on Jazz and Blues*, ed. Paul Devlin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 124-125.

slanderous events which gained substantial traction in national media while also situating them alongside the race-based musical expectations placed upon Eckstine by contemporaneous jazz critics. These critics lambasted Eckstine in the early 1950s for eschewing the racially overdetermined aesthetic of their constructed jazz tradition in favor of a romantic crooning repertoire they deemed inauthentic vis-à-vis Black music. Thus, the interplay between overt white supremacy on the one hand and paternalistic meddling on the other resulted in a situation in which Eckstine sought to simultaneously downplay a violent racial stereotype while playing into another centered around Black musical authenticity. Given the Basie Orchestra's strong association with top-flight, swinging blues—and the fact that Basie's public image was far less sexualized than Eckstine's—the collaboration with the semi-retired bandleader appears as timely for Eckstine's public image as it was for Basie's desire to run a full-time big band again. From this perspective, the birth of the New Testament Basie Orchestra in 1952 is inextricably linked to this symbiotic partnership between Basie and Eckstine. Although a good deal of this chapter deals with Eckstine and his professional situation, my primary goal is to demonstrate how Basie's decision to reform his full-time orchestra in 1952—a critical and overlooked element of Basie's biography—was a result of the two's symbiotic association during the early 1950s. By investigating both men's motivations and demonstrating how they were each fulfilled by joining forces for three tours spanning 1952 and 1953, I make Basie's biographical narrative clearer and more complex.

I begin by describing the traditional understanding of Basie's hiatus from 1950-1952. Though it was not until his 1984 autobiography that Basie specifically named Eckstine as one of the most consequential individuals in the reformulation of his

orchestra, many chroniclers of Basie and his music have glossed over the details of these precarious years. Next, I outline Basie's professional frustrations in the decade leading up to his orchestral hiatus by citing his autobiography as well as the gossip and entertainment sections of the *Chicago Defender* and the *New York Amsterdam News*. Having outlined some of Basie's plausible needs vis-à-vis potentially reforming his big band, I then turn to Eckstine's professional situation in the early 1950s by citing contemporaneous issues of *Down Beat*, *Life*, and *Look*, Black publications like the *Baltimore Afro-American*, and *Jet*, and Eckstine's biography by Cary Ginell. By interpreting Eckstine's and Basie's narratives alongside each other, I show how artists operate within a highly complex web of circumstances, perspectives, and impulses which is often oversimplified by traditional conceptions of jazz history.

### **“But then he made a comeback”: Basie Hiatus Narratives in Jazz Discourse**

Histories of Basie's career typically resemble the strict two-act narrative illustrated by Dance at the beginning of this chapter. Raymond Horricks formats his history of the Basie Orchestra similarly, separating the so-called “Old Basie Band” and “New Basie Band” along the line of the small group years.<sup>84</sup> And writing in the early 1960s, André Hodeir observed in *Toward Jazz* that the Basie Orchestra's “center of interest” had ostensibly shifted away from the band's prewar aesthetic.<sup>85</sup> Perhaps as a result of this ubiquitously bifurcated framing, the existence of the New Testament Orchestra is often considered a foregone conclusion. For instance, in his 1977 overview

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<sup>84</sup> Raymond Horricks, *Count Basie and His Orchestra* (New York: Citadel Press, 1957).

<sup>85</sup> André Hodeir, *Toward Jazz* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 109.

of the history and contemporaneous landscape of big band music, George T. Simon concludes his entry on Basie with some lines which neatly encapsulate the way the Basie Orchestra's recess from 1950-1952 has been commonly perceived: "Since the days of the big bands, Basie has flourished. For several years he didn't do well, and he was forced to cut down his group to a sextet. But then he made a comeback, and...the Basie band rode high and handsomely during the mid-sixties."<sup>86</sup> Though Simon's pivotal narrative beat in the above passage is "but then he made a comeback," Simon, like many jazz historians, does not address how Basie made said comeback. For example, Eileen Southern writes: "In 1950 Basie found it necessary for economic reasons to disband the large group and tour with a sextet, but he soon organized another big band."<sup>87</sup> Gunther Schuller makes a similar statement in his book *The Swing Era*: "[Basie] was forced to disband in 1950 and continue sporadically with small groups for a few years. But in 1952 Basie was able to revive his orchestra."<sup>88</sup> These examples are congruent with the oral history I have heard from other jazz musicians throughout my life, so it is worth considering why the specific circumstances that lead to the resurrection of one of the most significant musical ensembles in American history have been consistently glossed over. One likely explanation lies in the fact that the years 1950 and 1951 have come to serve as a dividing line between the Old and New Testament eras, representing the ensemble's initial "death" and triumphant "rebirth." As Stanley Dance stated in the passage quoted at the beginning

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<sup>86</sup> George T. Simon, *The Big Bands*. 3rd ed. (New York: Collier Books, 1974), 87.

<sup>87</sup> Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), 391.

<sup>88</sup> Gunther Schuller, *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz 1930-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 260.

of this chapter, Basie's orchestral intermission divides his narrative "more definitely than might be expected of such a brief hiatus."<sup>89</sup>

From this hiccup in the narrative arises a prevailing conceptualization that the Basie Orchestra played nothing but head charts from 1936-1950, took two years off, and then suddenly started playing academically polished arrangements in 1952; as Alun Morgan writes in his biographical sketch of Basie: "The new band relied more on arrangements than earlier units."<sup>90</sup> Gary Giddens usefully challenges this perception:

By 1942, the tendency toward increasingly sophisticated and complex arrangements, with the accent not on soloists but on contrasting tonal colors, weightier harmonies, and clockwork ensemble punch, was apparent on such pieces as "It's Sand Man" and "Ain't It the Truth."<sup>91</sup>

Schuller makes a similar claim, going so far as to claim that such "first-rate" arrangements from 1942, "signaled a new era in the Basie history."<sup>92</sup> Schuller also remarks that, during this time, the Basie band's performative style became heavier, denser, and louder. He attributes this primarily to changes in personnel, particularly an infusion of younger players. Here we see a bifurcation of Basie's career, but along a different fault line: 1942 instead of 1952.

Basie scholars such as Dance set the midpoint by what they perceive to be the low point of Basie's career. The problem with this common perception is that it conflates Basie's finances with the stylistic and orchestrational changes which were in full swing a decade prior to his big band's dissolution. More in-depth scholarship on Basie has

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<sup>89</sup> Dance, *The World of Count Basie*, 14-15.

<sup>90</sup> Alun Morgan, *Count Basie* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1984), 50.

<sup>91</sup> Gary Giddens, "The Institutionalization of Count Basie," In *Riding on a Blue Note: Jazz and American Pop* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2000), 90.

<sup>92</sup> Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 260. For more on Schuller's analyses of Basie's music, see chapter four of this dissertation.

usefully complicated any attempts to split such a vast musical journey into two acts. In his indispensable bio-discography which outlines Basie's life and career in exacting detail, Chris Sheridan frames the early 1950s Basie sextet as a bastion which sheltered Basie's musical idiom from economic struggle. All the while Basie was able to regenerate his musical reputation after years of corporate mishandling:

[T]he Victor recordings creat[ed] an unfortunately commercial image that obscured the real spirit of Basie's music as heard on broadcasts. That spirit was kept alive by the Combo [*sic*], which raised musical standards after the earlier misfortunes and, in many ways, paved the way for the "new" rhythmic and musical approach of the New Testament band that was about to burst forth. The process, as we have seen, was not without pain, though, and certainly not the overnight phenomenon it has seemed.<sup>93</sup>

The scare quotes around "new" underline the assertion that there was nothing sudden or simple about the stylistic differences throughout Basie's career. Sheridan continues:

1952 dawned with no less uncertainty than several previous years, but it opened perhaps the most crucial chapter in Basie's long band leading career, even if the musical formula that sealed the Count's success was to emerge gradually, rather than overnight, as has sometimes been suggested.<sup>94</sup>

In short, while the Old and New Testament era are distinct from each other in some respects, this change happened incrementally starting years before the orchestra's hiatus from 1950-1952. Moreover, the Old Testament era was defined by financial insecurity as much as by any musical aesthetic, so in the following section, I detail Basie's professional situation leading up to his decision to break up his full-time orchestra in 1950. In doing so, I underscore how vital Eckstine's economic and logistical support was to Basie's decision to reform his band in 1952.

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<sup>93</sup> Chris Sheridan. *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, Discographies 22, ed. Michael Gray (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 323.

<sup>94</sup> Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 325. As I show in chapters three and four, Basie's career contained far more stylistic variance and subtlety than has often been considered.

## Basie's Financial Blues

The Old Testament Basie years of 1936-1950 are often defined by the ensemble's cutting-edge style of 4/4 swing and its mastery of head chart composition, but it was also a period in which Basie consistently had to navigate professional inequities and personal humiliations. Basie scholars such as Dance typically associate money troubles with the final years of the Old Testament era, but as early as 1940, the members of the Basie Orchestra often suffered economically due to mismanagement on the part of the ensemble's corporate overseers. For example, after Willard Alexander—Basie's longtime manager through the Musical Corporation of America (MCA)—moved on to the William Morris Agency, the Basie band's touring schedule became more grueling and less financially equitable.<sup>95</sup>

The consequences of this situation were no secret, as evidenced by contemporaneous newspaper articles. On November 16, 1940, the *Baltimore Afro-American* ran a story entitled "Basie May Quit Band; Play Piano for Benny Goodman."<sup>96</sup> The majority of the article details Basie's dissatisfaction with the reshuffled MCA, but the headline is highly provocative given Basie's hypothetical relegation from bandleader to sideman. Along with sporadic dates with his own orchestra during this period of professional uncertainty, Basie was also performing and recording with Goodman's sextet between November 1940 and January 1941, so it stands to reason that the so-called "rumors" of Basie disbanding his orchestra to join Goodman had some degree of

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<sup>95</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 245.

<sup>96</sup> "Basie May Quit Band; Play Piano for Benny Goodman," *Baltimore Afro-American*, November 16, 1940.

legitimacy.<sup>97</sup> Goodman was on the hunt for a big-name pianist to fill the role of Fletcher Henderson, who had recently vacated the position to work full-time as the Goodman band's arranger. Earl Hines got the initial call from Goodman around September of 1940, but Hines pulled out of his agreement at the last minute, leaving the door open for Basie.<sup>98</sup> Perhaps playing the piano with an elite ensemble for good, steady money would have been sufficient motivation for Basie to abandon the glories of bandleading as early as 1940; on the other hand, the *Afro-American* article may have been a ploy for leverage in his contract dispute with MCA. Indeed, Basie wryly recalls in his autobiography, "I'm not going to say how those rumors got out and became newspaper stories, but they didn't do our case any harm."<sup>99</sup> In any event, Basie reached an agreement with MCA after appealing to the president of the American Federation of Musicians James Petrillo, paving the way for his orchestra to continue working for the remainder of the decade.<sup>100</sup>

Of course, the financial dealings of a marquee swing band such as Basie's were complex matters involving numerous individuals and organizations. Nevertheless, as the bandleader, it was Basie's name and picture splayed across headlines that pointed to debt and other embarrassing predicaments. One such article from the February 1, 1941 issue of the *Baltimore Afro-American* offered the embarrassing headline "Basie Says He'll Pay Off Bills By August."<sup>101</sup> "I'm \$28,000 in debt now," begins the article, "but on the basis of bookings already made for my band and record contracts, I expect to be clear of

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<sup>97</sup> Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 1102-3.

<sup>98</sup> Cary Ginell, *Mr. B: The Music & Life of Billy Eckstine* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2013), 30.

<sup>99</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 245.

<sup>100</sup> "Basie May Quit Band; Play Piano for Benny Goodman."

<sup>101</sup> "Basie Says He'll Pay Off Bills By August," *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 1, 1941.

debt by August.”<sup>102</sup> This humiliating opening passage—likely not an actual quote from Basie—reads like an apology for a situation that was, at most, only partially his fault. The article does later state that Basie blamed the situation on MCA’s poor management, but this is buried beneath a wall of text that strongly implies Basie alone was incapable of keeping his ensemble profitable.

Basie grew to hold a lifelong aversion to gossip journalism such as this, a position he makes explicit in the preface to his autobiography: “I just don’t intend to bring up anything that might add up to a lot of gossip and speculation that don’t really have anything to do with playing music the way I play it.”<sup>103</sup> Another famous example of Basie bearing the brunt of sensationalist newspaper articles came when Lester Young left the Basie Orchestra on December 12, 1940.<sup>104</sup> The explanation given in an article in the *Chicago Defender* became the stuff of legend, and the apocryphal story is still spread today by many a jazz enthusiast. Basie quotes this “weird tale” in *Good Morning Blues*:

“According to sources close to the ‘Jump King of Swing,’ Lester was ‘fired’ when he allegedly refused to show up for a recording date that took place on Friday the 13th. Lester is said to have asserted that Friday the 13th was definitely no time for music[...]Basie became enraged at this bit of insubordination and immediately handed Young, who was one of the mainstays of his powerful sax section, his notice after waiting for him several hours in the recording studios.”<sup>105</sup>

Basie flatly denies this story, saying that he had never known Young to be superstitious:

The truth of the matter was that [Young] wanted to go out on his own and see what he could do with a little group for a while. And I really think another thing was Herschel [Evans]’s death. He had really wanted to leave right after that

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<sup>102</sup> “Basie Says He’ll Pay Off Bills By August.”

<sup>103</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, xiii. I provide an in-depth discussion of Basie’s relationship to journalists in chapter two.

<sup>104</sup> Count Basie and His Orchestra, “It’s the Same Old South,” “Stampede in G-Minor,” “Who Am I?,” and “Rockin’ the Blues,” recorded December 13, 1940, Okeh 5963, 10” 78, CBS 66101, 12” LP. Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 111-113.

<sup>105</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 244.

happened [in February of 1939], and the longer he stayed right on in that same situation, the harder it was for him to get over it. Finally he just decided to make a little change.<sup>106</sup>

Having spent only a few years in the limelight, Basie had already learned that little was off limits for gossip columnists. Not only was he partially responsible for the financial stability of his band members and their families, but also for any mishaps that could be readily blown out of proportion in nationally distributed newspapers. When considering Eckstine's offer to reestablish his full orchestra in 1952, Basie likely found his friend's impressive economic and logistical resources a welcome alternative to the unforgiving situations he faced during the 1930s and 1940s.

Overwork and underpay would be recurring themes for the Basie band until their eventual disbandment in January of 1950. Willard Alexander was quoted in the March issue of *Down Beat*, saying that "'Basie's big band has been badly handled in the last couple of years...It was destroyed as a box-office [sic] attraction.'"<sup>107</sup> Alexander was correct, but more broadly, Basie's professional situation at the start of the 1950s also reflected the decline of the American public's interest in swing music. While Eckstine was a romantic icon of popular music on the path to Hollywood stardom, Basie was one of the old guard swing kings trying to find his place in a new musical landscape. Scholars typically identify 1946 as a year which saw substantial stylistic shifts away from big band swing. Guthrie Ramsey notes that Louis Jordan's output during 1946 collectively provides a "thumbnail view of the emerging style that would become known as rhythm

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<sup>106</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 245.

<sup>107</sup> "Basie Works With Combo," *Down Beat*, March 10, 1950, 17.

and blues.”<sup>108</sup> Additionally, Gunther Schuller argues that rhythm and blues began to replace swing as the social music of choice for Black Americans during a time of cultural and economic upheaval: “As World War II brought millions of blacks to the North...where relatively lucrative work could be found in wartime factories operating around the clock, R & B became their special music.”<sup>109</sup> Schuller continues:

Black audiences could no longer tolerate the increasingly insipid and tame dance music of the white bands—they weren’t particularly invited into that world anyway—but at the same time many of them could not keep up with the rapid advances in black orchestras (Hines in 1943, Eckstine and Gillespie’s *Things To Come* orchestra of the mid-1940s) and the switch to small be-bop combos playing “esoteric,” “intellectual” jazz. Or so they perceived it. Rhythm and Blues was the answer for them.<sup>110</sup>

In short, the postwar years annihilated the field of swing bands, with orchestras such as those led by Benny Goodman, Woody Herman, Artie Shaw, Tommy Dorsey, Les Brown, Harry James, Jack Teagarden, and Benny Carter shuttering within the winter of 1946-1947 alone.<sup>111</sup>

Basie’s orchestra clung to stability a bit longer than most, but the writing was on the wall by 1948. Between 1948 and 1950, the band repeatedly became stranded on the road, was forced to cut back on promised wages, had a European tour fall through, and faced repeated rumors of breaking up.<sup>112</sup> By the beginning of 1950, Basie had made up his mind to break up his big band for the foreseeable future:

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<sup>108</sup> Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 65.

<sup>109</sup> Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 390.

<sup>110</sup> Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 390-391.

<sup>111</sup> The only orchestra from the Swing Era to weather this period without interruption was Duke Ellington’s, but Ellington only managed to do so by dipping into his substantial cache of song royalties in order to offset his losses. Harvey G. Cohen, *Duke Ellington’s America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 256.

<sup>112</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 277-280.

[T]hings were drying up for big bands, and finally I just got tired of being out there on the road just catching those dates as we could catch them...I made up my mind and then called everybody together and told them. I said I didn't know what was going to be happening next after I had a chance to take a rest and think about it. Because at that time I didn't know whether I was going to have a trio or six pieces or a big band or what.<sup>113</sup>

Basie rested for the rest of January, but he did not stay idle for long; February 7 saw the birth of his all-star combo which would constitute the majority of Basie's work during 1950 and 1951.<sup>114</sup> The combo was originally a sextet made up of Basie, Jimmy Lewis (bass), Buddy De Franco (clarinet), Gus Johnson (drums), Wardell Grey (tenor), and Clark Terry (trumpet). After their first engagements at Chicago's Brass Rail club, they were joined by longtime Basie sideman Freddie Green on guitar on March 24, 1950.<sup>115</sup>

### **Flowers for Lochinvar: Nostalgic Basie Narratives in Mid-Century Jazz Criticism**

Since the Basie Orchestra managed to maintain stability a bit longer than most other bands before disbanding, many jazz critics at the turn of the 1950s clung to the naïve hope that a second Swing Era was just around the corner. This optimistic viewpoint is exemplified in an article by Jack Tracy in the January 13, 1950 issue of *Down Beat*. In "Basie Best of What's Left?," Tracy argues that the Count Basie Orchestra had more to offer the "jazz purveying business" than just having outlasted other major big bands.<sup>116</sup> He situates the Basie band as possessing enough stylistic

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<sup>113</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 292. Chris Sheridan dates this event as January 8, 1950. Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 1124.

<sup>114</sup> Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 1124.

<sup>115</sup> Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 1125.

<sup>116</sup> Jack Tracy, "Basie Best of What's Left?," *Down Beat*, January 13, 1950, 21.

dynamism to withstand the doldrums that faced large, dance-oriented jazz ensembles in the post-World War II era: “[T]he crew is an amalgamation of about every music style in the books. There are Kansas City men...swingsters...and modernists. The rest fall somewhere in between.”<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, Tracy compares the danceable modernity of this late-Old Testament Basie orchestra with that of Dizzy Gillespie’s contemporaneous big band: “But this crew is doing quietly and without fanfare just what Dizzy Gillespie made a big issue of — giving customers bop with a beat, music that is entirely danceable if you want to use it for that.”<sup>118</sup> Tracy’s characterization of the Old Testament Basie band as a modernist ensemble is supported by scholars and critics; Eileen Southern has asserted that the Basie band “early established itself as an avant-garde group from which other bands borrowed ideas heavily,” and Gary Giddens wrote in 1977 that the Basie band of the 1930s “captured the rhythmic abandon and modernism that were the real significance of swing...more than anyone else.”<sup>119</sup> Furthermore Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., has written about how the Afro-modernist currents of the 1940s served as a “site for expressing some of the paradoxes, contradictions, tensions, and...joys and pleasures of African American life in those years”: an observation which resonates with Tracy’s claim that the contemporaneous Basie Orchestra was modernistic due to its stylistically diverse personnel.<sup>120</sup>

Tracy’s buoyant perspective would be dashed within days of its publication.

Rather than lament the big band’s end, some of the earliest *Down Beat* articles

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<sup>117</sup> Tracy, “Basie Best of What’s Left?”.

<sup>118</sup> Tracy, “Basie Best of What’s Left?”.

<sup>119</sup> Giddens, “The Institutionalization of Count Basie,” 88. Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 391.

<sup>120</sup> Ramsey, *Race Music*, 97.

addressing Basie's shift to a permanent small group display residual traces of the hopefulness expressed by Tracy. For example, one article from March 10, 1950 entitled "Basie Works With Combo" reads:

Basie's combo may or may not be a temporary expedient, depending on how things work out in the next few months...According to [Willard] Alexander, Basie has not abandoned the big band ideal...The small group is a temporary move, with the current conditions of the band business in mind. The combo might wind up as a permanent thing or, if conditions warrant, he might go back to a big band. It just depends on what will make the most money for Basie.<sup>121</sup>

Other *Down Beat* articles exhibit a more practical tone. In one such example from March 24, 1950, Pat Harris quips:

Guys who want to lead bands for longer than one tune or one set nowadays, probably have highly irrational reasoning—holes in their heads. As most band leaders are intelligent, rational persons, they now find themselves in what is often an untenable position...Count Basie and Woody Herman recently hit Chicago with small groups.<sup>122</sup>

Harris describes the music of Basie's small group as "hardly stimulating, [but] is certainly easy to listen to."<sup>123</sup> He also avoids speculating regarding Basie's return to full-time big band leading, calling the small group a "pleasant compromise."<sup>124</sup>

A more salient trend, however, lies in how some American jazz critics shifted the Basie narrative in the early 1950s. Directly before Basie broke up his orchestra, writers like Tracy framed him as a dynamic, forward-thinking modernist in the same vein as Gillespie. Once Basie had relinquished his position as one of the last remaining giants of

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<sup>121</sup> "Basie Works With Combo."

<sup>122</sup> Pat Harris, "Woody, Basie Work With Small Units, Explain Why," *Down Beat*, March 24, 1950, 5.

<sup>123</sup> Harris, "Woody, Basie Work With Small Units."

<sup>124</sup> Harris, "Woody, Basie Work With Small Units."

the Swing Era, others such as Harris argued that the combo was sufficient, and even permitted jazz fans to see swing giants up close in a more intimate setting.<sup>125</sup> Curiously, though, many critics were quick to canonize Basie as a living saint whose most significant musical contributions were behind him. This is not to say that these critics denied the musical value of Basie's endeavors going into 1951 and beyond; in fact, they cheerfully encouraged Basie's small group as well as his reformulation of the Basie Orchestra. Rather, it seems that the prevailing narrative suddenly shifted to portray all of Basie's subsequent musical projects through the lens of nostalgia rather than modernism. One such article by George Hoefer entitled "Basie Led The Greatest Rhythm Machine In Jazz" appeared in *Down Beat's* March 24, 1950 issue.<sup>126</sup> The past-tense predicate in the title conveys Hoefer's relatively pessimistic opinion regarding Basie's career. Indeed, his opening line states, "Count Bill Basie has completed a cycle in the band business."<sup>127</sup> He continues: "the head of the Count's career was attained on a June night in 1938, when the Basie-ites carved Benny Goodman's great swing aggregation at the 'Benefit Battle of Bands' in Madison Square Garden."<sup>128</sup>

Several months later, *Down Beat's* coverage of Basie continued to showcase a less optimistic view on a potential rebirth of the Basie Orchestra. One writer notes: "Possibility that Count Basie might reform a big band this fall, expressed last winter when he broke up his band and started working with a combo, has apparently gone by the boards, for the present Basie small group currently has bookings through the

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<sup>125</sup> Harris, "Woody, Basie Work With Small Units."

<sup>126</sup> George Hoefer, "Basie Led The Greatest Rhythm Machine In Jazz," *Down Beat*, March 24, 1950, 11.

<sup>127</sup> Hoefer, "Basie Led The Greatest Rhythm Machine In Jazz."

<sup>128</sup> Hoefer, "Basie Led The Greatest Rhythm Machine In Jazz."

beginning of November [1950].”<sup>129</sup> The next month, Ralph J. Gleason’s lengthy, consolatory article “Basie Will Always Have A Swinging Band” appeared in *Down Beat*.<sup>130</sup> Gleason does assert briefly that “Basie *will* have a big band again before too long, and his present [small] group will be the core around which it will be built,” however, the majority of the article reads like an obituary for Basie’s career to that point.<sup>131</sup> Gleason compares Basie to Sir Walter Scott’s romantic hero Lochinvar, who, after arriving mysteriously from the west, rides off into the unknown. This journey from the west—Kansas City—constitutes the majority of Gleason’s article. Over the course of roughly 1,200 words, Gleason recounts the story of Basie’s career from his early days in Red Bank, New Jersey through to him pulling the plug on his orchestra in 1950. Moreover, this article was the seventh in a “Bouquets to the Living” series in *Down Beat*, further underlining the tone of pseudo-posthumous nostalgia which surrounded Basie’s name during 1950-1952.

On top of the financial uncertainty Basie faced during this time of professional upheaval, it seems that critics were more than willing to close the book on Basie’s career. Basie recalls the combo “burning it up every set, every night” and “having a ball,” but he was also likely aware of the emerging narrative that his most significant successes were behind him. For Basie, rebuilding his full orchestra was always on the back of his mind:

Some people insist that all during that time with the combo I was always talking about how much I missed that bigger sound of the full band. Even my wife

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<sup>129</sup> “No Big Band For Basie For Awhile [*sic*],” *Down Beat*, September 8, 1950, 1.

<sup>130</sup> Ralph J. Gleason, “Basie Will Always Have A Swinging Band,” *Down Beat*, November 17, 1950, 1-2.

<sup>131</sup> Gleason, “Basie Will Always Have A Swinging Band.”

claims that I used to mope around the house grumbling and complaining about not being able to hear my music the way I was used to.<sup>132</sup>

In short, Basie was open to the idea of leading his big band full time again, but to do so would require enough monetary and logistical security to justify such a gamble. Indeed, contemporaneous *Down Beat* coverage highlights the precarious situations for other marquee big bands such as those of Cab Calloway, Woody Herman, Stan Kenton, and Charlie Barnet.<sup>133</sup> If Basie was to dissolve his combo and reform his full orchestra, he would not only need to address the financial and organizational issues which plagued him throughout the 1940s, he would also need to reenter the scene with enough zeal to counter the prevailing narrative that he and his orchestra were ultimately charming relics.

### **In Walked Billy**

Throughout 1950 and 1951, Eckstine was a regular attendee at these Basie combo performances. According to Basie, Eckstine primarily came to these shows to convince him to reconstitute his full orchestra. Basie recalls that Eckstine “started in on him” to get his big band back together on the first night he was there.<sup>134</sup> “That was just the beginning,” Basie recalled.<sup>135</sup> Basie sums up Eckstine’s playful, but forceful proposition:

Man, what [do] you keep fooling around with little old one- and two-piece stuff for? Get your big band back together. Man, you look funny up there messing around with that little old two- and three-piece crap. Stop kidding yourself. This is

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<sup>132</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 290.

<sup>133</sup> “Calloway Won’t Form Big Band,” *Down Beat*, May 5, 1950, 11. Harris, “Woody, Basie Work With Small Units, Explain Why.” Jack Tracy, “Chicago Band Briefs: ‘Big Bands To Chicago? Chances Look Pretty Slim,’” *Down Beat*, May 4, 1951, 6. “Woody Reorganizes To Go After Dance Crowd,” *Down Beat*, May 5, 1950, 1.

<sup>134</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 290.

<sup>135</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 290.

small garbage for you, Base. This ain't your thing. Hell, your thing is a big band, man.<sup>136</sup>

Eckstine was relentless in his affectionate jeering, but what ultimately convinced Basie to give the big band another try was Eckstine's assurances of lucrative pay and minimal administrative responsibilities. After more than a decade of struggling with money and logistics, Eckstine's offer may have sounded enticing to Basie. "Don't worry about nothing," Basie recalls Eckstine stating, "You don't have to worry about the money. We can take care of that. Just get your whole thing together again."<sup>137</sup> Moreover, the sheer scope of the 131-date national tour which kicked off their collaboration in 1952 surely complicated any notions that Basie was old news.

Unlike Basie, Eckstine enjoyed a boom in financial and commercial success leading into the 1950s. *Billboard's* 1949 annual college student poll ranked him as America's third favorite "All-Around" male singer behind only Bing Crosby and Perry Como and ahead of Frank Sinatra, and he finished second only behind Mel Torme as "Most Promising New" male singer.<sup>138</sup> In 1949, Eckstine's personal earnings from MGM records sales were over \$100,000, and in the following year, he signed a ten-year deal with MGM which guaranteed a minimum of \$58,000 per year for the first five years on top of his royalties.<sup>139</sup> Significantly, this same *Billboard* article offers insights into

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<sup>136</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 290.

<sup>137</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 291.

<sup>138</sup> "Eleventh Annual College Poll," *Billboard*, June 11, 1949, 19, <https://books.google.com/books?id=OA4EAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PT2&dq=1949%20college%20student%20poll%20billboard&pg=PT18#v=onepage&q=1949%20college%20student%20poll%20billboard&f=false>.

<sup>139</sup> "Eckstine Signs MGM 5-Year Renewal Pact," *Billboard*, October 28, 1950, 14, [https://books.google.com/books?id=2x0EAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PA14&dq=Billy%20Eckstine%20Billboard%20%24100%2C000%20MGM&pg=PA14#v=onepage&q=Billy%20Eckstine%20Billboard%20\\$100,000%20MGM&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=2x0EAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PA14&dq=Billy%20Eckstine%20Billboard%20%24100%2C000%20MGM&pg=PA14#v=onepage&q=Billy%20Eckstine%20Billboard%20$100,000%20MGM&f=false). This is the equivalent of about \$1.22 million and \$705,000

the logistical advantages of Eckstine's recent deal: "The diskery will pay all costs of dates, musicians and arrangers and will also assure Eckstine of a minimum of promotion and exploitation. MGM will put a field deejay man exclusively to service Eckstine on the road."<sup>140</sup> Such support could have addressed Basie's financial barriers to collaborate with Eckstine, but despite Eckstine's substantial successes going into the 1950s, he faced an intricate set of challenges which, I argue, were at least temporarily solved through his association with Basie beginning in 1952. While Basie was leveraging his position as a canonic jazz figure in order to alleviate financial struggles in the early 1950s, cracks were beginning to show in Eckstine's seemingly unimpeachable success due to his consistent efforts to counter social expectations thrust upon him due to his race.

### **"Jelly stays on my mind"**

Eckstine's biography is very much defined by his confounding of prescribed racial boundaries. By 1933, Eckstine was receiving notoriety as a vaudeville singer and emcee as well as for his imitations of Cab Calloway. At the same time, though, he was beginning to assimilate the "crooning" style of white singers such as Rudy Vallée and Bing Crosby. Eckstine would later credit Harlan Lattimore—the so-called "Colored Bing Crosby"—for this stylistic pivot, reinforcing the fluidity of racial influence that defined him as an artist.<sup>141</sup>

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today, respectively. "CPI Inflation Calculator," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed March 8, 2023, [https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm). "Eckstine Signs \$1 Million Disc, Pics, TV Pact," *Down Beat*, December 1, 1950, 1.

<sup>140</sup> "Eckstine Signs MGM 5-Year Renewal Pact."

<sup>141</sup> Ginell, *Mr. B*, 10.

Such was not unusual for contemporaneous crooners. As Allison McCracken shows, white crooners from this period showed “a wide range of attitudes toward the appropriation of culturally coded black music.”<sup>142</sup> For example, in 1927, Gene Austin became the leading recording artist in the United States through his “synthesis of Tin Pan Alley, cowboy, nascent country (then called ‘old-time’ or ‘hillbilly’), jazz (ragtime), and blues.”<sup>143</sup> As someone who modeled himself after white and Black performers, Eckstine reflected this broader trend among American crooners; however, given his positionality as a Black singer, Eckstine operated under a hegemonic expectation to perform the blues: a requirement not made of singers such as Austin. As his career blossomed, Eckstine openly and repeatedly condemned his obligation to white audiences to sing blues numbers merely because of his skin color. In a 1947 interview originally published in *Metronome*, Eckstine astutely stated:

Blues tunes have been good for me, but I know that white folks want to label all Negroes as blues singers. For example, when Norman Granz takes a group of black musicians to Europe, he doesn’t bring black ballad singers but black blues singers like Muddy Waters, Lightnin’ Hopkins, and Big Joe Turner. I love them all, but I know that they are being used. The white man thinks that blues is all a black man should sing. He doesn’t want you to do romantic stuff.<sup>144</sup>

Eckstine openly expressed this resentment toward such racial expectations regarding his musical choices and artistic presentation. However, he was acutely aware that adhering to them was often more than merely an issue of professional politics: it could well be a matter of physical safety. During his tenure with the band lead by Earl “Fatha” Hines, Eckstine endured his first in-person experiences with the racism, segregation, and

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<sup>142</sup> Allison McCracken, *Real Men Don’t Sing: Crooning in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 287.

<sup>143</sup> McCracken, *Real Men Don’t Sing*, 95.

<sup>144</sup> Ginell, *Mr. B*, 34.

violence that came with touring in the South as part of a Black ensemble. Hines articulated the pride he felt for his ensemble during these trying experiences:

I don't want to overlook the fact that my band was among the first Freedom Riders, because we were riding through the South many, many years ago, and creating all kinds of excitement. Most of the members of my organization at that time were northerners, and it was unusual for the white southerner to see Negroes all over a Greyhound bus!<sup>145</sup>

Speaking about Eckstine's case in particular, Ginell notes: "[T]he Southern tours were a culture shock. For the first time, his belief that his innate talent would earn him positions of respect and fairness was being challenged."<sup>146</sup>

Eckstine's uneasiness regarding being identified as a blues singer was not unusual for individuals in his position. While it is true that some Black jazz singers such as Jimmy Rushing negotiated blues and romantic repertoire, Rushing's legacy became much more associated with the blues: a point which Basie articulates throughout his autobiography.<sup>147</sup> One might presume that Eckstine feared a similar legacy should he give an inch of ground to those who expected Rushing-like blues shouting from the refined Pittsburgh baritone. As Eckstine continued to hone his sensuous voice throughout the 1930s, his status as a romantic singer blossomed; he developed a following among female fans who fancied his masculine vocal register, and he landed a full-time position as the Hines band's featured male balladeer in 1939.<sup>148</sup> Indeed, Eckstine was

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<sup>145</sup> Stanley Dance, *The World of Earl Hines* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 81.

<sup>146</sup> Ginell, *Mr. B*, 22-23.

<sup>147</sup> Kansas City music historians Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix state: "A versatile song stylist, Jimmy Rushing moved effortlessly between...popular standard[s]...and the blues." Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz: From Ragtime to Bebop — A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 100. Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 6, 123, 129, 151, 182, 202, 225.

<sup>148</sup> McCracken notes that in the beginning of the 1930s, producers in American mass media viewed baritones as a much-needed "novel twist" on the existing paradigm of superstar tenor

experiencing a new level of notoriety; however, during a recording session for the Victor label on December 2, 1940, Eckstine and the Hines band recorded a sexualizing gutbucket blues number entitled “Jelly, Jelly” which, ironically, became a smash hit for Eckstine.

It is difficult to overstate the degree to which this recording of “Jelly, Jelly” defined Eckstine’s entire musical career. By 1941, newspaper coverage of Hines and Eckstine consistently equated their success to the tracks from their 1940 Victor sessions. “Jelly, Jelly,” however, is mentioned more than any of Eckstine’s contemporaneous romantic hits.<sup>149</sup> Furthermore, covers of “Jelly, Jelly” would keep it in the ears of Americans for decades; Erskine Butterfield covered it to great acclaim in 1941, with Frank Marshall Davis writing in the *Baltimore Afro-American* that Butterfield “carves [Hines’ version] into hamburger.”<sup>150</sup> Most prominently, bluesman Josh White covered it in 1958 as did The Allman Brothers in 1973 (a newly-recorded version also appears in the soundtrack of the 1997 film *Love Jones*). In short, despite Eckstine’s resentment over his obligation to perform blues numbers, to many listeners and critics, Eckstine’s name became synonymous with the genre. As I show in the following section, the commercial success of “Jelly, Jelly” significantly complicated Eckstine’s efforts to further maneuver

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crooners. McCracken, *Real Men Don’t Sing*, 276-77. In an interview with Eckstine and Hines, Stanley Dance pointed out that, before Eckstine, “most black bands had male singers with high voices.” To which Eckstine quipped “I’d have had a fight every week if I’d begun to sound like a faggot.” Dance, *The World of Earl Hines*, 243.

<sup>149</sup> “Earl Hines Sets Record In St. Louis: Maxine Sullivan To Sing In New Orleans,” *Chicago Defender*, July 19, 1941, 21, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. Rollo S. Vest, “Around Detroit,” *Chicago Defender*, July 19, 1941, 20, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. “Say Ekstein [*sic*] Made Hines’ Band Shine,” *Chicago Defender*, October 4, 1941, 21, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. “West Coast Hails A New Earl ‘Father’ Hines Orchestra: Band Discs Made Is Proving A Sensation,” *Chicago Defender*, September 13, 1941, 21, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>150</sup> Frank Marshall Davis, “Hawkins’s 2 Cuts Win Cat’s Pajamas,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 28, 1941, 13.

his professional identity toward the popular romantic realm because some influential critics pointed to such blues numbers as an example of ostensible Black musical authenticity. From this perspective, a joint tour with the indefatigably blues-oriented Basie Orchestra may have satisfied such critical opinions without requiring Eckstine himself to adopt the identity of a bluesman.

Furthermore, the conditions which brought about “Jelly, Jelly” are significant vis-à-vis Eckstine’s complicated relationship with the blues. During the December 2 session, the Hines band initially recorded swing instrumentals and romantic ballads sung by Eckstine, but they had exhausted their prepared material with an hour of studio time to spare. Victor’s producer for the session Harry Myerson inquired to Hines: ““Why don’t you play some kind of blues? They sell down South.””<sup>151</sup> Such a number was somewhat atypical for the bebop-leaning Hines band of the early 1940s. Nevertheless, in a business-minded effort to take advantage of the group’s exploding popularity at the time, Hines had Eckstine throw together an impromptu blues number. Hines made it a point throughout his career to feature the members in a variety of capacities, so deputing the arranging responsibilities was a common practice in the Hines Orchestra.<sup>152</sup> Hines and Eckstine later recalled in an interview with Stanley Dance:

E.H.: One time, when we went to record, and we had all those beautiful arrangements on ballads for B. to sing, and the a. and r. man said “Don’t you have any blues?”

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<sup>151</sup> Ginell, *Mr. B*, 31.

<sup>152</sup> Gunther Schuller points out that Hines “allowed...many players in his orchestra to contribute arrangements,” and that the ensemble served as “a training ground for the upcoming generation of players.” Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 273, 289. Hines himself affirms this point, stating that his approach as a bandleader hinged on a careful balance of accountability and fostering personal relationships with each member. Dance, *The World of Earl Hines*, 79-85. For more on how big bands function as social institutions, see chapter three of this dissertation.

B.E.: On the road, especially in the South, we used to fill out the program with a lot of those Joe Turner blues, like *Cherry Red*; and things like *My Big Brass Bed*. In those days, too, the union allowed you to record more than four tunes if you hadn't used up the three hours. So Earl had me go out in the anteroom and write down the lyrics while he and Budd [Johnson] worked out a head arrangement with the band. That was *Jelly, Jelly*.<sup>153</sup>

As Myerson and Eckstine both noted, Black artists were expected to perform stereotypical blues numbers, particularly in the South. This was due in large part to the history of Black performers around the turn of the twentieth century negotiating their place on the stage by marketing their Blackness as a more authentic version of the racial tropes widely propagated by the blackface minstrel tradition during the nineteenth century. As David Krasner points out: “When black performers created ‘Life and art’ by putting on the ‘coon’ mask and attaching the term ‘real’ to it, they complicated (and contributed to) the semiotics of realism in American culture.”<sup>154</sup> Similarly, Jeffrey Magee has demonstrated how Fletcher Henderson’s time as the music director for Black Swan Records in the 1920s was defined in large part by his growth as a stride and blues pianist. Magee quotes Ethel Waters: “Fletcher wouldn’t give me what I call ‘the damn-it-to-hell bass,’ that chump-chump stuff that real jazz needs... To prove to me he could do it, Fletch began to practice. He got so perfect... Naturally, he began to be identified with that kind of music, which isn’t his kind at all.”<sup>155</sup> Much like Henderson, Eckstine’s foray into the blues idiom was more a professional practicality than an expression of artistic identity.

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<sup>153</sup> Dance, *The World of Earl Hines*, 241.

<sup>154</sup> David Krasner, “The Real Thing,” In *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 100.

<sup>155</sup> Jeffrey Magee, *The Uncrowned King of Swing: Fletcher Henderson and Big Band Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 24. Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 4.

Eckstine's marketability as a singer—particularly across the South—was very much dictated by the “semiotics of realism,” to borrow again from David Krasner's term, which served to oversimplify and homogenize the multitudinous tapestry of Black male artistic expression into cliché blues tropes which often centered around the hypersexualization of the Black female body as well as the Black male (i.e. Eckstine's) libido. The lyrics to “Jelly, Jelly” are critical to understanding how the piece fed into this paradigm:

Hello baby, I had to call you on the phone...  
Hello baby, I had to call you on the phone...  
'Cause I feel so lonesome, and Daddy wants his baby home.

It's a downright, rotten, lowdown, dirty shame...  
It's a downright, rotten, lowdown, dirty shame...  
The way you're treating poor me, I know I'm not to blame.

Jelly jelly jelly, jelly stays on my mind...  
Jelly jelly jelly, jelly stays on my mind...  
Jelly roll killed my pappy, it run my mammy stone blind.

In the case of “Jelly, Jelly,” the sexual metaphor for the female sexual anatomy (jelly roll) and the more gender-neutral term for sex in general (jelly) situate Eckstine as, ostensibly, a man with but one thing on his mind.<sup>156</sup> Albert Murray has argued that “only a very few of the millions of devoted admirers of Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Jimmy Rushing, and Big Joe Turner, for instance, can actually understand more than half the

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<sup>156</sup> Maria V. Johnson argues that “jelly” should be understood as a gender-neutral sexual term since it has been consistently used by both men and women blues musicians “to connote lovemaking and sexual prowess.” Maria V. Johnson, “‘Jelly Jelly Jellyroll’: Lesbian Sexuality and Identity in Women's Blues,” *Women & Music*, 7 (2003): 31-52. For more on the use of “jelly,” “jellyroll,” and other sexual signifiers in blues lyrics, see: Stephen Calt, *Barrelhouse Words: A Blues Dialect Dictionary* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009). Paul Oliver, *Aspects of the Blues Tradition* (New York: Oak Publications, 1970). Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of the Blues*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

words of their lyrics as sung, not to mention the idiomatic imagery and references.”<sup>157</sup> In Eckstine’s case, however, his diction is easily understandable (unlike the often shouting, preaching style of Murray’s examples), leaving no room for misunderstanding the well-known sexual metaphors “jelly” and “jelly roll.” Further, the phrasing of the last line of the final chorus—“jelly roll killed my *pappy*, it run my *mammy* stone blind [my emphasis]”—likely resonated with the racial “realism” perpetuated by the minstrelsy tradition, entrenching the song within the “‘coon’ mask” to which Krasner refers.

Each chorus of “Jelly, Jelly” is more sexual than the last. Read in a vacuum, the first chorus could be understood to simply reference a man missing the presence of his monogamous counterpart. The second chorus does not offer any explicitly sexual content, however the line “The way you’re treating poor me, I know I’m not to blame” introduces the erotic trope of a woman teasingly withholding herself from the man, dashing the potential for a wholesome reading of the first chorus. The innuendos of the third chorus firmly contextualize the overt sexuality of the first two: the narrator (Eckstine) aches for this woman’s body, however she is not necessarily his only partner since it is jelly, and not the woman which “stays on [his] mind.” Upon its release, this song skyrocketed Eckstine’s national popularity while reinforcing his status as a sexual icon among female fans.<sup>158</sup> This is not surprising; during the second quarter of the twentieth century, the blues sold well across racial demographics, regardless of segregation in record marketing.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 76, 79.

<sup>158</sup> “Billy Eckstine Sings of Love and He’s Ultra Solid With Feminine Followers,” *New York Amsterdam Star-News*, January 10, 1942, 17, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>159</sup> Jeffrey Magee notes that blues recordings were selling well among white and Black audiences as early as 1921. Magee, *The Uncrowned King of Swing*, 22-25.

Around the time Eckstine began courting Basie for a joint tour across the South, the irony of Eckstine's relationship with "Jelly, Jelly" was being cruelly compounded by some contemporaneous jazz critics. As Eckstine endeavored to shift his repertoire toward romantic songs associated with the crooning tradition, even ostensibly well-meaning critics complained that Eckstine had sold his artistic soul to the false idol of commercialism. One particular series of articles on Eckstine in *Down Beat* magazine from 1951 exemplifies the patronizing meddling white critics sometimes displayed when writing about the artistic choices of Black American musicians.<sup>160</sup> John Gennari importantly notes that critiques of problematic writings by white jazz critics can have the adverse effect of casting Black musicians as being "abject victims," devoid of any artistic or cognitive agency.<sup>161</sup> In the following section, I aim to negotiate this reality by considering Eckstine's intellectual and professional considerations alongside my outline of one particular series of adversarial writings from 1951 in *Down Beat* magazine.

### **Billy Eckstine, "Possessive Investments," and Mid-Century *Down Beat***

The three *Down Beat* articles in question were authored by an individual identified only by the pseudonym "Len." Despite making numerous inquiries to other experts and to *Down Beat* magazine itself, I have yet to uncover Len's identity.

Nevertheless, Len's critical takes on Eckstine exemplify George Lipsitz's theorization of

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<sup>160</sup> Len, "Beat's Eckstine Story Unfair, Says Apollo Op," *Down Beat*, October 19, 1951, 1. Len, "Eckstine Doesn't Live Up To His Promise In Apollo Date," *Down Beat*, October 5, 1951, 1. Len, "'I Had To Entertain,' Says Eckstine To Critics Of His Copacabana Appearance," *Down Beat*, April 20, 1951, 1.

<sup>161</sup> John Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 10.

the “possessive investments in whiteness” vis-à-vis Black artistry and expression. As

Lipsitz explains the concept:

It might seem paradoxical that large numbers of European Americans who have a powerful possessive investment in the economic reward of whiteness in the rest of their lives have such a deep affective investment in the art of [Black Americans]. The two investments, however, are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, one depends on the other. [...] By relegating African Americans to purportedly primitive, natural, and mystical domains, the consumption of Black culture salves the alienations and identity problems of European Americans.<sup>162</sup>

Lipsitz’s remarks encapsulate well the mindset of many white scholars and critics during the first half of the twentieth century. Benjamin Filene writes that the modus operandi of John Lomax’s influential field recordings of incarcerated Black folk musicians in the early 1930s was “to document ‘the Negro who had the least contact with jazz, the radio, and with the white man...The convicts heard only the idiom of their own race.’”<sup>163</sup> In her insightful analysis of Charles Mingus’s 1971 psychoanalytical autobiography *Beneath the Underdog*, Nichole Rustin-Paschal highlights how critics of the book displayed a “narrow construction of black masculinity” in their reviews.<sup>164</sup> John Hammond asserted that the Count Basie rhythm section best exemplified a so-called “negroid” aesthetic due to its members being concerned with the plight of Black sharecroppers in the South.<sup>165</sup> Len’s critiques of Eckstine’s crooning repertoire seems to be rooted, at their core, in a similar (mis)understanding of Black artistic authenticity. Like other jazz critics from white, mainstream American publications such as *Down Beat*, Len seems to have fallen into the

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<sup>162</sup> George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018), 162.

<sup>163</sup> Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 50-51.

<sup>164</sup> Nichole Rustin-Paschal, *The Kind of Man I Am: Jazzmasculinity and the World of Charles Mingus Jr.* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017), 22-23.

<sup>165</sup> Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool*, 51.

broad pattern of legitimizing the artistic validity of Black people under the assumed condition that the most “authentic” Black expressions were the direct result of a racially particular nearness to primal sensual instincts.<sup>166</sup>

Len’s three *Down Beat* articles from between April 20 and October 19, 1951 neatly exemplify the relegation to the primitive described by Lipsitz. While Len’s motivations were certainly more complicated than I have outlined, what cannot be disputed is the fact that throughout the progressively antagonistic articles centering around two of Eckstine’s New York residencies, Len calls on Eckstine to revert to “Jelly, Jelly”-type blues numbers while taking sneering jabs at a romantic crooning repertoire which Duke Ellington tellingly described as “just a little too much for the undown people,” and “strictly for those of us who dug [Eckstine’s] sensuous semantics.”<sup>167</sup> I do not claim that critical perspectives such as those expressed by Len were the sole cause of Eckstine’s professional crisis in the early 1950s. Rather, I argue that they contributed to Eckstine’s difficult position in which jazz critics begged him to lean into his Blackness in a manner found uncomfortable and untrue to himself and his aesthetic. From this perspective, Eckstine’s desire to collaborate with Basie—a musician whose aesthetic was explicitly blues-oriented—may be understood to be a negotiation between Eckstine’s ethos and critical pressures.

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<sup>166</sup> For these reasons, I operate under the assumption that Len was a white man, but my conclusions vis-à-vis Len’s positionality may need to be reevaluated should future research prove this to not be the case.

<sup>167</sup> Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington, *Music Is My Mistress* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), 254.

## Len, Eckstine, and the Copa Crowd: April 20, 1951

The first of these New York residencies was at the Copacabana at the beginning of 1951. For Len and his ilk, the whiteness of the Copacabana's clientele seems to have been synonymous with the mainstream romantic repertoire Eckstine favored during this period. While one contemporaneous critic unironically proclaimed that Eckstine had "finally achieved the highest pinnacle to which any Negro artist [could] aspire...to sing in a club where Negroes are unwelcome as customers," according to Len, many members of the "hip gentry" could not stomach Eckstine's divergence from the sort of music which they expected a Black, male singer to perform.<sup>168</sup> Particularly vocal in this regard was Bob Sylvester from the *New York Daily News*, who Len quotes extensively in his *Down Beat* article from April 20. While Sylvester lauded Eckstine's talent as a singer, saying it was rivaled only by that of Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra, he was equally lavish in his criticism of Eckstine's repertoire at the Copacabana: "[Eckstine] started out with a half-baked song by a half-baked songwriter named Mack Gordon and ended with a purely dreadful piece of material by a purely dreadful writer named Sid Kuller."<sup>169</sup>

Len quoted Sylvester in the first of his *Down Beat* articles, setting the stage for his own expectations for Eckstine. He agreed that some of Eckstine's set "bordered on the corny," but he dismissed Sylvester's searing review as "a trifle too strong," while also defending Kuller: "[A]ny man who did the brilliant work that resulted from Kuller's collaboration with Duke Ellington on *Jump for Joy* can hardly be condemned outright as

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<sup>168</sup> Len, "'I Had To Entertain.'"

<sup>169</sup> Len, "'I Had To Entertain.'"

a ‘purely dreadful writer.’ Kuller, like Eckstine, has to keep his audiences in mind.”<sup>170</sup>

Len’s final sentence here echoes Eckstine’s own mentality on the matter:

What the hell, [Bob Sylvester is] right. But he should remember one thing. The people that come here [to the Copacabana] are not music lovers. They want to be entertained. I tried to give them a more musical show when I was in another place of this kind, the Chez Paree in Chicago, and ouch!, I died the death of a dog. You have to meet your audience at least halfway.<sup>171</sup>

This practice of playing to the tastes and expectations of a given audience seems to have been congruent with Len’s own conceptualization of how Eckstine should have musically presented himself in the early 1950s. While Len conceded that the complaints voiced by critics such as Sylvester were “at least partly justified,” the April 20 article concludes with him affirming that Eckstine’s musical programming was perfectly suited for the Copacabana’s ostensibly un-hip crowd:

Generally it was not the kind of show calculated to bring unmitigated joy to those of us who knew Billy when. However, it shows that the Eckstine voice is as great as ever, or greater. It was the right show for the Copa crowd.<sup>172</sup>

As Eckstine moved his act from the Copacabana to the Apollo, Len’s coverage of the singer would increasingly adopt a register of artistic gatekeeping which ranged between misguided avuncular and crassly spiteful. Clearly, Len’s perspective did not account for the fact that Eckstine possessed aversions to the obligatory performance of the blues, despite his commercial success with blues material like “Jelly, Jelly.” Amiri Baraka critiqued this very paradigm in his 1960 essay “Jazz and the White Critic”:

“Nostalgia, lack of understanding, or failure to see the validity of redefined emotional

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<sup>170</sup> Len, “‘I Had To Entertain.’”

<sup>171</sup> Len, “‘I Had To Entertain.’” Like the Copacabana in New York, Chicago’s Chez Paree was known for its practice of turning away patrons based on their race.

<sup>172</sup> Len, “‘I Had To Entertain.’”

statements which reflect the changing psyche of the Negro in opposition to what the critic might think the Negro ought to feel; all these unfortunate failures have been built many times into a kind of critical stance or aesthetic.”<sup>173</sup> That Len evidently did not consider Eckstine’s relative lack of agency while he negotiated his artistic identity in the early part of his career exposes the critic’s limited understanding of the identities prescribed to Black American artists during the middle of the twentieth century.

Len’s instinct to preserve what he perceived to be authentically “Negro” (i.e. the blues) is not without an apparent respect for the racial authorship of the music, albeit one which was greatly shaped by prevailing conceptualizations of Black artistic authenticity. Karl Hagstrom Miller has demonstrated how the American conceptualization of the blues was developed along a strictly-regulated racial fault line, and Benjamin Filene describes how even the earliest endeavors in documenting English-American folk music traditions contained “racial undertone[s]” which “extended easily into the black-white dichotomy familiar to Americans.”<sup>174</sup> While Len’s desire for Eckstine to sing the blues may have been consciously rooted in an effort to highlight and celebrate a Black musical idiom, such an argument betrays his perspective: that race in America was a zero-sum binary in which a move away from Black stereotypes was tantamount to self-whitewashing. Similarly, Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., argues that musical expressions in the Black American tradition are frequently bifurcated into the “‘urban North’ and the ‘agrarian South,’” with the latter encompassing those musical gestures which “evoke the southern, agrarian past

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<sup>173</sup> Amiri Baraka, “Jazz and the White Critic,” in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 142.

<sup>174</sup> Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 24-26.

of African Americans.”<sup>175</sup> While Ramsey convincingly argues that these two conceptualizations interact as “a powerfully rich and complicated dialectic...[which] is inextricably linked to...the practice of blackness,” the musical gestures associated with the legacy of chattel slavery in the United States—particularly the blues—grew to serve as one of a handful of gatekeeping signifiers of jazz (in)authenticity among critics such as Len.<sup>176</sup> Such “white hipness,” to borrow Ingrid Monson’s term, was also realized by some white musicians as well. For example, John Gennari points out how clarinetist Milton “Mezz” Mezzrow’s autobiography displays “a romantic racialist perspective that fancied African Americans as happier and spiritually purer for living outside the uptight middle-class mainstream,” and Monson asserts that Mezzrow “mythologized” the masculinity of African American men “in a manner that sometimes partook of what Andrew Ross has called a ‘romantic version of racism.’”<sup>177</sup> In Len’s case, such a romanticizing mindset resulted in him seeking to dictate how contemporaneous Eckstine should have expressed himself artistically.

Though his first article on the Eckstine residencies was relatively tame, Len concludes his April 20 *Down Beat* article with a cliffhanger:

[Eckstine] will play Labor Day week at the Apollo theater in Harlem. And we’re laying odds that he will do as great an Apollo show for the Apollo audience as he did a Copa show for the Copa-patrons. Until that week, all judgements on Billy’s musical integrity are discreetly reserved.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Ramsey, *Race Music*, 47.

<sup>176</sup> Ramsey, *Race Music*, 47.

<sup>177</sup> Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool*, 32-34. Ingrid Monson, “The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (1995): 403.

<sup>178</sup> Len, “‘I Had To Entertain.’”

Obviously in this context, “Apollo audience” signified “Black audience.” We can note the cognitive dissonance at the core of Len’s assertion. It was not just that he entreated Eckstine to play a “[Black] show for the [Black] audience”; indeed, there certainly would have been differing aesthetic desires between the audiences at the Copacabana and the Apollo, and Eckstine himself readily asserted that one must “meet [their] audience at least halfway.” The problem here lies in the way Len used his power as a jazz critic to threateningly put Eckstine in a position in which he would be pressured to perform what the white tastemakers at *Down Beat*—and their primarily white readership—would have perceived to be authentically Black. Moreover, while withholding critical analysis may appear harmlessly centrist at first blush, there is an underlying threat at play here: Len all but guaranteed a scathing review à la Bob Sylvester should Eckstine not play an “Apollo show for the Apollo audience.”

### **The Other Shoe Drops: October 5, 1951**

Following Eckstine’s residency at the Apollo in 1951, Len made good on his warning. In the page-one article entitled “Eckstine Doesn’t Live Up to His Promise In Apollo Date,” Len abandons the lukewarm centrism of his previous article, instead painting Eckstine as pretentious, as out of touch with Black authenticity, and as a man who did not keep his word regarding compromising his repertoire for the sake of his audience:

[Eckstine] sang wonderfully, as always, but it was painfully clear that he was offering the Apollo audience a Copa show. As a result, he received the weakest hand we have ever seen him get at the Apollo and he got offstage with no trouble at all after only five numbers.

It was a far, sad cry from the days when his voice could hardly be heard above the feminine squeals of delight. At the show [I] caught, a juggler and a guy who danced on roller skates both got as much of a hand as B, maybe slightly more.<sup>179</sup>

Len's perspective here is clear: he felt that he knew what Apollo audiences wanted better than Eckstine did. Furthermore, the author's association of Eckstine's Copacabana repertoire with an allegedly weak audience response carries with it a troubling conflation between the supposed whiteness of the music and the alleged lack of sexual response by the women in the Apollo audience. That crooners' fan bases were typically mostly female complicated their reception among critics and highbrow cultural elites. McCracken points out that the crooner paradigm in the 1930s was very much perceived through the lens of gender in American culture. Indeed, the idea of crooning as an emotional, sensuous, intimate expression had been a part of American culture for decades prior to the advent of the "crooner" as a popular singer.<sup>180</sup> Since their audiences were typically "characterized as female or feminized, immature and emotionally needy, and lacking in both taste and judgment," crooners were often treated with the same flippancy as was directed toward their fans.<sup>181</sup> In Eckstine's case, while his relation to his female fans likely did put his artistic legitimacy into question, it was his status as a Black man singing white-coded music which occupied most of Len's critiques in the October 5 article.

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<sup>179</sup> Len, "Eckstine Doesn't Live Up To His Promise In Apollo Date," *Down Beat*, October 5, 1951, 1.

<sup>180</sup> Derived from the Low German *croyn*, the term "crooning" was a Scottish vernacular term which dates back to the fifteenth century meaning "to utter a low murmuring sound; to sing (or speak) in a low murmuring tone." Over the centuries, the meaning took on a dimension of wailing lamentation, "imbuing the term with the potential for pathos that American minstrels, early blues singers, and radio crooners would exploit." McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing*, 16.

<sup>181</sup> McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing*, 8.

A robust scholarly discourse exists which examines the various mindsets of some white jazz critics regarding the power they wielded in their writings. For instance, Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr. quotes Leonard Feather regarding the journalist and producer's opinions on the power of written jazz criticism: "Many of us who write about jazz have tried to upgrade the lot of the black musician, and we are happy to observe that in some respects that lot has improved."<sup>182</sup> Feather was an outspoken antiracist and integrationist; however, as Ramsey illustrates, his 1949 book *Inside Jazz* offers minimal racial contextualization: "no race theories here," Ramsey writes, "just vivid historical accounts, technical analysis, discographies, and the first biographical dictionary of bebop musicians."<sup>183</sup> Given Feather's self-identification in *Inside Jazz* as "a jazz musician and composer" with "empirical experience [in] the more serious aspects of the music," his approach to writing about Black musicians was focused on exalting the excellence of the music and its practitioners by aligning the musical quality of significant figures of mid-century modern jazz such as Parker and Gillespie with the highbrow artistic traditions of Europe.<sup>184</sup> Writing on the problematic nature of viewing jazz history purely through the values of European aesthetics, Charles D. Carson argues that "giving preference to historical narratives that favor Eurocentric ideas of autonomy and unity over sociological, popular, or even commercial concerns serves only to undermine the richness and complexity of the jazz idiom as a whole."<sup>185</sup> It seems that such attempts on Feather's part to colorblindly canonize bebop musicians resulted in a distortedly uncomplicated view of

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<sup>182</sup> Ramsey, *Race Music*, 126.

<sup>183</sup> Ramsey, *Race Music*, 126.

<sup>184</sup> Ramsey, *Race Music*, 123-124.

<sup>185</sup> Charles D. Carson, "'Bridging the Gap': Creed Taylor, Grover Washington Jr., and the Crossover Roots of Smooth Jazz," *Black Music Research Journal*, 28 (Spring 2008): 2.

the racial delineations of contemporaneous audiences. For example, Ramsey notes that Feather's euphemistic comparison of different New York jazz audiences during the 1940s was notably simplistic; Ramsey quotes Feather: "Savoy audiences consisted of local jitterbugs [i.e. Black audiences], who wanted music that jumped, and jazz hunters downtown [i.e. white audiences], who were concerned more with the esthetic [*sic*] qualities of the performances."<sup>186</sup>

Much like Feather, Len problematically oversimplifies the tastes and desires of both Black and white audiences. From his perspective in *Down Beat*, Eckstine failed to relate to the Apollo's Harlem clientele by abstaining from blues numbers like "Jelly, Jelly" in favor of an ostensibly more white-friendly show. One of Len's chief concerns in this respect was the fact that the orchestration of Eckstine's backing ensemble seemed to reflect the aesthetic values of the western European tradition rather than the Black American one. For instance, Eckstine's longtime pianist Bobby Tucker had moved from behind the keyboard to the semiotically significant position of conductor. Furthermore, the big band led by clarinetist Buddy DeFranco was fortified with a string section: "[S]even strings—at the Apollo yet!" Len mused.<sup>187</sup> Such choices were certainly a departure from the Black American types of artistry displayed in the Earl Hines band and Eckstine's own big band from the late-1940s. These ensembles—with their prioritization of unique arrangements, driving swing, and virtuosic solos—exemplified the aesthetics of the large, Black American ensemble during the 1930s and 1940s. To be sure, Len's implication that a primarily Black American audience in 1951 would not respond

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<sup>186</sup> Ramsey, *Race Music*, 124. I thank Christi Jay Wells for their help in deciphering Feather's racial analogies in this excerpt.

<sup>187</sup> Len, "Eckstine Doesn't Live Up To His Promise In Apollo Date."

positively to supposedly highbrow instruments carries obvious racist weight.

Significantly, though, his perspective here seems to be less concerned with belittling said audience members and more centered in an attempt to ingratiate himself to them. Len continues:

Billy has every right to like strings, but he should have known that his audience here remembered him when he got along perfectly well without them. And when he said how glad he was to be back at the Apollo and that he had been counting the days, you could almost hear a thousand people muttering “I’ll bet he’s counting the days till he closes.”<sup>188</sup>

This act of putting words in the audience’s collective mouth amounts to little more than a rhetorical sleight of hand, so to speak, as Len confirms his own assertion with essentially no evidence.

As I have shown, Len operated, to varying degrees, with a possessive investment in gatekeeping artistic Blackness in the United States. This was indeed a common trend in the first half of the twentieth century; John Hammond infamously wrote in *Down Beat* about the “Tragedy of Duke Ellington,” calling *Reminiscing in Tempo* “un-Negroid” due to the way Ellington “shuts his eyes to the abuses being heaped upon his race.”<sup>189</sup> John Gennari points out how Hammond defined “black music” in “narrow ideological and formal terms that...many African American musicians have challenged in a number of ways.”<sup>190</sup> Regarding the poorly reviewed *Black, Brown, and Beige*, Scott DeVaux has detailed the way many white critics focused on the work’s form, overshadowing the broader narrative of the programmatic work, with Lisa Barg and Walter van de Leur

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<sup>188</sup> Len, “Eckstine Doesn’t Live Up To His Promise In Apollo Date.”

<sup>189</sup> John Hammond, “The Tragedy of Duke Ellington, the ‘Black Prince’ of Jazz,” *Down Beat*, November 1935, 1, 6, reprinted in Mark Tucker and Duke Ellington, *The Duke Ellington Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 119-20.

<sup>190</sup> Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool*, 51.

importantly noting that one of the few reviews which showcased the program came from Langston Hughes.<sup>191</sup> But this trend does not adequately explain the degree to which Len seems to have relished his vindictive posture in his two articles from October 1951. Of the two primary subjects in his narrative—Billy Eckstine and the Apollo audience—Len was insultingly condescending to the former and flippantly homogenizing of the latter. Nevertheless, it seems that Len felt convinced that he was speaking on behalf of the Apollo audience despite his limited interaction with them during Eckstine’s residency in September 1951 (it seems he only attended one of these performances).

Such cognitive dissonance resulted in Len adopting a homogenized caricature of Black American audiences for the purpose of his own argument—and ghettoizing the actual members of said audiences—all while making daring decrees to Eckstine through the mouthpiece of *Down Beat* magazine:

If Billy will come out from behind the golf ball for a moment before it becomes an 8-ball, we’d like to offer him a little advice, which he hasn’t asked for and won’t follow. Next time you play the Apollo, B, throw out them strings, put Bobby Tucker back at the piano, get yourself a good honking tenor and a rhythm section, and sing *Jelly Jelly*. Neither your dignity nor your boxoffice [*sic*] receipts will suffer.

But we stand by one vital point: granted that you keep the strings and do the usual great job on the *I Apologizes* and the *Caravans*, we’d still like you, if only for our personal kicks, to throw in some blues as a reminder that you still dig that groove, too.<sup>192</sup>

This sort of attempt at controlling the expression of Black American artists has been extensively detailed by scholars such as John Gennari, Amiri Baraka, Ingrid Monson,

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<sup>191</sup> Lisa Barg and Walter van de Leur, “‘Your Music Has Flung the Story of ‘Hot Harlem’ to the Four Corners of the Earth!’: Race and Narrative in *Black, Brown and Beige*,” *The Musical Quarterly* 96, no. 3/4 (2013): 428. Scott DeVaux, “Black, Brown, and Beige and Its Critics,” *Black Music Research Journal* 13 (Fall 1993): 127-128.

<sup>192</sup> Len, “Eckstine Doesn’t Live Up To His Promise In Apollo Date.”

Christi Jay Wells, and Eric Porter.<sup>193</sup> More specific to the context of mid-century jazz discourse in *Down Beat* magazine, that Len's patronizing paternalism was dressed up in the trappings of jive lingo (i.e. "them strings" and "dig that groove") further underscores the fact that white jazz critics from this time not only wielded the power of the gatekeeper; they often felt that they were initiated enough in Black American culture to be deserving of it.<sup>194</sup>

### **"We a-pole-ogize": October 19, 1951**

In response to Len's October 5 article, the Apollo's managing co-owner Frank Schiffman emphatically condemned the author's critiques in the following issue of *Down Beat* from October 19, 1951. Schiffman was no stranger to countering negative narratives about his theaters. In 1940, when faced with public scrutiny for allegedly refusing to show Black films in the multiple Black-only movie theatres he owned, Schiffman's response was published in the *Pittsburgh Courier*.<sup>195</sup> Schiffman claimed that he only discriminated against poorly made films, framing his establishments—particularly the

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<sup>193</sup> Baraka, "Jazz and the White Critic." Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool*. Monson, "The Problem with White Hipness." Eric Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Christi Jay Wells (née Christopher J. Wells), "'A Dreadful Bit of Silliness': Feminine Frivolity and Ella Fitzgerald's Early Critical Reception," *Women & Music*, 2017.

<sup>194</sup> John Gennari makes a similar case regarding Mezz Mezzrow's use of such language throughout the clarinetist's autobiography: Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool*, 32-34.

<sup>195</sup> "'All-Colored Films Own Worst Enemy' – Rowe: Says Industry Held Back By Production Idea of Quick Gold," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 2, 1940, 21, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. Earl J. Morris, "Claim theatre Magnates Boycott Race Films: Frank Schiffman and Wallerstein Named In Charges," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 24, 1940, 20, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. "Schiffman Answers Charges Of His Accusers: Has Played Many Colored Pictures At Apollo Theatre," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 23, 1940, 21, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

Apollo—as bastions of Black artistic excellence. More than a decade later, Schiffman similarly came to the defense of Eckstine and the Apollo:

Your article is unfair from every conceivable point of view. It's a terrible injustice to Billy Eckstine, and to the Apollo audiences! I caught him at probably 15 shows throughout the week, and he never failed to get a big hand; moreover, he did a wonderful week's business.<sup>196</sup>

Schiffman did concede that Eckstine had been “standoffish” in previous Apollo residences, and he also admitted that the final show of any opening day—the very performance which Len attended—always tends to display “a letdown from the tension of the first few shows.”<sup>197</sup> Nevertheless, Schiffman flatly objected to the notion that strings were too highbrow for the Apollo, a point which Len casually and parenthetically dismissed as “not intended.”<sup>198</sup>

Len toned down his rhetoric slightly in this article, seemingly dodging Schiffman's verbal counterpunches: “[The Apollo] is one place where a truly versatile singer is able to offer a well-rounded show—all the way from *Jealousy* to *Jelly Jelly*. And Billy is just the guy who can do it.”<sup>199</sup> Nevertheless, it is still loaded with sardonicism: “After the [October 5] review had gone to press, B told us that he never got offstage after five numbers as we stated; six was the least he did at any show. To which all we can add, B, is that we a-pole-ogize.”<sup>200</sup> This final statement gleefully mocks Eckstine's pronunciation of the title word from one of his biggest romantic hits of 1951 entitled “I Apologize.” The plural “we” underlines the fact that Len was speaking on behalf of

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<sup>196</sup> Len, “‘Beat's Eckstine Story Unfair,’ Says Apollo Op,” *Down Beat*, October 19, 1951, 1.

<sup>197</sup> Len, “‘Beat's Eckstine Story Unfair.’”

<sup>198</sup> Len, “‘Beat's Eckstine Story Unfair.’”

<sup>199</sup> Len, “‘Beat's Eckstine Story Unfair.’”

<sup>200</sup> Len, “‘Beat's Eckstine Story Unfair.’”

*Down Beat*'s editors, not as an outlier among them. Furthermore, this rhetorical body shot represents the extent to which Len permitted Eckstine to defend himself here underlines the possessive investment in dictating how Black American artists should conduct themselves for the sake of his periodical's constructed narrative vis-à-vis jazz authenticity.

This narrative significantly resembles the struggle trope of Black authenticity which continues to shape much of the hermeneutics of Black American music. In contemporary Black music discourse, the struggle trope is typically evoked by hip hop artists as a means of self-authentication in the space of commercial American music.<sup>201</sup> During the middle of the twentieth century, the trope commonly served as a litmus test within white critical discourse, which determined the cultural authenticity of Black artists. Further, I claim that the blues—as a signifier of the legacy of American slavery to many jazz critics and scholars—may be understood as a sonic analogue to the struggle trope.<sup>202</sup> The narratives of venerated heroes of the jazz canon—many being masters of the blues in their own right—were greatly defined by struggle in one form or another: Louis Armstrong experienced extreme childhood poverty and run-ins with the law; Billie Holiday consistently endured physical, sexual, and financial abuse; and Basie was famously a victim of inequitable deals made by predatory agents and record companies during the early decades of his career. Broadly speaking, it is useful to view such

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<sup>201</sup> Lauron Kehrer, “White Women Rappers Get Ratchet: Iggy Azalea, White Girl Mob, and Cultural Appropriation in Hip-Hop” (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 2017). S. Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>202</sup> In chapter three, I discuss how Albert Murray has critiqued the connection between the blues and racial struggle.

examples of struggle among early-twentieth century jazz luminaries via race as it intersects with socioeconomic status, gender, and commercial agency; however, Len's expectation that Eckstine should have adhered to the performance of the blues—the aural struggle trope—displays the possessive investments in the narrative he and his publishers at *Down Beat* sought to put forth: “Rejection of the blues doesn't indicate progress.”<sup>203</sup> Moreover, Eckstine's ostensible embracing of Basie's blues-oriented style in 1952 may have served to counter this paradigm.

After undertaking his bold and seemingly personal attack on Eckstine, one wonders why Len readopted the centrist tone he exhibited in the article following Eckstine's Copacabana residency. One possible explanation might be that Eckstine was simply too popular to continue insulting. Even in *Down Beat*, Eckstine completely dominated the readers' polls, winning the titles for “Best Male Singer” from 1949-1952 by huge margins. Furthermore, beginning in 1950, Eckstine enjoyed a lucrative deal with Paramount, which came with a robust body of advertisements in the pages of newspapers and magazines such as *Down Beat*.<sup>204</sup> On the other hand, such immense popularity coupled with what some scholars would refer to as a “transracial” presentation likely situated Eckstine as an easy target for those who were devoted to a neatly quantifiable view of Black Americans and the authenticity of their artistic expressions.<sup>205</sup> Len was one of many individuals who took on such a paternalistic posture within the fledgling

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<sup>203</sup> Len, ““Beat's Eckstine Story Unfair.””

<sup>204</sup> “Eckstine Readies for Paramount,” *Down Beat*, April 21, 1950. “Eckstine Signing for a Cool Million,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 28, 1950, 26.

<sup>205</sup> I take my cue on the term “transracial” from Tamara Roberts in her research on Michael Jackson. She defines the term as “the traversing or dissolving of racial categories.” Tamara Roberts, “Michael Jackson's Kingdom: Music, Race, and the Sound of the Mainstream,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 23, no.1 (2011): 26.

discourse of written jazz criticism at the middle of the twentieth century. His fighting words were representative of a gatekeeping mindset among mainstream jazz critics that contributed to Eckstine's sudden and dramatic fall from grace within the pages of *Down Beat*; after dominating the readers' polls for consecutive years, Eckstine would barely garner any votes beginning in 1953.

While his racial and musical authenticity were being scrutinized by paternalistic jazz critics, Eckstine was also facing scandals which were more acutely bigoted. The most damaging and widely circulated slanders stemmed from articles in *Life* magazine (1950) and *Look* magazine (1951) which depicted Eckstine interacting with white female fans and dating white celebrities.<sup>206</sup> Eckstine was slated to appear in leading roles in major motion pictures prior to the *Life* and *Look* articles; however, in their wake, these projects dissolved. Such appearances were the standard move for superstar singers, so the racist outrage following the articles in *Life* and *Look* exacerbated the public relations problems presented by jazz critics, putting Eckstine in serious danger of fading into obscurity. Eckstine's persistence in soliciting Basie's partnership in 1951 underscores the fact that Basie—for all his financial mishaps—was never involved in any scandals of this sort. For this reason, Basie's presence on Eckstine's tours beginning in 1952 provided a balm for the rage much of the white American public felt toward the singer following a series of racist scandals during the beginning of the 1950s.

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<sup>206</sup> Article title unknown, *Look*, December 4, 1951. "Mr. B: Bobby Soxers Become Billy Soxers to Boost Baritone Billy Eckstine," *Life*, April 24, 1950, 101-104.

## “Gnashing Dixie Teeth”: Eckstine and Racist Scandals

*Life* magazine was at the height of its influence in April 1950 when its publisher Henry R. Luce decided to run a major profile on Billy Eckstine.<sup>207</sup> Detailing Eckstine’s musical performances, impressive finances, and sizable logistics team, the article likely could have bolstered Eckstine’s ascent into superstardom, but one photograph in which the singer is in physical contact with white, female fans had the opposite effect across much of the United States. This photograph—featured far more prominently than the article’s other five pictures—portrayed Eckstine and a few white women laughing, while one of the ladies held her hand and forehead on Eckstine’s chest and shoulder.<sup>208</sup> To the sensible viewer, it portrays a warm interaction, captured brilliantly in a hectic moment. The photographer in charge of the profile, Martha Holmes, called it her favorite photo of her entire career. However, Holmes had also pointed out that, “It was groundbreaking back then in that it was a black man hugging a white woman. There was a discussion about whether we should run it or not.”<sup>209</sup>

Chief among the factors taken into consideration by those at *Life* certainly must have been the fact that a warrant had recently been issued for Eckstine’s arrest for allegedly assaulting a white woman in a Los Angeles club just weeks before the profile was to run. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, a blonde audience member named Eleanor Spears accused the singer of spitting in her face, tearing her fur coat, slapping

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<sup>207</sup> Dennis Hevesi, “Martha Holmes, 83, Pioneer in Photography, Dies,” *New York Times*, September 30, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/30/arts/design/30holmes.html>. Kerrie Mitchel, “Life in Pictures: Pop Star Billy Eckstine and the Infamous 1950 Photo That Impacted His Career,” *Behind The Scenes* (blog), *New York Historical Society Museum & Library*, June 26, 2019, <https://behindthescenes.nyhistory.org/Life-infamous-1950-photography-billy-eckstine/>.

<sup>208</sup> “Mr. B,” *Life*, 101.

<sup>209</sup> Hevesi, “Martha Holmes.”

her, and calling her “vile names” at a club performance.<sup>210</sup> It is not the aim of this research to speculate about the validity of this accusation; however, the concluding paragraphs in the *Los Angeles Times* article are somewhat puzzling:

“I asked him to sing ‘Good-by’ [sic] and he told me not to interfere with his work. Well, it’s certainly good-by for me. I’m never going to buy any more of his records,” Mrs. Spears told Taylor.

Her version of the affair was corroborated by a red-haired friend, Miss Norma Province, 22, a model, who also lives at [Spears’] address.<sup>211</sup>

Spears’ culminating claim that she would not purchase any more of Eckstine’s records seems anticlimactic given the severity of her story. Coupled with the thinly veiled reference to a “red-haired” [read: white] witness, this article does not seem to convey the urgency one might expect had a Black male celebrity publicly beaten a white woman in 1950. Eckstine’s flat denial of the story was published in Black newspapers such as the *Baltimore Afro-American*.<sup>212</sup> Nevertheless, the violence of the Spears story likely tinged the public perception of Eckstine’s relations with white women by the time *Life* published their profile later the same month.

Given the publicity surrounding Eckstine’s warrant, the decision makers at *Life* must have known that a substantial portion of Americans would object to the image of Eckstine in close physical contact with white women, so it is worth considering why it was published at all. Were the magazine’s publishers sincerely attempting to normalize interracial exchanges? Did they think that the unanimous joy depicted in the photo might

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<sup>210</sup> “Night Club Patron Says Eckstine Affronted Her,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 7, 1950, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>211</sup> “Night Club Patron Says Eckstine Affronted Her.”

<sup>212</sup> Cliff Mackay, “This Week’s News In Tabloid,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 6, 1950, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

have offered a counternarrative to the one put forth by Spears? Or was it just another example of *Life* publishing a socially tone-deaf article about a Black American musician?<sup>213</sup> These are fascinating questions that future research on *Life*'s coverage of Black American artists and public figures may answer definitively, but clues to the magazine's frame of mind lie in the photo's caption: "After a show at Bop City, Billy is rushed by admirers, most profess to have a maternal feeling for him. 'He's just like a little boy,' they say."<sup>214</sup> The historically problematic description of a Black man as a "boy" notwithstanding, such a ridiculous summary of the photograph might be viewed as an editorial washing of the hands; the provocative photo would sell issues and create a buzz, and the magazine's editors could have effectively shrugged in disbelief that anyone might infer any overtones that could not be described as motherly. Speculation aside, the photo's conspicuous (mis)caption clearly betrays the *Life* editors' awareness of its potential for racist controversy.

Upon the profile's release in the April 24, 1950 issue of *Life*, the resulting racist uproar quickly became part of the nation's social discourse. In less than two weeks, the *Baltimore Afro-American* mentioned the scandal in its tabloid section "Names! Names! Some You Know and Some You Don't." Managing editor Cliff Mackay observed: "[G]nashing Dixie teeth could be heard all the way up to NYC after Life magazine came out. It showed Billy surrounded by a swooning group of blondes at Bop City. One had her head on his chest."<sup>215</sup> Clearly, Mackay perceived the photographed women as

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<sup>213</sup> John Gennari mentions a *Life* article on bebop published at the height of Charlie Parker's influence which "failed to mention [Parker], concentrating instead on cabalistic subcultural emblems such as Dizzy Gillespie's secret handshake." Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool*, 306.

<sup>214</sup> "Mr. B," *Life*, 101.

<sup>215</sup> Mackay, "This Week's News In Tabloid," 9.

obviously romance-minded, making it seem that *Life*'s attempted facade of maternalism did not register with some readers. Indeed, the following issue of *Life* from May 15, 1950 featured letters to the editor which displayed overt racism. Frank J. Roy Jr., from Columbus, Georgia wrote "I am disgusted with Life for printing the picture of Billy Eckstine and his admirers," and John H. Edmonson from Fairfield, Alabama said "If that was my daughter [in the photo] she would be lucky to be able to sit down in a week when I finished with her."<sup>216</sup> Writing about these letters, Cary Ginell astutely notes that these are the only excerpts which were deemed suitable for print.<sup>217</sup> One other letter regarding the Eckstine article is included in this issue, however it does not offer any counterpoint to the views expressed by upset readers such as Roy and Edmonson. Rather, Pat Wright from San Francisco gives a glowing review of Eckstine's performance abilities: "I have never enjoyed anything so much as seeing Mr. B. One forgets about such things as the talk of an atomic war, Communism, the high cost of living and people like Stalin."<sup>218</sup> The acutely racist reactions to the article juxtaposed with ambiguously general praise for Eckstine's music invites further skepticism regarding the mindset of *Life*'s publishers; if they had indeed run the story in the name of improving race relations, should they not have furthered that same theme by printing responses which painted the article itself in a positive light? On the other hand, it is entirely possible that Mr. Wright's pseudo-political musings constituted the apex of the support voiced on Eckstine's behalf. Still, the photo was viewed by some of Eckstine's contemporaries as a reason for hope. Describing the nationally distributed photo, Harry

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<sup>216</sup> "Letters to the Editors," *Life*, May 15, 1950, 14.

<sup>217</sup> Ginell, *Mr. B*, 115.

<sup>218</sup> "Letters to the Editors," *Life*, 14.

Belafonte echoed the words of Martha Holmes, saying that “it was as if a barrier had been broken.”<sup>219</sup>

Tony Bennett offered a more sobering reflection on how the photo affected Eckstine’s career: “It changed everything. Before that, he had a tremendous following...The girls would just swoon all over him, and it just offended the white community.”<sup>220</sup> Due to similar assessments, the infamous profile worried music promoters and movie executives. Yet, according to Ginell, Eckstine might have rebounded from the scandal if not for a subsequent profile in *Life*’s sister publication *Look* in early 1951 in which Eckstine, recently separated from his wife June, was depicted romancing white, French actress Denise Darcel.<sup>221</sup> The fawning white fans in the *Life* article got the attention of racist Americans, but Eckstine’s interracial relationship appeared to confirm their worst fears: that Eckstine wanted white women, and they wanted him.<sup>222</sup> This amplification of existing racist perceptions of the singer helped extinguish his professional success.

The gravity of these scandals is thrown further into relief by the attitude of apparent certainty regarding Eckstine’s move to starring in Hollywood films just a few months before the *Life* article was published. For instance, in the February 24, 1950 issue

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<sup>219</sup> Ginell, *Mr. B*, 115.

<sup>220</sup> Ginell, *Mr. B*, 115.

<sup>221</sup> Ginell, *Mr. B*, 116.

<sup>222</sup> There is a long history in the U.S. of refined, romantic-oriented Black songsters being interpreted as audacious and threatening by white supremacist portions of society. For example, Barbara Lewis argues that the grotesque minstrel characters Jim Crow and Zip Coon were created in order to directly parody nineteenth-century Black crooner and composer George Washington Dixon’s suave, sophisticated song character “Long Tail Blue.” Barbara Lewis, “Daddy Blue: Evolution of the Dark Dandy,” in *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, eds. Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 257-272.

of *Down Beat*, a page one article entitled “Talk of ‘Lena Treatment’ Doesn’t Worry Eckstine” illustrates the confidence Eckstine had in being treated as a serious star by MGM Pictures.<sup>223</sup> The “Lena [Horne] Treatment” refers to the fact that MGM had been widely criticized for “failing to make a really great star out of Miss Horne and relegating her to nothing better than production numbers, generally without any white performers, in frothy film musicals.”<sup>224</sup> When asked about the potential for this sort of treatment, Eckstine appeared unshaken: “I’m just a singer, and I certainly don’t expect to become a great actor—at least not in my first picture. I’ll never do anything in a picture that would lower anyone’s opinion of me or any minority group, and I’m sure MGM won’t expect me to.”<sup>225</sup> The author also relays details about a promising role in a film which would never be made:

Final details on Eckstine’s first film role were ironed out during his recent visit to Hollywood. Unless plans are changed, as is always possible, Billy will play the role of a band leader in a picture entitled *East of Broadway*, in which the locale is the old New York Cotton club. Lena Horne, cast as the band vocalist, will be the romantic interest opposite Eckstine.

Heading the cast of *East of Broadway* will be Van Johnsons, Jimmy Durante, and Carmen Miranda, with Joe Pasternak as producer. Production is to get under way in early spring.<sup>226</sup>

Such a film would have not only affirmed Eckstine as one of the biggest stars of the decade, but it would have shifted his existing identity as a film actor away from the narrow castings he had experienced in the 1940s. Krin Gabbard gives useful insight regarding Eckstine’s presence in American motion pictures:

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<sup>223</sup> “Talk of ‘Lena Treatment’ Doesn’t Worry Eckstine,” *Down Beat*, February 24, 1950, 1.

<sup>224</sup> “Lena Treatment,” *Down Beat*, 1.

<sup>225</sup> “Lena Treatment,” *Down Beat*, 1.

<sup>226</sup> “Lena Treatment,” *Down Beat*, 1.

[Aside from Nat Cole], [p]erhaps the only other well-known black male singer from the 1940s and 1950s who projected strong male sexuality was Billy Eckstine. His career in films and television, however, was extremely limited. Even when Eckstine appeared in the race film *Rhythm in a Riff* (1946), his hyper masculine crooning was undercut substantially by his boyishness and timorous self-presentation. The plot of *Rhythm in a Riff* had him struggling to find a job for his band, hardly the image of manly self-confidence that he was capable of projecting. Although Eckstine and Cole were the only two male black singers of the late 1940s and early 1950s whose recordings of romantic ballads were regularly consumed by white audiences, Eckstine was never able to become a *visual* presence beyond a black audience. Cole was able to make that transition, but in the process he was substantially transformed.<sup>227</sup>

The transformation to which Gabbard refers is most evident in Cole's heroic portrayal of W. C. Handy in the 1958 biopic *St. Louis Blues*. Gabbard writes:

The fact that the black W. C. Handy's story is *not* seen through the eyes of, say, his best friend the white drummer has much to do with the persona of Nat King Cole...[since] Cole functioned as a healthy alternative to the unsavory image of the drug-crazed, psyched-up black jazz artist that had been thoroughly inscribed on the American mind by the late 1950s.<sup>228</sup>

Cole's distance from the gritty personas of mid-century jazz artists was also due to his increasing use of romantic crooning repertoire, a fact which did not go unnoticed by contemporaneous jazz critics. Writing about Eckstine's Apollo residency in the October 5, 1951 issue of *Down Beat*, Len stated:

It is a sad thing to see a great artist reach the stage where he has gone beyond the kind of audiences who helped make him famous, and has lost contact with them and their musical tastes. It has been happening for years with Nat Cole, who has completely lost the original fans of his early trio; it is happening now with Billy and his hold on Negro audiences.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Krin Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 246. This last sentence is particularly significant here, given the fact that, after commanding the *Down Beat* readers' polls for Best Male Singer from 1949-1952, Cole would overtake Eckstine in 1953 before giving way to nearly two decades of shared dominance from Frank Sinatra and Ray Charles.

<sup>228</sup> Gabbard, *Jammin' on the Margins*, 99.

<sup>229</sup> Len, "Eckstine Doesn't Live Up To His Promise In Apollo Date."

Gabbard also points out that Black singers such as Cab Calloway and Herb Jeffries often portrayed “tough guys and dashing romantic leads” in race pictures, and attributes Eckstine’s absence from such roles to the fact that he, unlike Calloway and Jeffries, had a large following among white audiences.<sup>230</sup> In short, Eckstine’s public scandals and interracial romantic relations precluded him from making the same image pivot which enabled Cole to enjoy the sort of subjectivity typically only afforded to whites in Hollywood, while his multiracial listenership inhibited him from extensive work in race films. In the fallout from the *Life* and *Look* scandals, Eckstine would only appear in one film in the 1950s: the forgettable 1952 MGM comedy *Skirts Ahoy!*, in which he portrayed a lounge singer with no dialogue.

While a slump in his musical career in general was not far behind the implosion of his endeavors in Hollywood, it is important to distinguish the forces at play in the context of film from those of popular music. The articles in *Life* and *Look* solidified the optics of Eckstine’s Jim Crow-confounding interactions with white women such that MGM producers were no longer willing to place him in a leading romantic role on screen. However, Eckstine—who would continue to dominate the readers' polls in *Down Beat* magazine until 1953—faced a different set of obstacles when negotiating his musical endeavors. As I have demonstrated, across the body of mid-century jazz criticism in the United States, Eckstine was openly condemned for not adhering to prescribed tropes associated with Black male singers. For many white jazz critics, he was expected to engage in a hyperracial performance by using sexualizing blues

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<sup>230</sup> Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins*, 312 n.3.

numbers like “Jelly, Jelly” as the keystone of his repertoire.<sup>231</sup> At the same time, much of the American citizenry was convinced that Eckstine posed a sexual threat to the integrity of white feminine purity. Though practically at odds with each other, both these viewpoints were based in a shared desire to racially segregate sexual expression. Acquiescing to either of these groups would have meant betraying his own racial and musical identities, so I interpret Eckstine’s offer to collaborate with Basie as a move of supreme personal agency. In situating himself alongside the musical excellence and blues “authenticity” of Basie, Eckstine conjured a third option which defied the avenues prescribed by those with possessive investments in dictating what he should or should not do. This complex and precarious position helps explain the urgency with which Eckstine courted Basie for their extensive collaboration. Basie was virtually never portrayed as any sort of heartthrob or romantic icon; his persona was rooted more in the excellence of his orchestra and authenticity of his Kansas City aesthetic. Because of this, Eckstine likely viewed an alignment with Basie as an apt tonic for the noxious narratives surrounding the singer’s amorous exploits.

At the same time, despite his lull in popularity during the middle of the century, Basie’s status as a cornerstone of the burgeoning jazz canon was a foregone conclusion within contemporaneous jazz critical discourse. The solidification of his legacy, though, also meant that many in the business of writing about jazz considered Basie’s most influential years to be behind him by the early 1950s. Coupled with the sour taste still residing in Basie’s mouth from more than a decade of scrimping and scheming to keep

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<sup>231</sup> I turn again to Tamara Roberts’s work on Michael Jackson for my working definition of “hyperracial” presentation by Black male musicians: “an overt and possibly stereotyped marking of race.” Roberts, “Michael Jackson’s Kingdom,” 26.

his ensemble's collective head above water, Basie's professional position from 1950-1951 was indeed more grim than other scholars have acknowledged, further underlining just how valuable Eckstine was to the revival of Basie's situation at the beginning of 1952.

### **Basie and Eckstine: Live and In Person**

From February 9 through June 19, 1952, Billy Eckstine headlined a tour of one-nighters with the Count Basie Orchestra which was the culmination of all the interdependent motivations shared by the two men over the course of the preceding years.<sup>232</sup> Chris Sheridan's exhaustive itinerary of Basie's career lists the band in Houston, Texas on February 8, so this places Basie in the South at this point; however, Sheridan cites "no information" for the 131 days between February 9 and June 19.<sup>233</sup> That Sheridan did not come across any documentation of this tour during his archival research on Basie is likely because Eckstine's camp was in charge of the tour's logistical planning. According to contemporaneous press, this tour was Eckstine's first extended voyage through the south in five years, with one journalist noting that the tour "was arranged as a result of Eckstine's large southern...following demanding to see their idol in the flesh."<sup>234</sup> By many accounts, this tour was an overwhelming success, with

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<sup>232</sup> Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 1129.

<sup>233</sup> Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 1129.

<sup>234</sup> That this quote appears in the Black newspaper *New Journal and Guide* invites speculation vis-à-vis whether the "large southern following" to which the author refers was all-Black or mixed-race. "Count Basie - Billy Eckstine To Tour South In February," *New Journal and Guide*, January 19, 1952, 22, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. A later *New Journal and Guide* article from May of the same year offers some clarity: "While most of his recent bookings were played to segregated audiences, Eckstine said the barriers were gradually being removed. In three cities, New Orleans, Miami and Columbia, S. C., the segregation policy was not observed. Mr. B. went

“standing room only” signs being a common sight, and dates in Kansas City, Houston, Dallas, and Ft. Worth reportedly attracting nearly 10,000 people each.<sup>235</sup> Indeed, it seems that each man got what he wanted out of this collaboration, at least for the time being; Eckstine successfully toured across the South despite his ongoing public relations troubles, and Basie reestablished himself as a full time big band leader on par with any other name in the business.

Less than two months after the conclusion of the tour in June 1952, Eckstine’s team began laying the groundwork for another similar tour which ran from September 12, through November 23, 1952.<sup>236</sup> An essay attributed to Eckstine appeared in the August 10, 1952 issue of *Down Beat* which praised the “new old bands” run by Basie, Ellington, and others, solidifying the singer’s association with such acts.<sup>237</sup> Significantly, the autumn tour differed from the first one in ways which imply a great deal of optimism on the part of Eckstine’s corporate overseers. Firstly, the second tour extended across the entire continent, with dates spanning from Oklahoma City to New Haven, and Los Angeles to Montreal.<sup>238</sup> While there were still numerous dates in the South, it seems that

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on to say that he had confined himself to the larger southern cities on his recent tour because he expected that the change would be most evident in these places. “Barriers Being Removed: Eckstine Sees Change in South On Annual Tour,” *New Journal and Guide*, May 3, 1952, 22, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>235</sup> “Eckstine-Basie Play To Record Dance Turnouts,” *Atlanta Daily World*, February 21, 1952, 3, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. “Eckstine, Basie, Smash Records,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 23, 1952, 23, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. “Eckstine Tour A Big Hit,” *New Journal and Guide*, February 23, 1952, 21, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. “Eckstine Tour Hit With Fans,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 23, 1952, 6, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. “‘Mr. B.’ Means Business in \$\$\$ Promoters Discover,” *The Chicago Defender*, March 1, 1952, 22, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>236</sup> “Dixie Bids For Eckstine - Basie - Shearing ‘Package’: See Possible Shift In Dates To Serve ‘South,’” *The Chicago Defender*, August 30, 1952, 23, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>237</sup> Billy Eckstine, “Show and Movie Tunes Are Saviors of the Music Business,” *Down Beat*, August 10, 1952, 2 & 18.

<sup>238</sup> “Dixie Bids for Eckstine.”

Eckstine's handlers felt that the time had come to ramp up the act's presence on the national stage. At the same time, though, the autumn tour was more financially ambitious, resulting in public scrutiny. A hefty price tag to bring in the act resulted in smaller towns' venues not being able to do so, and the choice to augment the tour with white pianist George Shearing once again resulted in many southern promoters protesting Eckstine based on his associations with individuals outside his own race.<sup>239</sup> A final tour in February and March of 1953 appears to have been an effort to renegotiate Eckstine among southern audiences, with Eckstine and Basie being joined by the rhythm and blues star Ruth Brown: a Black woman whose association with the distinctly racialized genre is highly significant vis-à-vis the marketability of the act in the South.<sup>240</sup>

Basie and Eckstine would remain close friends for the rest of their lives, but by this point it was clear that their careers were moving in two different directions. For the next five years, Basie took the jazz world by storm, releasing instant classics such as *April in Paris* (1957) and *The Atomic Mr. Basie* (1958). Critical to the New Testament Orchestra's early success was the enlistment of baritone Joe Williams, with *Count Basie Swings*, *Joe Williams Swings* (1955) being the *ne plus ultra* of that musical partnership. Indeed, Eckstine's extensive performances with the Basie Orchestra during 1952 and 1953 certainly must have calibrated the ensemble for work with a top-shelf baritone such as Williams. As substantial a box office attraction unto himself, Eckstine could not have

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<sup>239</sup> "Dixie Bids For Eckstine."

<sup>240</sup> "Eckstine, Brown, Basie To Play Here March 9th," *Atlanta Daily World*, February 22, 1953, 8, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. "Eckstine, Brown, Basie On Dance Card, March 9th," *Atlanta Daily World*, March 1, 1953, 4, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. Lawrence N. Redd, "Rock! It's Still Rhythm and Blues," *The Black Perspective in Music* 13, no. 1 (spring 1985): 31-47. Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 1131.

maintained his star status if he became a sideman to the now re-ascending Basie. Once the mutually beneficial partnership between Basie and Eckstine wrapped up around 1953, Williams was in a perfect position to fill Eckstine's musical part in the Basie Orchestra while not overshadowing Basie, while also singing as many blues numbers as his new boss asked of him.

Eckstine and Basie would collaborate once again in 1958 on the album *Basie/Eckstine, Inc.* This is one of Eckstine's finest outings of his entire career, and the whole production is nothing short of inspired. Significantly, Eckstine fills the baritone role made famous by Williams, but which he himself paved the way for during his earlier tours with the Basie band. Reminding listeners that he was indeed the prototype upon which Williams built his legendary tenure with Basie, Eckstine once again contributed to the artistic tapestry of the Count Basie Orchestra in ways that can neither be underestimated or overstated, just as he had done for the majority of the 1950s.

## **Conclusion**

The bifurcated nature of Basie's typical biography has resulted in his orchestral intermission being something of an intellectual bottleneck for scholars, wherein oversimplified myth stands in place of critical engagement. By focusing on the interconnected motivations between Basie and Eckstine, my research clarifies this oft-overlooked aspect of Basie's legacy. Moreover, by situating Eckstine and his professional incentives alongside those of Basie, the complexities of both their narratives increase substantially.

I find such an approach to be highly valuable, as simple, linear historical narratives tempt scholars, practitioners, and casual listeners to accept received knowledge without critical engagement into the complexities of subjects' lived realities. Just as one learns about the protagonist of a fictional novel by witnessing them interact with other people, places, and situations, critical examinations of jazz legacies may further the understanding of their subjects by rendering them within a rich tapestry of interpersonal influence and cultural significance. From this perspective, the narrative of Basie's orchestral hiatus becomes inseparable from the stories of Eckstine, Black American music, and race in American media. While this does, to an extent, decentralize Basie within his own narrative, it also places Basie within other broader stories of American history.

## CHAPTER 2

### “THE POET, THE PRIEST, AND THE MEDICINE MAN”: COUNT BASIE, ALBERT MURRAY, AND *GOOD MORNING BLUES*

A black sheet is studded with three identical posters reading “Northsea Jazz Festival ‘79.” As the camera zooms in and out, left and right, searching for the perfect frame, a Dutch-accented voice politely stumbles over itself: “We thank you *very* much, we want *very* little. Just a few minutes, that’s all.” “All right,” steadily replies a second voice; it is coarse-grained and clearly American. From stage right, two men emerge and sit down at the table. On the left is Willem “Pim” Jacobs: a Dutchman and an accomplished jazz pianist. Seated to his left is Count Basie, dressed in a sand-colored three-piece suit, an off-white shirt, and a matching dark burgundy tie and pocket handkerchief. From his slicked-back salt-and-pepper hair and neatly trimmed mustache down to his brown and white two-tone shoes, his presentation is immaculate, though the sweat he dabs from his brow reveals just how recently he had exited the festival stage.<sup>241</sup>

Initially, the two men sit quietly, not making eye contact. Basie’s pleasant demeanor exudes the self-assured regality one would expect from jazz royalty; he does not appear agitated or preoccupied with this post-performance obligation. Jacobs also sits quietly, but nervously. He rubs his hands on his jeans and adjusts his stiff upper body toward a comfortable position he may or may not find. He steals a long look at Basie while the titan’s attention is diverted to an off-screen assistant lighting his cigar.

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<sup>241</sup> For personnel and setlist information on this performance, see Chris Sheridan. *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, Discographies 22, ed. Michael Gray (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 921, 927.

Basie billows a few blueish-gray clouds, the disembodied arm exits stage left, and Jacobs returns to his attempts to mitigate—or, at least, conceal—his anticipation. Basie’s sideways glance intimates his acute awareness of the interviewer’s star-struck restlessness; he has seen this before. He takes a breath as if intending to relieve his interviewer’s visible tension, but before he can say anything, Jacobs suddenly signals the beginning of the interview:

“I just...[unintelligible] in Dutch first, if it’s alright with you.”

“Well, okay,” Basie replies, retreating back behind his stogie.

Jacobs looks to the camera and briefly presents the world-famous respondent to his Dutch-speaking viewers. Basie waits patiently, puffing on his tobacco, and looking down at the orange and brown plaid cloth draped across the table which sits in front of them.

After the few bars of Dutch, Jacobs switches to English:

“Mr. Basie, it was just a wonderful concert. I want to compliment you in the first place.”

“Aw, thank you very much, we enjoyed it.”

“I think the audience was very interested too, you know?”

“Very nice, very nice, you know. We always have a wonderful time each time we come here. And we look forward to coming here each year.”

Jacobs gushes, recalling his first time hearing Basie “years before” at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam.<sup>242</sup> Seeing the Basie Orchestra at this iconic stronghold of Western art music must have been thrilling for the twenty-something-year-old pianist. Since then, Jacobs had built an impressive career for himself as a jazz pianist, no doubt drawing

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<sup>242</sup> According to Basie's career tour itinerary published by Chris Sheridan, Jacobs was likely referring to a performance from either September 22, 1956, March 7, 1959, or March 26, 1960. Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 1136, 1146, 1149.

some degree of inspiration from the man he was tasked with interviewing some two decades later. Jacobs continues:

“There’s always so much happiness in the whole thing, you know? I think [it] just means a lot of happiness, don’t you think so?”

“Yes I do, really. I think if everybody can be happy, I mean, things turn out better for everything, and while even if you’re not playing well, if you’re happy, that helps.”

“Yeah it helps a lot, you know, because some of the musicians sometimes look very serious and very, I must say, not too happy with the work they do, and I say, well, ‘as long as there is music and you can just swing your music, play it, and be happy with it’...”

“Right. That’s it. That’s the way I feel about the whole thing. If I couldn’t be happy, I don’t think I would be along out here on the road because that’s my life, and if you can’t be happy with your life, what else?”

Things are off to a pleasant start. Jacobs equates Basie’s music to happiness and good times, and Basie appears sincere in his affirming response. Rather than delving further, though, Jacobs abruptly changes the subject:

“And I think there’s another expression, and they usually mean it in sport—‘never change a winning team’—and I think [the] same goes for music, [the] same goes for your band...”

*Basie, opening his mouth and softly tilting his head, looks as if he has some insights to offer but Jacobs continues:*

“...of course there are some changes in the musicians, you know, over the years...”

*Basie sharply inhales and slightly furrows his brow. Clearly he has thoughts about what Jacobs is saying, but Jacobs continues:*

“...but the music never changed, you know, it’s such a nice trademark...”

“Well...” begins Basie...

*His tone signifies he might disagree with Jacobs’ evaluation. Yet Jacobs—having long since taken a breath—unblinkingly soldiers on:*

“...I think it’s a very nice compliment, if I may tell, that after just one or two bars, you can hear this is the Basie Orchestra playing.”

“Well I hope so,” Basie quietly replies, swallowing his initial thoughts and donning a mask of acquiescence. “That’s what we try to keep it. Thank you.”

The interview concludes, and the two men return to their original positions facing away from each other. Basie returns to his cigar and cracks some jokes to the room, and Jacobs, beaming, exchanges some words in Dutch with his producer who requests that they turn the cameras back on in order to ask some questions about the early days of Basie’s career. Despite a few momentary inklings of forthcomingness during their interview, Basie flatly declines this request since he is working on the project that would eventually become *Good Morning Blues*. Future book sales, he remarked, could be jeopardized by divulging too much.<sup>243</sup>

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“For years, when I wrote the word ‘I,’ it meant Basie.”  
Albert Murray<sup>244</sup>

Reflecting on their collaborative process during the creation of *Good Morning Blues* in his 1996 essay “Comping for Count Basie,” Basie’s autobiographical co-writer Albert Murray describes his vicarious subject as “one of the most reluctant and reticent of interviewees.”<sup>245</sup> Indeed, a YouTube search for “Count Basie interview” in 2023 generates scant results compared to the dozens of available interviews involving Basie’s

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<sup>243</sup> “Interview with Count Basie by Pim Jacobs at the North Sea Jazz Festival-1979-World of Jazz,” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4-1hDkUlqo>. This interview took place on July 13, 1979 and was televised by the Dutch public broadcasting company Nederlandse Omroep Stichting. Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 1226.

<sup>244</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., “King of Cats,” *New Yorker*, April 8, 1996, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1996/04/08/king-of-cats>.

<sup>245</sup> Albert Murray, “Comping for Count Basie,” in *The Blue Devils of Nada* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 48.

contemporaries such as Ella Fitzgerald or Duke Ellington. Throughout his life, Basie was known for being among the more evasive figures in American music; he had a “longstanding suspicion,” writes Murray, “that reporters were mostly concerned about getting credit for some sensational revelation, regardless of who was embarrassed or hurt in the process.”<sup>246</sup> This is not surprising since Basie’s name and the financial struggles of his orchestra had served as tabloid fodder for decades until he achieved sustained economic security in the 1950s. Having worked closely with Billy Eckstine, Basie knew well how easily a photo or quotation could ruin a career, particularly when coming from an individual as famous and influential as himself.<sup>247</sup> Echoing Murray’s reflections on Basie, Ingrid Monson points out that, in her experience interviewing jazz musicians for her book *Saying Something*, “those musicians with the highest public visibility were the most protective of their time and privacy.”<sup>248</sup> Indeed, Basie echoes this sentiment in the conclusion of *Good Morning Blues*:

[W]hen it comes to naming names and going into details, I just don’t see the point of doing that just to give somebody something to gossip about.

And besides, that is another thing about still being active. I might bring up something that happened over fifty years ago, but it is not as far in the past as you might think, because every so often I still get back in to all the towns in every part of the country that I ever performed in, and that means that I have never really been out of touch with people in all those places down through the years. And whenever and wherever the people you’re talking about are still not around, there are still their children and grandchildren and even-great-grandchildren to be

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<sup>246</sup> Murray, “Comping for Count Basie,” 48. Mark Burford’s research on Mahalia Jackson’s interactions with jazz scholars at the Music Inn also sheds light on the way mainstream jazz discourse during the twentieth century had a penchant for objectifying Black musicians in the pursuit of codifying Black American musical idioms such as jazz, the blues, and gospel. Mark Burford, “Mahalia Jackson Meets the Wise Men: Defining Jazz at the Music Inn,” *The Musical Quarterly* 97, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 429-486.

<sup>247</sup> For more on Basie and Eckstine, see chapter one.

<sup>248</sup> Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 16

considered. I don't want to have to face them. Hell, I don't even want to imagine what they'd say behind my back.<sup>249</sup>

Though Basie had concerns about predatory journalists throughout his career, Murray writes that this was not generally on the forefront of Basie's mind in the twilight of his life:

Behind all of that super cool, laid-back understatement, Old Base was mostly having himself a ball, and in his daily contacts with white people over the past forty-five years, he was much less concerned with keeping from being done in by hostile ones than with keeping from being bored to utter exhaustion by worshipful ones.<sup>250</sup>

Murray describes “worshipful” interviews such as the one I described at this chapter's outset as the “equivalents of masks and costumes”: so “self-conscious [and] stilted” that the subject comes off “more like an overstylized media [type] than like the [individual] they project otherwise.”<sup>251</sup> Murray's use of the term “mask” is intriguing here given the robust discourse surrounding “masking” and ironic subversion among Black Americans.<sup>252</sup> Indeed, Basie—like many Black American musicians of his generation—

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<sup>249</sup> Count Basie and Albert Murray, *Good Morning Blues: The Autobiography of Count Basie, As Told to Albert Murray* (New York: Random House, 1985), 383-384.

<sup>250</sup> Murray, “Comping for Count Basie,” 41.

<sup>251</sup> Murray, “Comping for Count Basie,” 33.

<sup>252</sup> Houston A. Baker Jr., “Caliban's Triple Play,” in *“Race,” Writing, and Difference*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986): 390-393. Houston A. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987): 17-18, 51, 102. Edward Brown II, “We Wear the Mask: African American Contemporary Gay Male Identities,” *Journal of African American Studies* 9, no. 2 (September 2005): 29-38. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007): 3, ProQuest Ebook Central. Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988): 75-77. Willie J. Harrell Jr., ed. *We Wear the Mask: Paul Lawrence Dunbar and the Politics of Representative Reality* (Kent, OH: Kent University Press, 2010). Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). Douglas Malcolm, “‘Myriad Subtleties’: Subverting Racism through Irony in the Music of Duke Ellington and Dizzy Gillespie,” *Black Music Research Journal* 35, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 185-227. Richard Rankin Russell, “Black Passages through White Spaces: The Masking of Faulkner's African-American

navigated his position in the racialized limelight of twentieth-century American popular music through such masking, and I show in this chapter that his prioritization of personal privacy embodied this paradigm. But it is these media-averse habits which also beg this chapter's central question: what was it about Murray that prompted Basie to relinquish his “reluctant and reticent” posture during their years-long collaboration on *Good Morning Blues*?

I argue that Basie green-lit Murray as his co-writer because the latter's critical writings resonated with the sort of narrative Basie wanted to craft in his autobiography. Further, I demonstrate how *Good Morning Blues* represents a significant intersection between Murray's ideological views regarding Black American life and music during the post-Civil Rights era, which he explicitly expressed throughout his pre-*Good Morning Blues* output, and Basie's own belief that, as Murray intimates, “unguarded or loose expression...represented one as careless, unorganized, and confused.”<sup>253</sup> While Murray addressed racial politics to varying degrees in all five of the books he published prior to his collaboration with Basie—*The Omni-Americans* (1970), *South to a Very Old Place* (1971), *The Hero and the Blues* (1973), *Train Whistle Guitar* (1974), and *Stomping the Blues* (1976)—he often did so in a way that went significantly against the grain of the more polemical sectors of contemporaneous Black intellectual discourse which, he argues, reflected the conclusions of problematic social science surveys such as the so-called “Moynihan Report.” To Murray, Black expressions constitute the centerpiece of

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Characters in ‘Go Down, Moses’” *CEA Critic* 73, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 89. Marshall Stearns, *The Story of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970): 189-192, ProQuest Ebook Central. Novian Whitsitt, “Reading Between the Lines: The Black Cultural Tradition of Masking in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” *Frontiers* 31, no. 1 (2010): 73-88.

<sup>253</sup> Murray, “Comping for Count Basie,” 35.

American culture, and he felt that racial polemics that painted Black Americans as victims actually reinforced the notion of white supremacy. Since, as Murray shares, Basie had no interest in making ideological points about race in *Good Morning Blues*, this perspective may have served to shift the book's tenor substantially.<sup>254</sup> While I do not seek here to speak for Basie, I do take my methodological cues from Murray, who claims that within any autobiography, "inferences may...be drawn from deliberate omissions."<sup>255</sup>

I begin by illuminating the sort of masking strategies Basie exhibited in his interview with Jacobs, placing him within the broader discourse of masking among twentieth-century Black American musicians. While many of *Good Morning Blues*'s critics perceived the book's absence of divulgements vis-à-vis Basie's run-ins with racial discrimination to be a product of such masking, this assessment is incomplete as it lacks the indispensable context of Murray's viewpoints. Still, it is important to consider Basie's ostensible use of masking before considering how *Good Morning Blues* constitutes a complex divergence from this pattern of behavior. Next, I describe how Basie and Murray's collaborative partnership aligns with the scholarly discourse surrounding jazz biography and autobiography. Given the dissonance between the harsh critiques upon the publication of *Good Morning Blues* and its subsequent wide use and acceptance by scholars as a critical primary source, the details of Murray and Basie's partnership offer fresh perspective on an area of jazz writing which, Ken Prouty asserts, lacks a sustained critique within jazz music's discourse.<sup>256</sup> While such critical discourse does exist

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<sup>254</sup> Murray, "Comping for Count Basie," 38.

<sup>255</sup> Murray, "Comping for Count Basie," 31.

<sup>256</sup> Ken Prouty, "Plagiarizing Your Own Autobiography, and Other Strange Tales: Miles Davis, Jazz Discourse, and the Aesthetic of Silence," *Jazz Research Journal* 4, no. 1 (2011): 16.

regarding more controversial or explicit autobiographies such as those of Billie Holiday or Miles Davis, the more tight-lipped *Good Morning Blues* is no less revelatory when contextualized through Basie and Murray's shared authorial values.<sup>257</sup> From Murray's personal accounts in "Comping for Count Basie" and the afterward of *Good Morning Blues*, we know Basie was quite familiar with at least two of Murray's literary works prior to their first meeting, though we do not know which two. So, for the remainder of this chapter, I analyze three of Murray's pre-*Good Morning Blues* works—*The Omni-Americans*, *The Hero and the Blues*, and *Stomping the Blues*—to shed light on Basie's authorial perspective in *Good Morning Blues*. In doing so, I show how each book may serve as a hermeneutical lens through which deeper insights into *Good Morning Blues* may be gleaned.

To be clear, I do not seek through this research to speculate about Basie's personal views on race or politics. Such editorializing would be disrespectful to Basie's privacy and would align with precisely the type of writing he viewed as sensationalist and destructive.<sup>258</sup> Rather, since Basie himself is a reoccurring figure in all three of the literary works by Murray that I address, I frame *Good Morning Blues* as an interpretive nexus through which the nature of Basie and Murray's collaboration may be better understood.<sup>259</sup> Where most scholars rely upon *Good Morning Blues* as a core first-hand

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<sup>257</sup> On Holiday: Maya C. Gibson, "Alternate Takes: Billie Holiday at the Intersection of Black Cultural Studies and Historical Musicology," (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008). Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery* (New York: Free Press, 2001). Robert G. O'Meally, *Lady Day: The Many Faces of Billie Holiday* (New York: Arcade, 1991). On Davis: Prouty, "Plagiarizing Your Own Autobiography," 16-41. Naaman Wood, "Uncle Toms, Massas, and Symbolic Violence: Miles Davis's Rhetoric of Moral Reconstitution," *Jazz Perspectives* 7, no. 1 (2013): 57-75.

<sup>258</sup> Murray "Comping for Count Basie," 38.

<sup>259</sup> Murray, "Comping for Count Basie," 29.

account of Basie's life and work, I treat *Good Morning Blues* as a primary source for understanding the collaborative dynamic between Basie and Murray as co-authors. While I draw upon it extensively in this chapter, its use in this context is meant to shed light on the book's composition, not its historical narratives. Additionally, I treat Basie as the agent of action in the writing of *Good Morning Blues*. While Murray was charged with prompting, organizing, and editing Basie's recollections, Murray adamantly states in "Comping for Count Basie" that Basie was the storyteller and set "the overall atmosphere as well as the specific mood for each situation and sequence of action."<sup>260</sup> As such, my primary goal here is to identify specific salient foci which serve as interpretive through lines across *Good Morning Blues*, *The Omni-Americans*, *The Hero and the Blues*, and *Stomping the Blues*, ultimately providing fresh perspectives on each of them.

### **Basie the "Conniver": Masking, Cultural Habit, and Personal Agency**

The posture of affable elusiveness Basie exhibited in his 1979 Northsea Jazz Festival interview is traceable to a broader practice among early-twentieth-century Black Americans. In inhabiting a society defined largely by the mores of white supremacy, Black Americans had to constantly negotiate what W. E. B. Du Bois referred to as "double consciousness": having to simultaneously perceive one's self as both themselves and a distorted version of themselves as perceived by the hegemonic perspective.<sup>261</sup> While the approaches used by Black Americans in this regard would come to reflect the burgeoning agency and agitation of the post-World War II and Civil Rights Eras, Black

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<sup>260</sup> Murray, "Comping for Count Basie," 29.

<sup>261</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 3.

American musicians from Basie’s generation learned to navigate their cultural landscape through donning a mask of agreeability and acceptance.

Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s 1895 poem “We Wear the Mask” encapsulates the resentment felt by many Black Americans during Reconstruction who had no choice but to don a proverbial mask in order to adhere to the expectations of white Americans.<sup>262</sup>

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us, while  
    We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To thee from tortured souls arise.  
We sing, but oh the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  
But let the world dream otherwise,  
    We wear the mask!<sup>263</sup>

There is an additional layer of ironic masking in this poem which Dunbar may or may not have intended. A good deal of his poetry was written in the exaggerated dialect of nineteenth-century minstrelsy; a fact about which, Houston A. Baker notes, Dunbar had complicated feelings: “[T]he land of his heart’s desire [was] American artistic recognition for his individual ability to write standard English poetry...Dunbar lamented to his good friend James Weldon Johnson, ‘I’ve got to write dialect poetry, it’s the only

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<sup>262</sup> Harrell, introduction to *We Wear the Mask*, xi.

<sup>263</sup> Paul Lawrence Dunbar, “We Wear the Mask,” Poetry Foundation, accessed December 3, 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44203/we-wear-the-mask>.

way I can get them to listen to me.”<sup>264</sup> Further, Elston L. Carr Jr., argues that “Dunbar’s dialect poetry can be read as a mask in motion that articulates appositional and subversive themes within the signifying system as described by [Henry Louis] Gates and, to a lesser degree, within the blues matrix as described by [Houston A.] Baker.”<sup>265</sup> That Dunbar composed this seminal, pre-Du Boisian expression of masking in standard English rather than in the African American vernacular dialect for which he was more contemporaneously known is fascinating and further complicates this influential poem. Nevertheless, “We Wear the Mask” still expresses the discontent many Black Americans felt toward the ubiquitous racism which necessitated such defensive measures as masking a “tortured soul” behind a smiling mask.

In *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Houston A. Baker Jr., describes this sort of non-confrontational masking geared toward the alignment of white perceptions—what he refers to as the “cryptic” or “minstrel” mask—and juxtaposes it with the more outspoken, confrontational “phaneric” masking of later generations of Black Americans.<sup>266</sup> Baker compares the “minstrel” masking posture with the ideological positions of Booker T. Washington, who argued that Black Americans should address interracial conflict through compromise and accommodation.<sup>267</sup> As Douglas Malcolm observes, “Baker regards views such as [Washington’s]...as emanating from what he describes as the minstrel mask, a contrivance built on stereotypes but which afforded a

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<sup>264</sup> Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, 38.

<sup>265</sup> Elston L Carr Jr., “Minstrelsy and the Dialect Poetry of Paul Lawrence Dunbar,” in *We Wear the Mask: Paul Lawrence Dunbar and the Politics of Representative Reality*, edited by Willie J. Harrell Jr. (Kent, OH: Kent University Press, 2010): 51.

<sup>266</sup> Baker, “Caliban’s Triple Play,” 390. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, 17-18, 51.

<sup>267</sup> Malcolm, “Myriad Subtleties,” 198.

measure of ironic commentary and freedom.”<sup>268</sup> “The minstrel mask,” Malcolm continues, “should not necessarily invoke the exaggerated mannerism of minstrelsy. Rather it is what Baker defines as the ‘mastery of form’ that allows the practitioner...to subvert white culture through indirect and ironic means.”<sup>269</sup> From this perspective, Basie’s smiling, compliant posture with interviewers may be interpreted as a strategic use of this type of cultural negotiation. Moreover, Lawrence Levine has argued that the “commonplaces of the minstrel idiom,” coupled with the inherent ineffability and interpretability of music, provided many Black American musicians an ideal vessel for ironically critiquing contemporaneous hegemony.<sup>270</sup> Therefore, the non-confrontational masking of Black musicians such as Basie can be understood as remnants of a centuries-old “cultural habit,” to use Shelby Steele’s term.<sup>271</sup>

In Murray’s post-*Good Morning Blues* novel *The Spyglass Tree* (1991), the protagonist Scooter recalls a lesson in this “cultural habit” provided by an elder at his local barbershop in 1920s Alabama that resonates deeply with the Reconstruction-era sentiments expressed by Dunbar:

The way my grandpappy told me, all that grinning and laughing is a part of our African mother wit, because the first thing our African forefathers found out after they realized that all them hungry-looking peckerwoods was not going to eat them was that if you didn’t grin at them, white folks would be scared shitless of us all the goddam time and ain’t no telling what they might do. My old grandpa told me, if you ain’t got nothing but a stick and a brick, you don’t go around making somebody nervous that’s got cannon and a Gatling gun.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Malcolm, “‘Myriad Subtleties,’” 198-199.

<sup>269</sup> Malcolm, “‘Myriad Subtleties,’” 199.

<sup>270</sup> Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 194.

<sup>271</sup> Shelby Steele, “Pride and Compromise,” *New York Times*, February 12, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/books/review/Steele-t.html>.

<sup>272</sup> Albert Murray, *The Spyglass Tree* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 147, quoted in Alfonso W. Hawkins Jr., *The Jazz Trope: A Theory of African American Literary and Vernacular Culture*,

Alfonso W. Hawkins Jr., notes in his analysis of this passage that such masking constitutes what Murray considered a “jazz strategy” of societal negotiation which, for many twentieth-century Black Americans, served as a means of “escape from one’s self, enter[ing] a world unfamiliar” via “mimic[ry], parody or lampoon[ing].”<sup>273</sup> To this point, Murray once stated in an interview: “[Jazz] encapsulates the American spirit of the twentieth century. It helps you come to terms with the chaos of the twentieth century. It’s grace under pressure. The movement of great pressure, the moment of truth, the moment when you write your message. That is when you play your solo.”<sup>274</sup> Murray was writing here about how the improvisatory nature of jazz was evident in his own prose, yet this statement also resonates more broadly with the sociocultural practices of twentieth-century Black American life. Hawkins observes: “When Murray states that jazz is ‘grace under pressure,’ he assumes that it has the capacity to ‘mask’ reality and that it includes a mechanism of personal control.”<sup>275</sup>

In *Good Morning Blues*, Basie—knowingly or not—upends Dunbar’s sorrowful tone. Instead, he aligns with the notion that a mask could be a “mechanism of personal control.” Basie—who, like Scooter, was born in the early twentieth century and entered the musical workforce shortly thereafter—was no stranger to masking as a form of societal negotiation; however, unlike Dunbar and Scooter’s “grandpappy,” both of whom

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African American Cultural Theory, edited by William Banfield, no. 1 (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008): 131.

<sup>273</sup> Hawkins, *The Jazz Trope*, 130-131.

<sup>274</sup> Albert Murray, “A Mobile Boy,” in Bill Caton, *Fighting Words: Words on Writing from 21 of the Heart of Dixie’s Best Contemporary Authors* (Montgomery, AL: Black Belt Press, 1995): 184, quoted in Hawkins, *The Jazz Trope*, 130.

<sup>275</sup> Hawkins, *The Jazz Trope*, 131.

masked begrudgingly, in *Good Morning Blues*, Basie frames his younger self as one who happily played into this paradigm in order to gain situational leverage. He recalls one boyhood experience with the older daughter of his father's rich, white employer Judge White:

The Whites drove their own automobile, which, I'm pretty sure, was also the first one I ever rode in. I used to find out when Lady Margarete, as I used to call their daughter, was getting ready to drive downtown, and I'd make it my business to walk up two or three blocks and slow up until I heard her coming, because I knew she was always going to say, "William, are you going into town?" And I'd say, "Yes, ma'am, yes ma'am," and hop in.<sup>276</sup>

The power dynamic inherent to a Black boy entering a car with a white person of high socioeconomic standing during the early twentieth century appears in multiple works of Black American literature. For example, Ralph Ellison's anonymous protagonist in *Invisible Man* is forced to humiliatingly chauffeur his university's white benefactor throughout the Black slums of Alabama, and the horrific crimes committed by Richard Wright's antihero Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* are precipitated by Thomas driving around with his white employer's daughter and her boyfriend. On the other hand, this anecdote from *Good Morning Blues* portrays Basie as a youngster who consciously played into his prescribed role in the power dynamic by donning a posture of extreme courtesy in order to acquire an end to which he likely had little access otherwise.<sup>277</sup>

While there was certainly a multifaceted power dynamic between Basie and Lady Margarete, it is telling that Basie chose to frame this narrative as one of cleverness and situational improvisation equating to personal agency. Moreover, this theme is prevalent

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<sup>276</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 26.

<sup>277</sup> Indeed, as a boy, Basie's thoughts dwelled on entering the glamorous world of show business, and Basie conveys that automobiles were clear signifiers of the type of success to which he aspired. Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 43-45.

throughout *Good Morning Blues*. Basie repeatedly describes his early professional self as a “conniver” who—through slick talk and improvisatory dealings with managers, bandleaders, and the like—maneuvered himself into jobs which would not have been available to him otherwise. In one such instance from around 1924, Basie greatly overestimated his abilities in this regard while negotiating payment for his tenure with the burlesque show *Hippity Hop*, which appeared on the Columbia and Keith Circuits.<sup>278</sup> Having felt overconfident in his ability to manipulate the proceedings, he foolishly undercut his own situation:

I thought of myself as being a pretty slick talker and conniver when it came to financial wheeling and dealing, so [when] Lou Henry said he wanted to tell us about how much the pay was going to be, I cut in before he could say anything else and told him we were not going anywhere unless we got forty dollars a week.<sup>279</sup>

Not until the next Columbia season would Basie realize that he had insisted on only half his employers’ intended rate.<sup>280</sup> Such lessons, though, did not dissuade Basie from “conniving”; rather, they seem to have served to cut his teeth on the practice. What Basie considered his master stroke in this respect came in 1929, when he persuaded Bennie Moten to let him join Moten’s prestigious orchestra as a staff arranger and pianist, despite the notable facts that Basie could only orally dictate arrangements, and that the Moten Orchestra already boasted an excellent pianist—Bennie himself—and a serviceable alternate in accordionist Buster “Bus” Moten.<sup>281</sup> “But I have always been a conniver,”

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<sup>278</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 54-55.

<sup>279</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 54-55.

<sup>280</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 62-63.

<sup>281</sup> Basie would play each line of his arrangements on the piano, and Eddie Durham would notate them onto a score. While itself a fascinating collaboration which warrants further study, such a relatively laborious process was likely not typical for an elite ensemble such as Moten’s. Murray and Basie, *Good Morning Blues*, 114-115.

Basie reiterates “and [I] began saying to myself, I got to see how I can connive my way into that band.”<sup>282</sup> Basie’s framing of these narratives resonates deeply with much of Murray’s writing.

## **Memoirs and Myths**

Upon the release of *Good Morning Blues*, many critics were perplexed by its absence of personal divulgences and concluded that this was a result of Murray’s incompetence as an interviewer.<sup>283</sup> Indeed, it is easy to read *Good Morning Blues* and perceive the same type of withholding Basie famously exhibited in such interviews. Unlike the narratives divulged in many other jazz autobiographies, Basie foregrounds the positive while glossing over everything else. Significantly, Murray and Basie agreed at the outset of their collaboration that *Good Morning Blues* should be a celebratory autobiography, eschewing any sort of material which might “scandalize somebody.”<sup>284</sup> As Basie states in the preface: “One thing the two of us agreed on at the very outset was that we were not going to be sidetracked into a lot of unhip gossip-magazine chitchat about people’s private lives...I just don’t intend to bring up anything that might add up to a lot of gossip and speculation that don’t really have anything to do with playing music the way I played it.”<sup>285</sup> But judging from the book’s initial reviews, critics seemed to

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<sup>282</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 113.

<sup>283</sup> Leonard Feather, review of *Good Morning Blues*, *Los Angeles Times*, March 16, 1986, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>284</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, xiii.

<sup>285</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, xiii.

have been frustrated by what must have appeared to be yet another instance of Basie obscuring personal information behind his mask.

Whether intended as praise or indictment, nearly every reviewer likened the book's prose to Basie's piano style: pleasant, yet elliptical and ultimately leaving consumers wishing for more content. E. J. Hobsbawm wrote that "Basie's understatement and exceptional...modesty muffle his account."<sup>286</sup> Similarly, Geoffrey Block pointed out that readers may be disappointed due to a lack of satisfying answers to dilettante-friendly questions such as "How did Basie get the nickname 'Count'?"<sup>287</sup> Other critics were more pointed in their reviews; Feather asserted that the book is "handicapped...[by] omitting or altering facts to suit [Basie's] wishful recollections," and that it is rife with "irrelevant details...and dubious facts" instead of gut-spilling divulences regarding, for instance, the so-called "great trauma" of parenting his daughter Diane who lived with multiple disabilities.<sup>288</sup> While Feather desired more details about Basie's most intimate personal life, others such as André Prévos saw *Good Morning Blues* as a missed opportunity for examining the racial discrimination Basie undoubtedly experienced during his career: "[i]t is to be regretted, nevertheless, that Basie did not tell us more about himself, and that he chose not to be more critical of individuals who may have hampered his artistic progress or caused him financial harm."<sup>289</sup> Robert G. O'Meally also stated plainly in his review of the book, "This is not a

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<sup>286</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, "'Playing for Ourselves,'" *The New York Review*, January 16, 1986, <https://www-nybooks-com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/articles/1986/01/16/playing-for-ourselves/>.

<sup>287</sup> Geoffrey Block, "Book Reviews," *American Music* 5, no. 3 (Autumn 1987): 326-329.

<sup>288</sup> Feather, review of *Good Morning Blues*.

<sup>289</sup> André Prévos, "Book Reviews," *The Black Perspective in Music* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 124-126.

racial plaint.”<sup>290</sup> At the same time, other critics problematically projected a posture of “colorblindness” onto Basie for which he never explicitly advocated. “Racism,” wrote one critic “is an issue that almost always comes up in books about jazz, and Basie comes off as refreshingly colorblind.”<sup>291</sup> Feather, despite expressing resounding disappointment in Basie’s lack of personal divulgements, interestingly interpreted the absence of racial polemics in *Good Morning Blues* as something of an implicit statement: “Racial problems are dealt with only glancingly, but this reflects one of Basie’s strengths; he tried to ignore race and transcend bigotry.”<sup>292</sup> Coupled with the fact that *Good Morning Blues* was ultimately published as a posthumous memoir, there were high expectations that this book would satisfy the curiosities of fans and historians who thirsted for concrete details regarding Basie’s long-concealed personal perspectives.

Judging from critical reviews of *Good Morning Blues*, the general expectation of contemporaneous jazz autobiographies was that each one should be something of a “tell-all.” An extreme example is *Miles: The Autobiography*, which was published just four years after *Good Morning Blues*. The promotional blurbs printed inside tantalizingly tempt readers with promises of “sex, drugs, women, and cars,” and stories which are

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<sup>290</sup> Robert G. O’Meally, review of *Good Morning Blues*, *Black American Literature Forum* 21, no. 1/2 (Spring-Summer 1987): 211-215.

<sup>291</sup> Amy Duncan, “The Definitive Basie Book,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 7, 1986.

<sup>292</sup> Feather, review of *Good Morning Blues*. Feather considered colorblindness to be a mark of “sophistication,” as evidenced by his writings on “Jazz in American Society” and his famous “Blindfold Test.” Leonard Feather, *The New Edition of the Encyclopedia of Jazz* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1960), 79-88, 477-478. John Gennari observes that when Feather wrote about race vis-à-vis jazz, he did so without denying the grim details of the matter; however, Gennari speculates that interracialism as an end in itself became something of a “self-satisfied...*idée fixe*” for Feather. John Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 56-58.

“brutally honest,” “shocking,” and “unmuted.”<sup>293</sup> Importantly, Murray states that Basie clearly communicated his autobiographical intentions at the outset of their collaboration, directly countering the notion that its tone was a result of Murray’s supposed inability to pull narrative details out of Basie:

What Basie had in mind was a book giving his own account of some of the highlights of some of the things he had been involved in during the course of his career as a musician and bandleader over the years, including a few incidents thrown in for laughs. As far as he was concerned, there were no axes to grind, no special ideological points to make, and no old scores to settle. He did not even express any overall urge to set the record straight. He simply dealt with longstanding misrepresentations and misinterpretations as they came up in the normal sequence of putting the book together.

That was the way he put it for the cowriter at the very outset of the collaboration, and not only was it justification enough for undertaking an autobiography at any time, it was also precisely what was most urgently needed. Not a gossip or sensation-oriented show biz confession, which, as far as he was concerned, was out of the question anyway.<sup>294</sup>

In short, Murray and Basie opined that *Good Morning Blues* constituted “urgently needed” counterpoint to the ostensible garrulousness of other notable autobiographies by jazz musicians such as Billie Holiday and Miles Davis.<sup>295</sup> To this end, Basie was resolved to not convey anything in his memoir which might be interpreted as heedless, scandalous, or political. Basie even minds his language in *Good Morning Blues*, rarely venturing beyond the occasional “hell” or “damn,” but also tactfully entreats his readers not to pass judgment upon his more coarsely spoken colleagues when he quotes them.<sup>296</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>293</sup> Miles Davis and Quincy Troupe, *Miles: The Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989): 2-3.

<sup>294</sup> Murray, “Comping for Count Basie,” 38.

<sup>295</sup> Davis and Troupe, *Miles*. Billie Holiday and William Dufty, *Lady Sings the Blues* (New York: Doubleday, 1956).

<sup>296</sup> For example, when describing Billy Eckstine’s notorious profanity, Basie censors Eckstine’s language while also emphasizing that his friend’s verbal idiom was “just his way of showing how much he liked you.” Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 290.

racial politics are virtually nonexistent in *Good Morning Blues*, and mentions of racial discrimination are dealt with glancingly: a common critique of jazz autobiographies, Holly E. Farrington points out.<sup>297</sup> For example, when recounting an instance from around 1925 in which a fellow burlesque performer was fired, Basie withholds any details, almost as if to shield individuals on both sides of the conflict: “I am not going to get into any specific details about what that was about. I’ll just say that it was a racial matter that the management regarded as a serious violation of its social policy.”<sup>298</sup>

Given that *Good Morning Blues* was roundly criticized upon its publication due to Basie’s centrism on racial matters, his authorial posture seems to have been taken as a kind of inauthenticity. Yet, Murray offers clear insight on how the tightly controlled, arguably overly diplomatic narrative in Basie’s memoir should not be judged for its lack of ostensibly relevant details:

Even when it is offered as an entirely unprepossessing personal record of one’s own life, undertaken with great reluctance, an autobiography is still of its very nature an exercise in exemplification, concerned with the narrator’s sense of endeavor, fulfillment, and failure. As such it’s really a species of *fiction*. It is a story with an explicit or implicit moral...

[I]t is a story and as such it takes people and events from the context of vital statistics and the facts of everyday life into the realm of legend, myth, fairy tale, and fable (which, by the way, also has the effect of transforming the profane into the sacred)...

It is the stuff of legend, myth, fairy tale, and fable, not the concrete facts per se, that accounts for the widespread interest in such classics of autobiographical writing as the *Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, and *The Education of Henry Adams* (written in the third person!) that persist from generation to generation.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Holly E. Farrington, “Narrating the Jazz Life: Three Approaches to Jazz Autobiography,” *Popular Music and Society* 29, no. 3 (2006), 375.

<sup>298</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 63-64.

<sup>299</sup> Murray himself was no stranger to writing memoirs from unusual perspectives; his personal recollections in *South to a Very Old Place* are in the fascinating and challenging voice of the present-tense second person.

Not that factual precision is unimportant, but rather that such books are read not nearly so much for the information per se as for the story.<sup>300</sup>

Story over specifics, fable over facts; such was Murray's view on what makes a significant and lasting autobiography.

And unlike some co-writers, who—David Yaffe argues—were “more attuned to book markets than to artistic insight,” Murray felt his primary concern when co-writing *Good Morning Blues* was to convincingly render his subject's voice.<sup>301</sup> Murray kicks off “Comping for Count Basie” by highlighting this point:

In autobiography as in fiction, nothing has more to do with what the story is really about than the voice of the narrator. So the main thing was to get [Basie's] voice on the page. Everything else came after that...If you couldn't help him sound like himself in print, you'd probably be better off working on a book *about* Count Basie rather than one *by* Count Basie about himself.<sup>302</sup>

As the resident *littérateur* of their collaborative enterprise, Murray viewed himself as something of an accompanist, “present on every page, [but] [n]ever as a partner in a duet.”<sup>303</sup> As such, his role was to frame Basie's proverbial soloing while vamping between choruses and transitioning between tunes, so to speak. Thus, a study of Murray's literary values may be as useful to understanding *Good Morning Blues* as the context of Basie's piano comping may be to an analysis of a Count Basie Orchestra recording.

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<sup>300</sup> Murray, “Comping for Count Basie,” 37.

<sup>301</sup> David Yaffe, “Pimp My Memoir: Jazz Autobiographies' Tricked-Out Personae By David Yaffe,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, no. 18 (2006), 1.

<sup>302</sup> Murray, “Comping for Count Basie,” 29.

<sup>303</sup> Murray, “Comping for Count Basie,” 31.

## Auditioning to Comp for Count Basie

The medium of the as-told-to autobiography provided Basie the perfect compromise between the somewhat conflicting motivations of sharing his narrative and tightly controlling it. Such an endeavor required a literary collaborator who could negotiate this balancing act. Undoubtedly, there was no shortage of qualified, albeit starstruck, candidates who—like the well-intentioned and musically accomplished Jacobs—would have struggled to draw Basie out from behind his charmingly laconic defenses. Though Basie’s lifelong tactics for social navigation undoubtedly helped to shape his voice in the memoir, I argue that it would be incorrect to claim that its jubilant tenor was a result of similar inability on Murray’s part. Rather, in order to grasp the deeper meanings of *Good Morning Blues*, one must account for the fact that Basie was well-acquainted with Murray’s views on Black music and culture prior to their first in-person meeting. In fact, judging from Murray’s recollections, it seems that his perspectives on such matters were the deciding factor in choosing to work with Murray, as far as Basie was concerned.

Initially, Basie’s manager Willard Alexander had tapped composer Alec Wilder, author of *American Popular Song*, to serve as Basie’s co-writer for his autobiography.<sup>304</sup> Wilder, a white man and a lifelong Basie fan, may have foreseen the challenges of getting Basie to open up to him in an interview setting, not to mention attempting to assimilate his voice. Whatever the reasons, Wilder insisted to Alexander that Murray was the only one for the job.<sup>305</sup> Murray had recently interrupted his work on the second installment of

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<sup>304</sup> Albert Murray, afterward and acknowledgments to *Good Morning Blues*, 386.

<sup>305</sup> Murray, afterward and acknowledgments to *Good Morning Blues*, 386.

what would become a trilogy of jazz and blues-inspired fiction in order to publish his manifesto on Black American music *Stomping the Blues* in 1976, so he was hesitant to do the same for yet another non-fiction project. To stall for time—and, perhaps, to gauge his potential collaborator’s literary chops—Murray sent Basie two of his own books.<sup>306</sup> Shortly thereafter, Alexander contacted Murray and said Basie had read them and was very interested in setting up a lunch meeting. Upon meeting Murray, it did not take Basie long to green-light him as his co-writer. Murray recalls:

[A]s soon as we got through our jive greetings and gave the waiter our selections, Basie said he had dipped into the two books Willard had sent him and had liked them. Then he asked me if I had any ideas about what kind of story his life would add up to, and I started a very brief outline... He lit a cigar, took a couple puffs, and before the waiter could get back with appetizers, he had made up his mind.

“Say Al,” he said, picking up his cigar, “is it all right to call you Al? Man, why don’t we just relax and hang out a little and enjoy our snack. Because as far as I’m concerned, this interview is over. As you know, I’ve had quite a bit of experience holding auditions over all these years, and it really don’t take but just a few bars for me to tell when somebody can voice my stuff and fit into my situation. This thing is all yours if you can see your way to take it on.”<sup>307</sup>

Since Murray’s writings constituted far more of his first impression to Basie than did their luncheon, it would be enlightening to know which of Murray’s five existing published works—*The Omni-Americans* (1970), *South to a Very Old Place* (1971), *The Hero and the Blues* (1973), *Train Whistle Guitar* (1974), and *Stomping the Blues* (1976)—Basie had read prior to Murray’s “audition.” Unfortunately, I have not been able to find evidence of this, but informed speculation on the topic of Murray’s prior works is also instructive. To varying degrees, all five books showcase Murray’s primary ideological theme from the first half of his career: that polemical, social science-informed

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<sup>306</sup> Murray, afterward and acknowledgments to *Good Morning Blues*, 386.

<sup>307</sup> Murray, afterward and acknowledgments to *Good Morning Blues*, 386.

perspectives on racial affairs in the United States problematically tended to portray Black Americans as victims—what Murray called “the fakelore of black pathology”—and were actually derived from assumptions about Black people which were rooted in the “folklore of white supremacy.”<sup>308</sup> From there, in his writings on Black American music—particularly the blues—Murray argued that this musical idiom did not represent the sorrowful lamentations of an oppressed people; rather, Murray framed the blues as heroic, celebratory, and, as Gene Seymour summarizes, the “finest, purest expression...of a peculiarly American form of existentialism.”<sup>309</sup> Murray writes in the titular essay from *The Omni-Americans*:

When the Negro musician or dancer swings the blues, he is fulfilling the same fundamental existential requirement that determines the mission of the poet, the priest, and the medicine man. He is making an affirmative and hence exemplary and heroic response to that which André Malraux describes as *la condition humaine*. Extemporizing in response to the exigencies of the situation in which he finds himself, he is confronting, acknowledging, and contending with the infernal absurdities and ever-impending frustrations inherent in the nature of all existence *by playing with the possibilities that are also there*. [emphasis original]<sup>310</sup>

In one way or another, these themes are central to all five of these books. For the remainder of this chapter, I examine three of them: *The Omni-Americans*, *The Hero and the Blues*, and *Stomping the Blues*. While *Train Whistle Guitar* and *South to a Very Old Place* are significant works in Murray’s body of work that also speak to this central theme, I focus on the other three because they each address Murray’s core ideologies on race and Black American music, while often citing Basie himself as a personification of

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<sup>308</sup> Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans: Some Alternatives to the Folklore of White Supremacy* (1970; repr., New York: Library of America, 2020). Albert Murray, “Premier Cru U.S.A.” in *Conjugations and Reiterations* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2001): 43.

<sup>309</sup> Gene Seymour, “Albert Murray at 80,” *The Nation*, March 25, 1996, 26.

<sup>310</sup> Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 55-56.

the “heroic” blues aesthetic. In doing so, I demonstrate how Murray’s explicitly stated ideologies were congruent with the sort of optimistic, anti-polemical narrative Basie sought to convey in his autobiography.

### ***The Omni-Americans (1970)***

By the time Basie offered Murray the job of authoring his autobiography in the late 1970s, Murray was already solidifying his reputation as a “maverick” of cultural criticism, to borrow a term from Sanford Pinsker.<sup>311</sup> Michael Borshuk writes that by the late 1960s, Murray held the view that “Americans subscribed too easily to an artificial cultural separation of blacks and whites, buying into this division either through the insidious legacy of white supremacy or through Black Power’s forceful counter-offensive.”<sup>312</sup> He was “at the forefront of [the] nascent revolt against the literary status quo” notes Gene Seymour.<sup>313</sup> *The Omni-Americans*—Murray’s first published book—came in 1970. In it, the fifty-four-year-old retired U.S. Air Force major pushed back against two primary prongs of contemporaneous Black literature and social criticism: the social science-inspired mainstream which, he argues, homogenized Black culture into a pathologically helpless Other, and the polemical writings of Black intellectuals which ostensibly echoed the generalized victimhood of Black Americans by, according to Henry Louis Gates Jr., “regard[ing] authentic black culture as separate from the rest of

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<sup>311</sup> Sanford Pinsker, “Albert Murray: The Black Intellectuals’ Maverick Patriarch,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 72, no. 4 (Autumn 1996): 678-684.

<sup>312</sup> Michael Borshuk, *Swinging the Vernacular: Jazz and African American Modernist Literature*, Studies in African American History and Culture, edited by Graham Hodges (New York: Routledge, 2006): 166.

<sup>313</sup> Seymour, “Albert Murray at 80.”

American culture.”<sup>314</sup> *The Omni-Americans* both introduced and emphatically displayed Murray as one who went against the currents of both these ideologies. In Murray, Gates continues, such “bullies of blackness had met their most formidable opponent.”<sup>315</sup>

Not surprisingly, among some Black intellectuals during the post-Civil Rights era, Murray represented a complacent contrarian, naggingly apologizing on behalf of those invested in maintaining American white supremacist norms. For instance, Murray dedicates several pages of the titular essay in *The Omni-Americans* to claiming that hair straightening and skin lightening did not necessarily constitute a profound loss of racial identity: “[p]rocessed hair...implies no less emphasis on black identity than the *au naturel*, Afro-Brillo.”<sup>316</sup> Additionally, Gates mentions Murray’s retort to the “House Negro” epithet which Black militants such as Malcolm X were known to fling at such politically divergent Black people: “The House slave seems to have brought infinitely more tactical information from the big house to the cabins than any information about subversive plans he ever took back.”<sup>317</sup> Such rhetoric placed Murray well outside the confines of progressive Black polemical discourse during the 1970s.

Chief among the polemical writers Murray critiqued in *The Omni-Americans* was James Baldwin, specifically in the essay “James Baldwin, Protest Fiction, and the Blues Tradition.”<sup>318</sup> While Murray condemns Baldwin’s polemical writings for falling into the same patterns of race-based victimization against which Baldwin himself so passionately

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<sup>314</sup> Gates, “King of Cats.”

<sup>315</sup> Gates, “King of Cats.”

<sup>316</sup> Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 49.

<sup>317</sup> Gates, “King of Cats.”

<sup>318</sup> Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 131-154.

argued in the context of protest novels, Murray's and Baldwin's critiques of protest fiction actually share a great deal of ideological ground. Thus, Baldwin's thoughts on Black American protest literature are a useful entrée into Murray's perspectives on Black American literature and intellectual discourse from *The Omni-Americans*; in turn, both resonate with Basie's protest-averse posture in *Good Morning Blues*.

In Baldwin's 1955 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel"—the epitome of his critiques of protest fiction early in his career—he excoriates Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), asserting that such protest fiction was part of a "formula created by the necessity to find a lie more palatable than the truth."<sup>319</sup> Novels such as these, he argues, which deny the complexities of real humans, bear the "mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel."<sup>320</sup> To Baldwin, melodramatically playing up the legitimate horrors of slavery and racial violence for rhetorical effect was disingenuous and ultimately harmful to the progress of Black people in American society. From Baldwin's perspective, Stowe's visceral "catalogue of violence"—juxtaposed with "self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality" and "the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion"—made for more of a propagandistic pamphlet than a proper novel.<sup>321</sup> Baldwin expands on this argument: "the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of

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<sup>319</sup> James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 16, 14.

<sup>320</sup> Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," 14.

<sup>321</sup> Also noteworthy here is the way Baldwin feminizes this foundational protest novel, comparing its emotion-evoking prose to that of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," 13-23.

cruelty.”<sup>322</sup> To Baldwin, Stowe’s seminal work of American racial protest fiction served as the template for “multitudinous, hard-boiled impersonators” well into the twentieth century.<sup>323</sup> Indeed, nearly a century after the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Richard Wright’s *Native Son* stood as the quintessential twentieth-century Black protest novel, among the most celebrated when Baldwin published his critique. Baldwin saw distinct parallels between the grotesque violence in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the hopeless villainy of Wright’s anti-hero Bigger Thomas. To Baldwin, the protest fiction which these books exemplified furthered a “rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its instance that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.”<sup>324</sup>

Murray expressed very similar views on protest narratives in *The Omni-Americans*. In the essay “Identity, Diversity, and the Mainstream,” Murray argues that Black protest novelists such as Wright, whose focus was situated so squarely on the oppression of Black Americans, had lost sight of the more complete picture of “the actual texture” of Black American life and culture.<sup>325</sup> The missing dimension to these writers’ perspectives on Black life during the 1930s and 1940s, Murray argues, may be observed in the intellectual, modernistic musical expressions which were being created by Black Americans at the same time:

[T]hose who are seriously interested in the actual texture of life in the Chicago of Bigger Thomas...would do well to supplement reading *Native Son* with a dozen or so recordings of Earl Hines’ great Grand Terrace orchestra.

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<sup>322</sup> Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” 14.

<sup>323</sup> Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” 16, 14.

<sup>324</sup> Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” 23.

<sup>325</sup> Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 161.

Despite the fact that the musician has long occupied the position of supreme artist for U.S. Negroes, Wright almost always wrote as if he were totally unrelated to what Count Basie, Jimmie Lunceford, Fats Waller, Lionel Hampton, Louis Jordan, and others were saying about black experience during his day.<sup>326</sup>

While Murray wrote to an extent about how protest novels contributed to a paradigm in which “the negative aspects of black experience are constantly...overpublicized,” Murray’s primary critiques in this regard dealt with social science studies of Black communities, most notably Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s highly influential *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965).<sup>327</sup> The so-called “Moynihan Report,” according to Murray, was not born from an intention to create a comprehensive study of Black American family life. Rather, “[Moynihan] set out to compile such data as would advertise Negro family life in the worst possible light.”<sup>328</sup>

Murray continues:

It charts Negro unemployment, but not once does it suggest national action to crack down on discrimination against Negroes by labor unions. Instead, it insists that massive federal action must be initiated to correct the matriarchal structure of the Negro family! Even if one takes this point at face value, nowhere does Moynihan explain what is innately detrimental about matriarchies. In point of fact, there is nothing anywhere in the report that indicates that Moynihan knows anything at all either about matriarchies in general or about the actual texture of Negro family relationships in particular.<sup>329</sup>

Works such as Moynihan’s, Murray argues, further entrenched white supremacy by dressing questionable methodology in the trappings of scrupulous science and noble initiative.

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<sup>326</sup> Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 161.

<sup>327</sup> Murray, Introduction to *The Omni-Americans*, 9.

<sup>328</sup> Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 28.

<sup>329</sup> Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 29.

Significantly, Basie offers many anecdotes in *Good Morning Blues* which collectively offer a more affirming perspective on Black mothers.<sup>330</sup> Images of his mother's cakes, the smells of family Christmases, and being rocked to sleep in his grandmother's warm bed depict a family life that starkly contrasts the pathological control by women over families as described by Moynihan.<sup>331</sup> Alongside such warm nostalgia, Basie emphasizes that his mother's hard work and dedication as a parent inspired him throughout his entire career.<sup>332</sup> The form of *Good Morning Blues* underlines the degree to which Basie and Murray endeavored to foreground Basie's tender relationship with his mother. The book's preface—which sets the stage with Basie on a train in England, dreaming about his mother and childhood in Red Bank—is highly reminiscent of other works in Murray's contemporaneous output for reasons beyond being printed in Murray's pet font of italics. For instance, Scooter from *Train Whistle Guitar* uses a tree at his childhood home as a quasi-literal vantage point for his recollections, while Murray's Basie is struck with old forgotten memories by remembering his mother's clothesline.<sup>333</sup> Taken together, the maternal narratives in *Good*

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<sup>330</sup> I avoid the term “matriarchy” here as it has been argued that Black American households have never been ubiquitously such. Rather, as Charles V. Willie and Richard J. Reddick write, twentieth-century Black American families in general were exceptionally equalitarian: “In our judgment, one of the greatest gifts of blacks to the culture of the nation has been the equalitarian family model in which neither the husband nor the wife is always in charge...It would be wise for others to observe the equalitarian family as a model of mutual empowerment and mutual fulfillment.” Charles V. Willie and Richard J. Reddick, *A New Look at Black Families*, 6th ed., (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 106.

<sup>331</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 25-28.

<sup>332</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, xi, 27.

<sup>333</sup> Additionally, Basie's presence on a train is significant in this passage, as trains are one of Murray's key interpretive tropes vis-à-vis Black music. For example, see: Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 118-126.

*Morning Blues* offer far more of what Murray considered to be the “actual texture” of a Black family than did the “Moynihan Report.”

Though Moynihan’s positionality as a white man writing and researching on behalf of the U.S. federal government gave an additional air of legitimacy to his claims in *The Negro Family*, Murray was even more concerned with the implications of similar writings by Black scholars from the same period: “[s]ome black wailing-wall polemicists have in their usual quasi-literate intellectual bankruptcy grab-bagged [the Moynihan Report] as ‘useful to the cause.’”<sup>334</sup> Specifically, Murray makes lengthy objections to Kenneth B. Clark’s book *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (1965). First published in the same year as the Moynihan Report, Murray described Clark’s book as “a good example of how a book by a black writer may represent a point of view toward black experiences which is essentially white.”<sup>335</sup> Murray specifies that the type of “white point of view” Clark displays is rooted in the assumption that slavery and subsequent oppressions “reduced Negroes to such a tangle of pathology that all black American behavior is in effect only a pathetic manifestation of black cowardice, self-hatred, escapism, and self-destructiveness.”<sup>336</sup> In short, Murray found it unacceptable that a Black intellectual would feed into the mainstream perception that Black American culture was one of little more than strife and reactive coping mechanisms. The connections between these sorts of social science publications and Black moral outcry polemics was clear to Murray: “the most glibly self-confident and even the most smugly chauvinistic

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<sup>334</sup> Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 28.

<sup>335</sup> Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 40.

<sup>336</sup> Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 40.

black spokesmen and leaders readily and frequently refer to themselves as being fear-ridden, emasculated, and without self-respect.”<sup>337</sup>

If we take Murray at his word that such was the worst that Black American intellectuals had to offer during the latter half of the twentieth century, *Good Morning Blues* may be read as a tonic for such pathological self-victimization due to Basie’s earnest eschewal of racial polemics. Indeed, Murray thought as much; he remarks in “Comping for Count Basie” that “if [*Good Morning Blues*]...is short on the usual protest and polemics that are so predictable in the personal accounts of so many other so-called black Americans, it is also short on gratuitous (and politically naïve) self-degradation and the rhetoric of sackcloth and ashes or phony despair.”<sup>338</sup> Significantly, Murray recalls that Basie came into their collaboration with a similar outlook:

When Basie asked prospective as-told-to collaborators what kind of book they thought this story would make, he already knew...that he did not want to become involved with anybody who was going to try to maneuver him into reducing the chronicle of his career as one of the most successful of American musicians to a polemic about racism.<sup>339</sup>

Basie and Murray were indeed successful in circumventing discussions of racial politics in *Good Morning Blues*. For example, when discussing his father’s position working for the wealthy Judge White in Red Bank, Basie makes no mention of the racial component of the two men’s marked power dynamic. Hypothetically, even if White were a noble, unbigoted employer, it seems that Basie’s perspective was such that making mention of the racial dynamic would have foregrounded it to a degree that he found irrelevant, if not

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<sup>337</sup> Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 38.

<sup>338</sup> Murray, “Comping for Count Basie,” 41.

<sup>339</sup> Murray, “Comping for Count Basie,” 48.

inappropriate. And in his description of the firing of one of his colleagues on the Columbia burlesque circuit—one of the rare instances in *Good Morning Blues* in which Basie mentions race explicitly—Basie similarly reserves judgment in any respect; he describes what happened but does not tip his hand vis-à-vis his personal views on the matter. Basie and Murray each expressed that *Good Morning Blues* was meant to serve as a counter to contemporaneous Black narratives which ostensibly foregrounded race. Therefore, it seems that they resolved to avoid talks of race and racism entirely in order to serve this purpose. As Basie quipped: “[Y]ou can get away with putting almost anything in a book these days.”<sup>340</sup> While Murray was hardly averse to writing about race, Murray’s relatively unconventional views on contemporaneous Black protest fiction, social science, and racial polemics echo Basie’s conscious motivation to not, as Murray recalls, “reduc[e] the chronicle of his career as one of the most successful of American musicians to a polemic about racism.”<sup>341</sup>

Underlining this desire, Basie asserts that the biggest challenge of his career was also one of his greatest achievements: “conniving” his way into the Bennie Moten Orchestra. “Actually,” Basie writes, “when I look back at everything, it seems to me that the biggest problem of my whole career was how I was going to get into Bennie Moten’s band...As far as I am personally concerned, nothing that I’ve ever had to deal with out here has been any rougher for me to take on than that.”<sup>342</sup> In the succeeding line, Basie slyly emphasizes that his claim included the racism that he generally omitted from the

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<sup>340</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 384.

<sup>341</sup> Murray, “Comping for Count Basie,” 48.

<sup>342</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 383.

autobiography: “When it came to all those other tough or strange situations that my co-writer [Murray] calls ‘occupational hazards’ of those days, we just took care of them somehow or other and kept on going, and if I’ve forgotten to mention some of them, I guess that means they were not really worth mentioning.”<sup>343</sup> I read “‘occupational hazards’ of those days” as a wry euphemism for “racism,” though I note that racial bigotry was not the only challenge travelling ensembles such as the Basie Orchestra faced. Financial uncertainty, ever-shifting personnel, and logistical mix-ups were common to virtually all large jazz ensembles. Nevertheless, such antagonistic forces were, according to Murray, opportunities for heroic action. In the following section, I address Murray’s most significant work addressing heroism and fictional literature: *The Hero and the Blues*. Given Murray’s assertion in “Comping for Count Basie” that autobiography is ultimately a “species of *fiction* [emphasis original]”—I place it alongside *Good Morning Blues* in order to interpret the latter as an heroic narrative.<sup>344</sup>

### ***The Hero and the Blues* (1973)**

*The Hero and the Blues* is a trilogy of public lectures which Murray presented at the University of Missouri, Columbia on October 7, 8, and 9, 1972.<sup>345</sup> In barely more than one-hundred pages, Murray expertly places his arguments on the societal role of literature atop the ideological claims regarding the “fakelore of black pathology” he makes in *The Omni-Americans*. As Robert D. Spector summarizes *The Hero and the*

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<sup>343</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 383.

<sup>344</sup> Murray, “Comping for Count Basie,” 36.

<sup>345</sup> Thomas Lloyd, preface to Albert Murray, *The Hero and the Blues* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1973): 5.

*Blues*, “Murray contrasts the humanizing and universalizing characteristics of great fiction with the superficialities of ‘protest literature’ and terms the latter, no matter how sincere its purpose, a paltry response to human needs.”<sup>346</sup>

Murray notes that the “aboriginal source” of fiction is song and dance ritual, or *molpê*, by which the performer of such rituals imitates life experience and “evokes the dynamic image which embodies and expresses his conception of human nature and of the meaning and purpose of human conduct.”<sup>347</sup> Murray continues:

It is also by means of such imitation that literature fulfills its function as a fundamental vehicle of information, instruction, wisdom, and moral guidance. The song and dance ritual, whatever its extensions, whether as drama, lyric poem, ode, hymn, lay, epic, ballad or blues, is not only a reenactment-creation, but also a reenactment illustration, demonstration, and initiation.<sup>348</sup>

In short, the most essential function of literature in this broad definition is to describe human experiences as an author perceives them to be relevant in the world in which they exist. Of course, this may be achieved through highly creative and ingeniously imaginative methods of narration; however, it is the “social function of the storyteller”—to echo the title of Murray’s first lecture—to “[create] stories or [narrate] incidents which embody the essential nature of human existence in his time.”<sup>349</sup> Murray employs a broad conceptualization of literature—that is, a socially-geared barometer of particular human experiences with strong roots in musical-kinesthetic rituals—that encompasses the introspective and culture-reflecting expressions of the blues tradition.

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<sup>346</sup> Robert D. Spector, review of *The Hero and the Blues*, *Books Abroad* 48, no. 2 (1974): 422, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40128673>.

<sup>347</sup> Murray, *The Hero and the Blues*, 21-22. For more on *molpê* and Greek drama, see Gilbert Murray, *The Classical Tradition in Poetry, The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930).

<sup>348</sup> Murray, *The Hero and the Blues*, 22.

<sup>349</sup> Murray, *The Hero and the Blues*, 10.

With such a definition of literature, the opinions Murray expresses regarding polemical fiction in *The Omni-Americans* become even clearer. In his view, literary artists ranging from novelists to blues musicians serve a vital role in society that must not be conflated with the valid, yet undoubtedly separate, endeavors of social science and politics. Artists, Murray argues, wield a far broader hermeneutical lens than scientists or politicians, so when they opt to ground their frame of reference in the “esthetic preoccupations...[of] social and political technicians,” they rob their society of a singularly useful perspective.<sup>350</sup> For an artist to deny their individual, subjective point of view in favor of the ideologies prescribed by social scientists and politicians, Murray continues, is ultimately a loss for society because the former is so much rarer and more precious than the latter: “Such an action on the part of a writer is every bit as regressive as that of, say, a surgeon who deserts the operating room to become a first-aid corpsman on the battlefield.”<sup>351</sup>

Moreover, Murray asserts that the core of our literary traditions, broadly defined, center around one element: heroism; and American protest fiction of the “Marx-Freud-oriented variety” is, in the end, non-heroic. Such works are “predicated upon assumptions which have much more to do with philanthropy than with the dynamic of antagonistic cooperation,” Murray argues.<sup>352</sup> Antagonistic cooperation became something of a pet term for Murray throughout his career, as it perfectly captures some of his key ideologies regarding heroic narratives in literature, music, and American sociopolitics. In his second

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<sup>350</sup> Murray, *The Hero and the Blues*, 10-11.

<sup>351</sup> Murray, *The Hero and the Blues*, 12.

<sup>352</sup> Murray, *The Hero and the Blues*, 44.

lecture entitled “The Dynamics of Heroic Action,” Murray uses the analogy of a heroic storybook knight to equate heroism and antagonistic cooperation:

[T]he image of the sword being forged is inseparable from the dynamics of antagonistic cooperation, a concept which is indispensable to any fundamental definition of heroic action, in fiction or otherwise. The fire in the forging process, like the dragon which the hero must always encounter, is of its very nature antagonistic, but it is also cooperative at the same time. For all its violence, it does not destroy the metal which becomes the sword. It functions precisely to strengthen and prepare it to hold its battle edge[.]<sup>353</sup>

In other words, the stuff of heroism is the process of being made stronger by way of a negative environment; cooperating with antagonistic forces with the knowledge that one may master them. Conversely, protest literature—or, as Murray refers to it, “social science fiction”—revolves around the indictment of injustices rather than the examination of them as “obstacles which beset all quests for...personhood, selfhood, the just society, and everything else.”<sup>354</sup> As such, Murray asserts, “protest or finger-pointing fiction such as *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Native Son* addresses itself to the humanity of the dragon in the very process of depicting him as a fire-snorting monster: ‘Shame on you, Sir Dragon,’ it says in effect, ‘be a nice man and a good citizen.’”<sup>355</sup> The paradox of this position lies in the perception of the dragon; if people are only capable of experiencing terror and devastation from “dragons,” and resistance is indeed futile, then what societal value could the protest novel possibly hold? Protest novelists are, thus, “professional supplicants,” Murray says “who are in the grotesquely pathetic position of making urgent requests which they cannot possibly believe will be honored by the enemy.”<sup>356</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> Murray, *The Hero and the Blues*, 38.

<sup>354</sup> Murray, *The Hero and the Blues*, 45.

<sup>355</sup> Murray, *The Hero and the Blues*, 45.

<sup>356</sup> Murray, *The Hero and the Blues*, 48.

Antagonistic cooperation—a central piece to Murray’s definition of heroism—has significantly been associated with the processes of jazz performance. In his recent book *Antagonistic Cooperation: Jazz, Collage, Fiction, and the Shaping of African American Culture*, Robert G. O’Meally argues that the “spirit of love” inherent to jazz jam sessions—the “epitome of antagonistic cooperation,” he claims—provides a useful template for how to “dream of better ways and means of getting ourselves together and moving forward.”<sup>357</sup> O’Meally draws a good deal of his inspiration here from the writings of Ralph Ellison, perhaps the originator of the term’s use among Black American intellectuals.<sup>358</sup> O’Meally and Ellison both note how the participants, or “battlers,” of a traditional cutting-style jam session simultaneously hone their individual artistic blades while also sharpening those of their collaborators/opponents; each person plays “with and against” the other, he says, further paraphrasing Ellison.<sup>359</sup> Murray also analogized Black musical practices and antagonistic cooperation. In his reading of Thomas Mann’s sweeping four-part epic *Joseph and his Brothers*, Murray argues that the titular hero “represents the human being as artist and improviser.”<sup>360</sup> Despite his own flaws and the

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<sup>357</sup> Robert G. O’Meally, *Antagonistic Cooperation: Jazz, Collage, Fiction, and the Shaping of African American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022): 2, 10-12.

<sup>358</sup> O’Meally, *Antagonistic Cooperation*, 10.

<sup>359</sup> O’Meally, *Antagonistic Cooperation*, 2, 10-12. O’Meally borrows here from Ellison’s statement that “true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group.” Ralph Ellison, “The Charlie Christian Story,” *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison’s Jazz Writings*, edited by Robert G. O’Meally (New York: The Modern Library, 2001): 36. Indeed, as Ellison’s protagonist in *Invisible Man* learns of Liberty Paint’s proprietary “Optic White” paint which glosses federal monuments such as the White House, a white shade becomes more vibrant with the addition of a few drops of black pigment. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952; repr., New York: Vintage International, 1995), 199-202. For critical readings of this passage in *Invisible Man*, see: John Lardas Modern, “Synaptic Gap: White Machinery,” in *Neuromatic: Or, a Particular History of Religion and the Brain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 282, ProQuest Ebook Central. Sean O’Brien, “Blacking Out: Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and the Historicity of Antiracism,” *Cultural Critique* 105 (Fall 2019), 89.

<sup>360</sup> Murray, *The Hero and the Blues*, 62.

injustices thrust upon him by malevolent characters such as his brothers and his uncle Esau, he exhibits a “seemingly undauntable optimism which supports his flexibility no less than his tenacity of purpose.”<sup>361</sup> Murray states:

Joseph shares fundamental qualities in common with the epic hero of the blues tradition, that uniquely American context of antagonistic cooperation. Joseph goes beyond his failures in the very blues singing process of acknowledging them and admitting to himself how bad conditions are...[H]e proceeds as if each setback were really a recoil action for a grater leap forward, as if each downfall were a deliberately designed crouch for a higher elevation.<sup>362</sup>

Like the blues singer, Murray asserts, Mann’s Joseph “challenges and affirms his personal equilibrium, sustains his humanity, and enables him to maintain his higher aspirations in spite of the fact that human existence is so often a low-down-dirty-shame.”<sup>363</sup>

These musical analogies clearly resonate with the way Basie sought to portray himself in *Good Morning Blues*: as an individual who could find the advantage in any situation. Returning again to Basie’s statement that “conniving” his way into the Bennie Moten orchestra was the “biggest problem of [his] whole career,” Murray’s equation of heroism with antagonistic cooperation offers an intriguing perspective on Basie’s subsequent dismissal of racist “occupational hazards.”<sup>364</sup> It seems that Basie meant to insinuate that the significance of such antagonistic forces paled in comparison to his work as an artist, and that they did not warrant more than a passing mention in his autobiography. Indeed, if the archetypical hero does proceed “as if each setback were

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<sup>361</sup> Murray, *The Hero and the Blues*, 57.

<sup>362</sup> Murray, *The Hero and the Blues*, 58.

<sup>363</sup> Murray, *The Hero and the Blues*, 37.

<sup>364</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 383.

really a recoil action for a greater leap forward, as if each downfall were a deliberately designed crouch for a higher elevation,” then setbacks and downfalls are incidental compared to one’s triumphs over them.<sup>365</sup> From this perspective, the “wishful recollections” in *Good Morning Blues* of which Leonard Feather so passionately disapproved may instead be read as a heroic chronicle in which Basie joyfully swings his blues rather than sobs them, a point which Murray substantially expands upon in the third and final book which I analyze in this chapter: *Stomping the Blues*. While *The Hero and the Blues* deals with music laterally as one of many examples of artistic heroism in Black American aesthetics, Murray addresses music head-on in *Stomping the Blues*. In it, Murray argues that blues-oriented musicians such as Basie serve an indispensable and heroic role to Black American society.

### ***Stomping the Blues* (1976)**

*Stomping the Blues* opens with Murray describing the feelings of pain and powerlessness which characterize the literary and scientific writings he criticized in *The Hero and the Blues* and *The Omni-Americans*: what he terms here “the blues as such.” The blues as such are the blues as they are commonly understood when someone says they “have the blues”: “teeming, swarming, and writhing” sorrows which noiselessly and invisibly return time and again to torment each of us, just as assuredly as anything in the human experience.<sup>366</sup> One of Murray’s primary arguments in *Stomping the Blues* is that the blues as such problematically coincides with a great deal of how the musical idiom of

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<sup>365</sup> Murray, *The Hero and the Blues*, 58.

<sup>366</sup> Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 3.

the blues is understood as an expression of helplessness and despair. Indeed, at the time he was writing the book, it was unusual to frame blues music as an antidote to unhappiness, and Murray states as much: “Definitions of blues music in most standard American dictionaries confuse it with the blues as such.”<sup>367</sup> Citing definitions from contemporaneous editions of *Webster’s New International Dictionary*, *American Heritage Dictionary*, Hugues Panassié’s entry in *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (5th edition, 1960), and nearly a dozen other references, Murray makes clear that the mainstream intellectual understanding of the blues idiom during the 1960s and 1970s was that the music conveyed sorrow as much as anything.<sup>368</sup>

To combat this problematic interpretation of the blues, Murray offers a markedly optimistic alternative which significantly echoes his perspective on heroism and antagonistic cooperation: the blues as such are defined as much, if not more, by the individual’s self-affirming response to them as by the gloom which they bring about.

Murray elaborates:

The main thing about [the blues as such] is all the botheration they bring, and your most immediate concern is how to dislodge them before the botheration

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<sup>367</sup> Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 57.

<sup>368</sup> Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 57-76. Though not mentioned by Murray, Gunther Schuller notably wrote that the monophonic blues of the nineteenth century was “an essential mode of expression, through which a minority could render its suffering.” Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 35-36. For more examples of this viewpoint, see: Hugues Panassié, *Hot Jazz: The Guide to Swing Music* (1936; repr., Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1970), 18. Hugues Panassié, *The Real Jazz*, revised and enlarged edition (1942; repr., Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973), 44-54. Additionally, Murray also notes in *Stomping the Blues* that hyper-literal interpretations of blues lyrics contributed to this paradigm: “Defining blues music as song not only gives the lyrics more emphasis than is warranted by the way they are used in actual performance, but also contributes to the assumption implicit in...misdefinitions [*sic*] which confuses the music with the blues as such: that what is said is more important than the way it is said. It is not. The truth is that when a singer likes the tune he is likely to proceed as if any words will do.” Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 75-76.

degenerates into utter hopelessness...What it requires is the primordial and ever persistent effort to purify the environment once more.<sup>369</sup>

In short, despite the existential threat posed to each of us by whatever misery befalls us, each individual has the capacity to “purify” themselves from the blues as such which haunt them. Elaborating on this point, Murray writes: “But of all the age-old ways of dispelling the ominous atmosphere that comes along with the blues [as such], the one most people seem to have found to be most consistently effective all told also turns out to be essentially compatible with a great majority of the positive impulses[,] definitive purposes, goals, and ideals of their existence.”<sup>370</sup>

Murray’s key point here is that the blues idiom acts as a specifically Black American method of such “purification”: “The blues counteragent that is so much a part of many people’s equipment for living that they hardly ever think about it as such anymore is that artful and sometimes seemingly magical combination of idiomatic incantation and percussion that creates the dance-oriented good-time music also known as the blues.”<sup>371</sup> Murray colorfully expands on this point:

Hence the dance hall as temple. Hence all the ceremonially deliberate drag steps and shaking and grinding movements during, say, the old down-home Saturday Night Function[...]And hence in consequence the fundamental function of the blues musician (also known as the jazz musician), the most obvious as well as the

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<sup>369</sup> Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 5. Interestingly, despite Murray’s rebuke of some of Pannassié’s writings on the blues, Panassié actually foreshadowed Murray’s thesis that performing the musical ritual of the blues serves as an antidote to the blues as such. Pannassié writes in *The Real Jazz*: “In a certain sense the Negro liberates himself when he sings the blues. It has been said that the blues were the cry of the black man’s soul under the oppression of the whites. Hence the plaintive quality, the often hopeless accent. But let us make no mistake; when a Negro sings the blues, it is not to give way to his sadness, it is rather to free himself of it. He has far too much optimism and too vivid a sense of life to permit himself to do otherwise. That is why the blues, in spite of their nostalgic mood, have nothing to do with whining—but rather express a confidence, a tonic sense of vitality. Panassié, *The Real Jazz*, 24.

<sup>370</sup> Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 16-17.

<sup>371</sup> Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 16-17.

most pragmatic mission of whose performance is not only to drive the blues away and hold them at bay at least for the time being, but also to evoke an ambiance of Dionysian revelry in the process.

Which is to say, even as such blues (or jazz) performers as [Buddy Bolden, Jelly Roll Morton, and Bessie Smith] played their usual engagements as dance-hall, night-club, and vaudeville entertainers, they were at the same time fulfilling a central role in a ceremony that was at once a purification rite and a celebration of festive earthiness of which was tantamount to a fertility ritual.<sup>372</sup>

In short, by naming and being mindful of the blues as such via the blues musical idiom, Black Americans could temporarily overwhelm them through the joyous blues rituals of music, dance, and communal fellowship. Indeed, Murray's assertion here recalls his claim in *The Omni-Americans* that "when the Negro musician or dancer swings the blues, he is fulfilling the same fundamental existential requirement that determines the mission of the poet, the priest, and the medicine man."<sup>373</sup> The purpose of all these agents, Murray claims, is to provide their society with defiantly life-affirming processes for vanquishing the blues as such. Which is not to say that the blues musician is a hero, per se; rather, they produce heroic narratives which simultaneously describe and parry the blues as such, thus momentarily rendering inert fellow community members' emotional and psychological trauma.<sup>374</sup>

Murray's reverence for the social function of blues musicians casts new light on *Good Morning Blues*. While Basie does not state overtly in *Good Morning Blues* that he considered the blues to be misunderstood, his consistent association of blues music with ebullient audiences supports Murray's argument that the conflation of the blues idiom

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<sup>372</sup> Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 17.

<sup>373</sup> Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 55-56.

<sup>374</sup> Indeed, Murray equates the works of "blues-oriented arrangers, composers and conductors" associated with the orchestras of Henderson, Webb, Hines, Lunceford, Basie, and Hampton to the scripts written for Elizabethan stage companies. Murray, *The Hero and the Blues*, 84.

and the blues as such is wholly contradicted by the celebratory exuberance of blues-derived music. For example, Basie’s memories of Jimmy Rushing—a vocalist long associated with the blues and a cornerstone of the Blue Devils, Moten Orchestra, and early Basie Orchestra—further the connection between singing the blues and “stomping” away the blues as such. Basie and Rushing met in Tulsa around 1927 when Rushing was singing with the Oklahoma City-based territory band Walter Page’s Blue Devils. After joining the ensemble full time on piano, Basie recalls, he and Rushing ran a side enterprise during tours in which they would show up to clandestine watering holes and perform as a duo. Though, as Basie emphasizes, Rushing was primarily known as a ballad singer in their days with the Blue Devils, their after-hours routine was all about the blues.<sup>375</sup> “[W]e used to hit those alleys and find the joints together,” Basie remembers. “Me and old Rush. We were some pair. We just wanted to have a good time. Me playing the piano and him singing. We used to do that in every town.”<sup>376</sup> Though not necessarily motivated by this, we might interpret Basie and Rushing’s blues duo as an act which provided others—even strangers in an unfamiliar town—with a musical erasing of the blues as such. Additionally, Basie’s statement that he and Rushing “just wanted to have a good time” implies that playing the blues served to rid them of their own as well. Basie’s framing of this anecdote deeply resonates with Murray’s linking of the blues idiom and providing a joyous environment; their celebratory custom, Basie continues, was so powerful that Rushing could even conjure it without Basie’s piano accompaniment:

The places that didn’t have a piano in it were not so hot as far as I was concerned, because I couldn’t do my thing. But that didn’t always stop Jimmy. One night we were in some town somewhere and I came walking down one of those alleys and

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<sup>375</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 123.

<sup>376</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 21.

heard all this singing by himself with no piano anywhere in sight or out of sight either...He had rushed on in there and was singing his can off with no music, nothing...I don't think he was that hungry or hard up or anything like that. I think he just liked the looks of the place or something, or saw somebody in there that he wanted to get next to.<sup>377</sup>

That a room without a piano could have its spirits lifted by nothing but a deft bluesman certainly resonates with Murray's points in *Stomping the Blues*. Elsewhere in *Good Morning Blues*, Basie similarly recalls the way Big Joe Turner—a blues singer with whom Basie would periodically collaborate throughout his entire career—could shape the emotional atmosphere of a space with his voice:

Sometimes I used to go by and listen to Joe Turner singing the blues. The first time I met Joe he was working down on Independence Avenue [in Kansas City around 1929]. He was the bartender down there in a basement joint where they used to serve whiskey by the dipper. Big Joe was the singing bartender. He would sing his numbers right behind the bar while he was mixing his drinks. He'd be hollering the blues and dipping that good taste, and also taking special care of all the cats he knew. He was in charge of that whole basement down there.

[W]hen I heard him that first time, I said to myself, Jesus, I *never* heard nothing like this guy. He was *the* blues singer in that town. Anybody who came to Kansas City talking about singing some blues had to go listen to *him*.<sup>378</sup>

The images of Rushing and Turner in *Good Morning Blues* bear no resemblance to the blues as such; their musical expressions did not evoke pity from listeners. Instead, Rushing confidently gripped strangers' attention with his voice, and Turner—as a singing bartender—served as a sonic compliment to patrons' revelrous imbibing.<sup>379</sup> In short, these anecdotes equated the blues with merrymaking and personal pleasure. As such, Basie's positive register throughout *Good Morning Blues* may be interpreted to align

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<sup>377</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 21.

<sup>378</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 110.

<sup>379</sup> Murray notes that consuming alcohol is another primordial, blues-as-such-confounding activity. Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 16.

closely with Murray's claim that Black American music represents a mode of antagonistic cooperation with and against the blues as such. Unlike the occasional musician who "[tries] to earn a living by making wretchedness a public figure," Murray asserts, the blues of singers such as "Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Jimmy Rushing, and Big Joe Turner" were "always a part if not the high point of the main event" due to the way they could electrify an audience.<sup>380</sup> Furthermore, Murray observes that both Rushing and Turner were the "archetypes" of the "Kansas City blues singer."<sup>381</sup> As Basie's musical aesthetic is inseparable from Kansas City's musical golden age during the 1920s and 1930s, it is worth comparing the way this environment is depicted in *Stomping the Blues* and *Good Morning Blues*.

Murray writes in *Stomping the Blues* that the swinging 4/4 blues music which greatly defined the Kansas City sound during this time exemplified a "velocity of affirmation and celebration."<sup>382</sup> Ross Russell writes that the city's geographic isolation from the publishing complexes of major metropolises made for an environment in which musicians were "left to their own [creative] devices," resulting in a "grass-roots" development of a rich jam session culture.<sup>383</sup> Of course, jam sessions and cutting contests have long followed jazz practitioners wherever they have gone, and, as in other cities during the first decades of the twentieth century, they often served to demarcate band territories and challenge individuals' positions within a masculinized professional

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<sup>380</sup> Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 54.

<sup>381</sup> Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 166.

<sup>382</sup> Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 166.

<sup>383</sup> Ross Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 3.

hierarchy.<sup>384</sup> Murray argues, though, that the jam culture of 1930s Kansas City was not supplementary to other more salient performance settings in the city; rather, the jam sessions in Kansas City were the primary events through which musicians such as Basie collectively crafted the city's particular style of joyfully realizing the blues as a swinging, good-time dance music. Moreover, Murray argues that it was in this unique creative domain of around-the-clock jam sessions that Basie and his colleagues mastered the 4/4 swing aesthetic.

The process by which this rhythm section aesthetic came to be is traceable to the Basie Orchestra's deep interconnectivity with the two ensembles which preceded it as the quintessential purveyors of Southwestern dance music: the Blue Devils and the Bennie Moten Orchestra. Murray quotes drummer Joe Jones' recollection of his early days in the Count Basie Orchestra: 'When Bennie Moten's two beat one and three rhythm and the two and four of Walter Page's Blue Devils came together in the Basie band, there was an even flow [of] one-two-three-four.'<sup>385</sup> Basie refers to how the varying styles of the Blue Devils and the Moten Orchestra both evoked joy and encouraged dancing, and he mentions that each rhythmic style had its own unique advantages. Regarding the one-and-

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<sup>384</sup> Quoting bassist Gene Ramey, Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix importantly note that jam sessions in Kansas City served as "constant trials of manhood." Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz: From Ragtime to Bebop—A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 165. Similarly, Thomas Brothers notes that, in the case of New Orleans in the preceding decades, cutting contests were dictated by the preexisting masculine hierarchies of the city's unique matrix of fraternal societies. Thomas David Brothers, *Louis Armstrong's New Orleans* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006). 202-211.

<sup>385</sup> Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 170. In short, the Basie rhythm section formula calls for unison rhythms on all four beats from the string bass and guitar, while the drums and piano glide along the top in rhythmic conversation with the ensemble and each other.

three “stomp” style of the Moten Orchestra, Basie states it was highly danceable, but limited to medium tempos:

[The Moten] band had its original Kansas City stomp style. It had a special beat, and it really had something going, and I could understand what was happening, because it was a very happy band.

I really don't know how you would define stomp in strict musical terms. But it was a real thing. What I would say is if you were on the first floor, and the dance hall was upstairs, that was what you would hear, that steady *rump, rump, rump, rump* in that medium tempo. It was never fast...But anytime [the Moten Orchestra] played anything, the floor was full of dancers. *That* told you something.<sup>386</sup>

Conversely, regarding the Blue Devils, Basie observes that their two-and-four pulse resulted in more of a “jump band or swing band.”<sup>387</sup> “Their style was snappier [than the Moten Orchestra’s],” Basie asserts.<sup>388</sup> Indeed, Basie’s telling of this narrative appears to align with Murray’s claim that such a stylistic synthesis afforded the Basie band a significantly greater degree of tempo flexibility while maintaining the same metrical pulse of 4/4:

Nor was the Kansas City jam session any less dance-beat oriented for being an experimental laboratory. Thus as music as the instrumental dueling at such sessions was to become a matter of storybook romance, what Kansas City musicians are most celebrated for is the drive with which they swing the blues and anything else in all tempos. Whatever they play becomes good-time music because they always maintain the velocity of celebration. Nothing’s too fast or too slow [for Count Basie].<sup>389</sup>

Murray’s point about tempo aligns with the general knowledge surrounding the Count Basie Orchestra; anyone who has listened to their music has likely been impressed by

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<sup>386</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 120.

<sup>387</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 120.

<sup>388</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 120.

<sup>389</sup> Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 164.

how lithely Basie's ensembles swing at extremely slow and fast tempos alike.<sup>390</sup> Amid the celebratory releases of the blues as such during the dance-oriented jam sessions in Kansas City and its surrounding Southwest territories, various rhythm section aesthetics coalesced into the smooth, even 4/4 aesthetic.

Basie's framing of Kansas City in *Good Morning Blues* echoes Murray's claim that Kansas City 4/4 swing possesses an inherent "velocity of celebration." Basie describes Kansas City around 1925 as "a scene where the [musical] action was greater than anything I'd ever heard of."<sup>391</sup> He continues:

Everything along [Eighteenth Street] was all lit up like klieg lights. It was one of the most fantastic sights I've ever seen in my life... There were joints all lit up and going full blast on both sides of the street for several blocks... And everywhere you went, there was at least a piano player and somebody singing, if not a combo or maybe a jam session.<sup>392</sup>

Kansas City's wealth of musical opportunities must have been exciting for the young, ambitious Basie, and he made the most of them when he moved there in 1929.<sup>393</sup> "Kansas City was a musicians' town," Basie remembers, "[and] I was becoming more and more tied up with music itself and less and less concerned with show business and entertainment in general... [T]he music scene was what Kansas City was all about."<sup>394</sup> From this perspective, Basie's framing of the Kansas City in *Good Morning Blues* as a hub of excitement and opportunity potentially mirrors Murray's assertion in *Stomping the Blues* that the city's musical aesthetic during the early twentieth century was deeply

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<sup>390</sup> For example, though "Lil' Darlin'" from *Atomic Mr. Basie* sits around 67 bpm and the live recording of "Whirly Bird" from *Live at the Sands (Before Frank)* clocks in at 300 bpm, both are anchored by the same 4/4 approach in the rhythm section.

<sup>391</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 65.

<sup>392</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 64-65.

<sup>393</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 107.

<sup>394</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 108-109.

connected with the “velocity of affirmation and celebration” which served to eliminate individuals’ blues as such.

As the Basie Orchestra moved out of Kansas City and gained notoriety, Kansas City’s version of the blues ritual became globally disseminated, exposing an international population of listeners to what Murray considered irrefutable proof that Black Americans were heroic masters over their blues as such.<sup>395</sup> This perspective brings us back to Murray’s claims in *The Omni-Americans* vis-à-vis depictions of Black Americans. While he alludes to the blues being a specifically Black musical ritual—he observes in *Stomping the Blues* that the danceability of such blues music was a result of the “primordial cultural conditioning of the people for whom blues music was created in the first place”—Murray tends to avoid making this clear-cut claim regarding the music’s ostensible racial ownership.<sup>396</sup> Perhaps Murray’s ambiguity in this regard was a result of his own ideological stance that he did not “give a shit about being black or white” nearly as much as he cared about being an American: a point that parallels Basie’s desire to avoid drawing racial boundaries in *Good Morning Blues*.<sup>397</sup> Moreover, to limit kinesthetic response to Black American musical idioms to only Black American audiences would undermine one of Murray’s main points: that Black American cultural idioms are as much a part of the fabric of American culture as those of western Europe. As he wrote in *The Omni-Americans*, by the very act of arriving on the shores of North America, enslaved Africans entered “the same stream of American tradition as those who landed at

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<sup>395</sup> Murray considered the musical aesthetic of 1930s Kansas City to be the most influential contribution by Black Americans to the stylistic character of American music in general. Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 158.

<sup>396</sup> Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 189.

<sup>397</sup> Murray, “A Mobile Boy,” 186.

Plymouth.”<sup>398</sup> Though certainly a product of Black American musical aesthetics, traditions, and exchanges, Murray argues that such Black American expressions are, by definition, also broadly “American” ones as well. Indeed, Basie seems to reiterate this perspective in the conclusion of *Good Morning Blues*, when he states that his style of swinging the blues was universally comprehensible and that divulgences vis-à-vis his racial challenges or behind-the-scenes gossip were irrelevant to his music since, “all you have to do to start getting with it is to pat your feet.”<sup>399</sup>

In summary, Murray considered the Kansas City blues aesthetic of Basie, Rushing, Turner, and others to be foundational to American culture at large. Though originally derived from Black American culture, he viewed its power to “stomp” away the blues as such as evidence for the idiom being artistically exceptional. And, since Basie portrays this Kansas City style of music in *Good Morning Blues* as one which possesses a supreme potential for bringing people together in social harmony, this autobiography and Murray’s *Stomping the Blues* appear to share a great deal of ideological ground vis-à-vis the sociocultural significance of Basie’s music.

## Conclusion

*Good Morning Blues* is a cornerstone of Basie’s legacy. Like much of his music, his autobiography is charming and unique, but it has also been dismissed by some whose conclusions lack the much-needed context of .<sup>400</sup> While it is true that, toward the end of his life, Basie had a penchant for donning a socially inert mask of smiling acquiescence

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<sup>398</sup> Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 188-189. Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 22.

<sup>399</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 384.

<sup>400</sup> For more on the legacy of Basie’s music, see chapters three and four.

in order to negotiate his occasional obligations to journalists such as Pim Jacobs, many critics of *Good Morning Blues* mistakenly perceived its celebratory tenor to be a product of this habit. Due to this fact, Basie's biographical legacy has often been considered frustratingly incomplete.

As I have shown, Murray's perspectives offer a great deal of insight into the sort of narrative Basie consciously sought to craft in his autobiography. In "Comping for Count Basie," Murray articulates that Basie was in charge of the book's tone and narrative and that Basie wanted *Good Morning Blues* to contrast some of the more polemical and/or sensationalist narratives common to some other jazz autobiographies by foregrounding triumph over struggle.<sup>401</sup> Furthermore, Murray's writings on racial polemics, protest fiction, heroism, and Black American music throughout his pre-*Good Morning Blues* body of work align strikingly with Basie's autobiographical aspirations. While I do not think it is useful or appropriate to project Murray's precise ideological stances onto Basie himself, Murray's critical writings on music, literature, and American society provide invaluable context for interpreting Basie's values as the narrator of *Good Morning Blues*. As such, works such as *The Omni-Americans*, *The Hero and the Blues*, and *Stomping the Blues* are inseparable from Basie's biographical legacy.

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<sup>401</sup> I am aware that my thesis in this chapter places a heavy degree of credence on Murray's recollections in "Comping for Count Basie." While it is possible that Murray's retelling of Basie's intentions is at least somewhat biased, as I have shown, Basie communicates in *Good Morning Blues* that he was consciously aware of how his book contrasted with other works of jazz autobiography.

PART TWO  
SIGNIFICATIONS

## CHAPTER 3

### RESPONDING TO THE CALLS: BLACK AMERICAN ANALYTICAL THEORIES AND THE MUSIC OF COUNT BASIE

I was in the eighth grade when I was first exposed to the music of the Count Basie Orchestra. While I sat playing third trumpet in a jazz education program called the Young Sounds of Arizona, our no-nonsense director regularly emphasized that, if we wanted to grow up to be hireable musicians, it was essential for us to fully grasp how to embody the subtly complex aesthetic commonly associated with Basie's influential big band. Within a few months of this training, she could tell us to play any of our student-level arrangements "like the Basie band," and we youngsters would play "fat" quarter notes, extreme dynamic contrasts, and occasionally "lay back" in the winds while the rhythm section grooved along in perpetual motion on all four beats. In the two decades that followed, I grew to become intimately familiar with Basie's music as a professional commercial trumpet player and occasional big band director.<sup>402</sup> I came to find that, among practitioners, Basie's music is frequently performed and widely beloved. Additionally, I have seen that, when performing Basie's music, performers tend to share a good deal of common ground vis-à-vis evaluating its aesthetic properties. Indeed, to this day, my eighth-grade programming serves me well when I need to evoke the Basie style in a big band, even if I am playing with strangers, because we all draw from a common

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<sup>402</sup> I point out that I occasionally refer to the music of the Basie Orchestra as "Basie's music." Though—with some notable exceptions I address in this chapter—the band's repertoire was not composed or arranged by Basie, he was known to refer to it as "my music." For example, see Count Basie and Albert Murray, *Good Morning Blues: The Autobiography of Count Basie, As Told to Albert Murray* (New York: Random House, 1985), 290. As such, I consider it appropriate to use "Basie's music" and "the music of Basie's Orchestra" interchangeably.

conceptualization of the activity that has been passed on to us through recordings and our elders.

Significantly, though, little such consensus is to be found in the scholarly discourse surrounding the Basie Orchestra's music. In particular, twentieth-century Eurocentric musicologists tended to focus on analyzing individual solos and quantifying the particularities of the Basie rhythm section's approach to 4/4 swing rather than attempting to analyze specific works from the band's repertoire.<sup>403</sup> As a result, the legacy surrounding the music of the Count Basie Orchestra is awkwardly split between jazz performers—who can execute the aesthetic in practice—and researchers who have historically eschewed substantial analyses of the Basie Orchestra's repertoire.<sup>404</sup> In this chapter, I begin to bridge the gap between these discourses. I argue that Afrodiasporic theories of vernacular rhetoric and music are particularly conducive to analyzing Basie's music for what it is: discursive, social, and driven by the performers. By drawing upon Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s rhetorical theory of Signifyin(g) and Samuel A. Floyd Jr.'s musical theory of Call-Response, I demonstrate that the Basie Orchestra's music may be understood as part of a vast, interconnected cornucopia of Black American music in which idiomatic tropes are revised through repetition and recontextualization.

First, I describe Signifyin(g)—a theory of African American vernacular rhetoric—as Gates articulated it in his groundbreaking book *The Signifying Monkey*. Though not a musical theory, per se, I show that a Signifyin(g) tropology served as the

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<sup>403</sup> For more on this, see chapter four.

<sup>404</sup> As Ken Prouty convincingly argues, academic “jazz studies” in academia is bifurcated into two realms—jazz performance and jazz scholarship—which rarely intersect with one another. Kenneth Prouty, *Knowing Jazz, Community, Pedagogy, and Canon in the Information Age* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 11.

schema for the Basie Orchestra's off-stage social hierarchy throughout the twentieth century. Next, I move on to Call-Response: Floyd's musical analogue to Gates' rhetorical theory which frames Black American musical idioms as referential, trope-based, intergenerational musical dialogues. By applying Call-Response analysis to two of the Basie Orchestra's most influential works—"April in Paris" and "Blues in Hoss' Flat"—I show how even the most tightly arranged pieces may be better understood when they are framed within a broader, intergenerational dialogue of Black vernacular music. Finally, I turn to Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.'s holistic, oral-history-based reimagining of Floyd's Call-Response in order to analyze a piece of music which Basie composed: a striking piano feature, itself entitled "Signifying." By analyzing Basie's music through these dynamic Afrodiasporic theories, I provide new, valuable avenues for conceiving the Basie Orchestra's works and aesthetic outside the confines of Eurocentric musicology.

### **Signifyin(g): A Theory of African American Vernacular Rhetoric**

Robert Walser defines Signifyin(g) as a specifically African American rhetorical process of cultural signification which "works through reference, gesture, and interaction to suggest multiple meanings through association."<sup>405</sup> Signifyin(g) is not a specific action, per se; it is a "master trope" under which fall myriad Black rhetorical tropes such as testifying, rapping, and playing the dozens.<sup>406</sup> Another useful definition given by

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<sup>405</sup> Robert Walser, ed., *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 324.

<sup>406</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 52. I use the term "master trope" here in the way Samuel Floyd applies it to his musical theory "Call-Response," which I will address in detail later in this chapter. Floyd's theory is directly inspired by that of Gates, however it is worth noting that Gates and Floyd use the term "master trope" in slightly different ways. For Floyd,

Richard Middleton and Peter Manuel conveys how and why Signifyin(g) is specifically derived from Afro-diasporic rhetorical traditions:

The theory of “Signifyin(g)” drawn by scholars from black American literary studies places the roots of Afro-diasporic formal thinking in the concept of a “changing same,” which generates intertextual relationships both historically and synchronically, through continual variation of formulae.<sup>407</sup>

While it is undoubtedly a product of Afro-diasporic linguistics, Signifyin(g) practices are not necessarily exclusive to African Americans. Rather, they are African American forms of vernacular intertextuality which have influenced other cultures, not the least of which being that of the American mainstream. As this rhetoric is arguably fundamental to Black American social discourse, it is deeply embedded into the fabric of Black American music.<sup>408</sup>

The game of the dozens is a useful example of how practitioners of a single rhetorical trope conceive of the present by Signifyin(g) upon a shared vernacular tradition through idiomatic reference and allusion.<sup>409</sup> Nathaniel Mills describes the dozens as “a black vernacular speech ritual in which participants invent dueling insults, often of a sexual nature and often about each other’s mothers. Central to the game...is that the

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Signifyin(g) constitutes a master trope because all other rhetorical tropes are subsumed within it. Gates’s use of the term is more complicated, as his original theorization of Signifyin(g) contains a multitiered hierarchy of tropes, with “master tropes” (i.e. “metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony”) still falling underneath the broader trope of Signifyin(g). As my purposes are ultimately oriented toward music, I will adhere to Floyd’s definition of the “master trope” even when discussing Signifyin(g). Samuel A. Floyd Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 95.

<sup>407</sup> Richard Middleton and Peter Manuel, “Popular music,” Oxford Music Online, January 20, 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.43179>.

<sup>408</sup> I note that all of the definitions of Signifyin(g) I cite here are from music scholars. As Gates’s theory is extremely complex and only deals with music tangentially in *The Signifying Monkey*, summaries drawn from musical applications of the theory are particularly germane to the context of my research.

<sup>409</sup> Gates writes in *The Signifying Monkey* that the dozens “is perhaps the best-known mode of Signification...because it depends so heavily on humor.” Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 99.

participants understand the imaginary, nonreferential nature of the insults.”<sup>410</sup> Mills observes that the dozens may be conceived through the broader tropological framework of Signifyin(g) because it is a “formally hermetic verbal play” which ritualistically, nonreferentially, and indirectly communicates insults crafted in a specific rhetorical aesthetic.<sup>411</sup> Gates likens this tradition to a sort of vernacular literary criticism in which initiated audience members (i.e. savvy African Americans) affirm the validity or invalidity of an expression in real time as it is happening. Significantly, this dynamic is also essential to the social fabric of jazz spaces. Thomas Brothers, in quoting jazz drummer Baby Dodds, observes that the dozens and “bucking” or “cutting” competitions between ensembles and/or individual musicians both operate within this dynamic of real-time, audience-based criticism: “‘If we said that a band cut you on the street, that meant they outplayed you,’ said Baby Dodds.”<sup>412</sup> The plural personal pronoun “we” in Dodds’ recollection underlines the discursive, communal criticism at the core of both Signifyin(g) rhetorical tropes and Black American musical spaces.

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<sup>410</sup> Nathaniel Mills, “Playing the Dozens and Consuming the Cadillac: Ralph Ellison and Civil Rights Politics,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 61, no. 2 (June 2015): 147.

<sup>411</sup> Mills, “Playing the Dozens,” 152-53. For more on the dozens, see: Roger D. Abrahams, “Playing the Dozens,” *Journal of American Folklore* 75, no. 297 (1962): 209-20. William Labov, “Rules for Ritual Insults,” in *Rappin’ and Stylin’ Out: Communication in Urban Black America*, ed. Thomas Kochman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 265-314. Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 347-48. Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, *Language Behavior in a Black Urban Community* (Berkeley: Language-Behavior Research Laboratory at the University of California, Berkeley, 1971), 87-90, 120. Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Penguin, 1973), 25. Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey Newton* (New York: Random House, 1970), 409. Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977), 133-34.

<sup>412</sup> Thomas Brothers, *Louis Armstrong’s New Orleans* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), 202-203.

Signifyin(g) tropes possess a certain rhetorical posture in which a performer's execution and an observer's comprehension both require a degree of cultural experience. An excerpt from Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* exemplifies how Signifyin(g) rhetoric is lost on the young, Black narrator from the South who—due to his elders' collective shame regarding the persistently horrific legacy of slavery—has been sheltered from older vernacular traditions:

Close to the curb ahead I saw a man pushing a cart piled high with rolls of blue paper and heard him singing in a clear ringing voice. It was a blues, and I walked along behind him remembering the times that I had heard such singing at home...

*She's got feet like a monkey  
Legs like a frog—Lawd, Lawd!  
But when she starts to loving me  
I holler Whoooo, God-dog!  
Cause I loves my baabay,  
Better than I do myself...*

And as I drew alongside I was startled to hear him call to me:

“Looka-year, buddy...”

“Yes,” I said, pausing to look into his reddish eyes.

“Tell me just one thing this very fine morning—Hey! Wait a minute, daddy-o, I'm going your way!”

“What is it?” I said.

“What I want to know is,” he said, “is you got the *dog*?”

“Dog? What dog?”

“Sho,” he said, stopping his cart and resting it on its support. “That's it. *Who*”—he halted crouch with one foot on the curb like a country preacher about to pound his Bible—“*got ... the ... dog*,” his head snapping with each word like an angry rooster's. I laughed nervously and stepped back. He watched me out of shrewd eyes. “Oh goddog, daddy-o,” he said with a sudden bluster, “who got the damn dog? Now I know you from down home, how come you trying to act like you

never heard that before! Hell ain't nobody out here this morning but us colored—  
Why you trying to deny me?”

Suddenly I was embarrassed and angry. “Deny you? What do you mean?”

“Just answer the question. Is you got him, or ain't you?”

“A *dog*?”

“Yeah, *the* dog.”

I was exasperated. “No, not this morning,” I said and saw a grin spread over his face.

“Wait a minute, daddy. Now don't go get mad. Damn, man! I thought sho *you* had him,” he said, pretending to disbelieve me. I started away and he pushed the cart beside me. And suddenly I felt very uncomfortable.<sup>413</sup>

While Ellison's anonymous protagonist is Black, he is unfamiliar with the rhetoric the well-meaning blues man assumed he would know given his dark skin (“Now I know you [are] from down home...”). In my reading of this passage, had the narrator been able to respond idiomatically, he would have been demonstrating his status as a rhetorically competent partner by drawing upon a shared rhetorical tradition.

The narrator's disconnect with an older generation of Black Americans is one of many examples of Ellison's key modernist theme in the book: invisibility, or as Horace A. Porter writes, “the anonymity of modern [American] life.”<sup>414</sup> Foreshadowed by the anonymity of James Weldon Johnson's protagonist in *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1900) and the “double consciousness” articulated by W. E. B. Du Bois in *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), the protagonist in *Invisible Man* negotiates each stage of his narrative

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<sup>413</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1947; Second Vintage International Edition, New York: Random House, 1995), 172-174.

<sup>414</sup> Horace A. Porter, *Jazz Country: Ralph Ellison in America* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), 76.

via the conditions thrust upon him by the perceptions of others.<sup>415</sup> To his Southern college's white benefactor, he is a tour guide who serves to whet the man's grotesque curiosities regarding the lingering horrors of slavery; when introduced to white women among New York's leftist circles, he is a forbidden object of sexual desire; needing to escape malevolent pursuers, he dons a hat and sunglasses and becomes just another Harlem pimp. Through each of these disparate sociocultural environments, Porter notes, Ellison synthesizes "an array of black voices and sounds, incorporating and celebrating indigenous American culture."<sup>416</sup>

In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates' equation of such an approach to a "double-voiced [text] that [talks] to other texts" directly reflects his claims vis-à-vis Signifyin(g) and Black American music.<sup>417</sup> Signifyin(g) authors elaborate upon longstanding rhetorical tropes and aesthetics by novelly rearranging them, reflecting new significances off of each other; in the same way, Gates argues, the jazz performer Signifies upon preexisting musical material by improvising over it and/or composing new melodies to fit its formal and harmonic schema. In doing so, they create a new rhetorical or musical gesture while simultaneously recontextualizing the original "texts." Porter articulates such a parallel between Black literature and Black musical idioms when he states that "*Invisible Man* is a jazz text...It consciously riffs upon or plays countless variations on familiar literary and cultural themes."<sup>418</sup> Other works in Black American literature offer similar insights into the ways the legacies of such Signifyin(g) practices are evident in

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<sup>415</sup> Porter, *Jazz Country*, 76.

<sup>416</sup> Porter, *Jazz Country*, 75.

<sup>417</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, xxv. Porter, *Jazz Country*, 75.

<sup>418</sup> Porter, *Jazz Country*, 74.

jazz spaces. Through her ethnographic research in her hometown of Eatonville, Florida during the 1930s, Zora Neale Hurston illustrates that such rhetorical actions have long been understood to be a male-gendered interaction, furthering the congruency between Signifyin(g) rhetoric and the extensively articulated discourse surrounding masculinity, gender, and jazz.<sup>419</sup> In *Mules and Men*, she relays how a woman's use of Black rhetoric is met with scorn:

“And speakin’ ‘bout hams,” cut in Big Sweet meaningly, “if Joes Willard don’t stay out of dat bunk he was in last night, Ah’m gointer sprinkle some salt down his back and sugar-cure *his* hams.”

Joe snatched his pole out of the water with a jerk and glared at Big Sweet, who stood sidewise looking at him most pointedly.

“Aw, woman, quit tryin’ to signify.”

“Ah kin signify all Ah please, Mr. Nappy-chin, so long as Ah know what Ah’m talkin’ about.”

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<sup>419</sup> David Ake, “Re-Masculating Jazz: Ornette Coleman, ‘Lonely Woman,’ and the Postwar Jazz Culture,” *American Music* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 25-44. Brothers, *Louis Armstrong’s New Orleans*, 197-218. Patrick Burke, *Come In and Hear the Truth: Jazz and Race on 52nd Street* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). Krin Gabbard, “Signifyin(g) the Phallus: *Mo’ Better Blues* and Representations of the Jazz Trumpet,” in *Representing Jazz*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995): 104-130. John Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Monique Guillory, “‘Black Bodies Swinging’: Race, Gender, and Jazz,” in *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*, eds. Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green (New York: New York University Press, 1998): 191-215. Travis A. Jackson, *Blowin’ the Blues Away: Performance and Meaning in the New York Jazz Scene* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012): 28, 41, 73-74, 79. Ingrid Monson, “The Problem with White Hipness: Gender, Race, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 396-422. Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). Nichole Rustin-Paschal, *The Kind of Man I Am: Jazzmasculinity and the World of Charles Mingus Jr.* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017). Nichole T. Rustin (née Nichole Rustin-Paschal) and Sherrie Tucker, eds., *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008). Sherrie Tucker, *Dance Floor Democracy: The Social Geography of Memory at the Hollywood Canteen* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: “All-Girl” Bands of the 1940s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000). Christi Jay Wells (né Christopher J. Wells), “‘A Dreadful Bit of Silliness’: Feminine Frivolity and Ella Fitzgerald’s Early Critical Reception,” *Women and Music* 21 (2017): 43-65.

“See dat?” Joe appealed to the other men. “We git a day off and figger we kin ketch some fish and enjoy ourselves, but naw, some wimmins got to drag behind us, even to de lake.”<sup>420</sup>

Gates points to this passage as it demonstrates the fact that “women most certainly can, and do, Signify upon men.”<sup>421</sup> That he was compelled to make this point, however, underlines the degree to which Signifyin(g) practices have been commonly understood to be a strictly fraternal rhetorical discourse.

The discursive practices I have described above deal with social performances in real time; the culturally informed rhetoric of the dozens player, the bewilderment of Ellison’s uninformed protagonist, and the attempt of Big Sweet to claim her validity among her male counterparts all receive in-the-moment criticism from those around them which serves to affirm or deny the validity of their gestures. But their social and/or rhetorical gestures also engage intertemporally with those of past generations. A dozens player’s proficiency is enabled by a grab-bag of rhetorical devices which likely predates themselves by decades, if not more, while Ellison’s “invisible” hero failed the old blues man’s sociocultural examination because the teenager’s upbringing was intentionally divorced from the traditions of his ancestors. In the same way, a jazz musician engages in a process of tropological Signification not only with those in their immediate space, but also across time through the act of recycling and revising—and thus, recontextualizing—elements of a traditional vernacular idiom.

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<sup>420</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 196-197. Zora Neal Hurston, *Mules and Men: Negro Folktales and Voodoo Practices in the South* (1935; New York: Perennial Library, 1990), 124.

<sup>421</sup> Significantly, Gates identifies this passage as the first instance of the term “signify” to appear in Black American literature. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 196-197. In a footnote, Hurston defines “signify” here as “To show off.” Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 124n.

## **“The Environment You Keep”: Signifyin(g) and Social Validity in the Count Basie Orchestra**

At the core of each Signifyin(g) trope is a process in which one attempts to assert themselves as a valid member of a group, and the group discursively determines the (in)validity of the individual’s expression. More broadly, throughout the twentieth century, Signifyin(g) rhetorical tropes were among the many approaches used by Black American musicians in order to negotiate and navigate their professional landscapes. According to Lawrence Levine, Black minstrel troupes in the late-nineteenth century were known to “utilize the commonplaces of the [white] minstrel idiom...to criticize, parody, and sharply comment on their society and their situation.”<sup>422</sup> Underlining the self-affirming agency at the core of this paradigm, Douglas Malcom notes that African American performers continued this performance practice into the twentieth century in order to “subvert white culture through indirect and ironic means.”<sup>423</sup> As the twentieth century progressed, many Black American musicians such as Miles Davis relied on what Amiri Baraka refers to as “micro-revolts” in order to deride the white supremacist culture into which their ancestors had been displaced.<sup>424</sup> This is indeed one of many roles that has been “assigned to Signifyin(g)...[by the] Afro-American tradition,” to use Gates’s words. These are examples of Signifyin(g) performed by Black musicians, however there is also Signifyin(g) to be observed within Black music itself.

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<sup>422</sup> Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 194.

<sup>423</sup> Douglas Malcolm, “‘Myriad Subtleties’: Subverting Racism through Irony in the Music of Duke Ellington and Dizzy Gillespie,” *Black Music Research Journal* 35, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 199.

<sup>424</sup> Amiri Baraka, “Miles Later,” in *Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 12.

While many scholars have demonstrated how Signifyin(g) may serve as a useful tool for analyzing musical expressions, I believe it is also worth noting that when considering the socially complex nature of jazz spaces such as jam sessions, rehearsals, and performances, the Signifyin(g) practices articulated above help crystallize the extent to which the legacy of Black vernacular rhetoric lives on in such environments.<sup>425</sup> For example, when drawing from the musical tropes or “vocabulary” of the jazz idiom during a performance, a jazz musician may be thought to signify their membership in that vernacular musical tradition by Signifyin(g) upon (i.e. imitating, paraphrasing, alluding to, and/or ironically dismantling) recognizably idiomatic tropes.<sup>426</sup> If they perform convincingly, their validity in the space is confirmed by fellow musicians, dancers, and/or audience members through physical, vocal, and instrumental gestures. In doing so, each individual in the jazz space demonstrates the legitimacy of their place there in the same way a participant in a game of the dozens validates theirs through expertly adapting Black American vernacular rhetoric to fit the situation.

The practice of validating one’s self to others in a jazz space resonates more broadly with the offstage social construction of the Count Basie Orchestra. Drummer

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<sup>425</sup> Jamie Fyffe, “Uniqueness, Signifyin(g) and Compositional Process in ‘Blue and Green’,” *Jazz Perspectives* 8, no. 2 (May 4, 2014): 185-208. Gabbard, “Signifyin(g) the Phallus.” Alan Stanbridge, “A Question of Standards: ‘My Funny Valentine’ and Musical Intertextuality,” *Popular Music History* 1, no. 1 (February 4, 2004): 83-108. Gary Tomlinson, “Cultural Dialogics and Jazz: A White Historian Signifies,” *Black Music Research Journal* 22, no. 1 (January 1, 2002): 71-105; Walser, “Out of Notes,” 343-365.

<sup>426</sup> I intentionally use both the standard English “signify” and the African American theoretical term “Signifyin(g)” here in order to underline the fact that the latter is not a concrete, quantifiable action, per se. As Gates clarifies, unlike the standard English definition of “signification” which “depends for order and coherence on the exclusion of unconscious associations which any given word yields at any given time, Signification luxuriates in the inclusion of the free play of these associative rhetorical and semantic relations.” Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 49.

Papa Jo Jones recalls how members of the early Basie band were expected to demonstrate their social validity upon joining the ensemble:

The Count Basie Orchestra was an *institution*...You're talking about CIA, FBI, or whatever: you were *screened* before you joined those kinds of bands. And see, once you got in there, that was you. I'll tell you how tight it was. See, if you took a man's place and he owed twenty dollars, you owed twenty. You owed his debt. You sittin' in his chair! "I did not..." Naw, you owed it! You got the seat: you owed it. [emphases original]<sup>427</sup>

Though this appears to be little more than rookie hazing on the surface, when one considers the fact that the men in the Basie Orchestra were likely well-practiced in the act of signaling one's self as a cultural insider via Signifyin(g) rhetoric, the policy Jones describes here may be understood as a rite of passage into a fraternity which had an immediate concern with protecting its members while touring across unfamiliar and unfriendly sectors of the country. Additionally, it also fostered a sense of stability for band members' personal situations; Jones continues: "If your wife needed an operation or you needed a half a ton of coal, they'd give you the money, and nobody ain't said when you'd pay it back. Pay a dollar here, fifty cents here. See, the environment you keep. Basie got into that environment."<sup>428</sup> Basie was indeed a long-time adherent to such a band-as-brotherhood mentality; as he remarked regarding his earliest break in large-ensemble jazz with Walter Page's Blue Devils: "Once a Blue Devil, always a Blue Devil."<sup>429</sup>

For the remainder of Basie's life, new members of his ensemble were required to prove and perform their validity in order to solidify their position in its ranks. Obviously,

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<sup>427</sup> Papa Jo Jones, *Riffide: The Life and Opinions of Papa Jo Jones, as told to Albert Murray*, ed. Paul Devlin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 47.

<sup>428</sup> Jones, *Riffide*, 47-48.

<sup>429</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 5.

matching the musical style and executing parts was essential, but as trombonist Fred Wesley recalls of his tenure from 1977-1978, “the Count Basie fraternity was stocked with a unique bunch of musicians who gelled, not only musically but also intellectually, philosophically, and socially, as well.”<sup>430</sup> If one did not fit into the group in any of these respects, their tenure in the Basie Orchestra would come to an unceremonious end:

There was a policy in the Basie band that nobody ever got fired. It was said that if you didn't fit the mold or didn't pick up the phrasings or didn't mesh socially with the other guys in the band, you would just fade away. One day, you would simply not be there anymore. I saw it happen to more than one really good player.<sup>431</sup>

This anecdote resembles the sort of performative, real-time criticisms associated with Signifyin(g) tropes; just as the rhetorical riffs in a game of the dozens are deemed (in)valid by a chorus of culturally familiar observers, the more initiated members of the Basie Orchestra collectively mediated their space by holding new members up to the group's social idiom. Moreover, such practices appear to have been in continual use from Jones' tenure during the 1930s and 1940s up through Wesley's brief stint with the band near the end of Basie's life, suggesting that the social rituals of the Basie Orchestra were a part of an intergenerational tradition. By enacting the ritual of confirming or rejecting each new member of their socio-musical fraternity, the tenured members of the ensemble Signified upon this social tradition by repeating and/or revising the social code of the group.

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<sup>430</sup> Fred Wesley Jr., *Hit Me, Fred: Recollections of a Sideman* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 216. Chris Sheridan. *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, Discographies 22, ed. Michael Gray (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 895-913.

<sup>431</sup> Wesley, *Hit Me, Fred*, 219-220.

At the same time, just as with the vernacular rhetoric of a Signifyin(g) trope, each repetition of the process of collective (in)validation resulted in variations on the extant social norms which reflected contemporaneous conditions. For instance, during the 1930s and 1940s when the certainty of the orchestra's financial situation varied from one job to the next, new members proved their validity in the band's social space by showing they were willing to endure the group's hardships by taking on their predecessors' debts; however, based on Wesley's recollections, it seems that during later decades, this performative trope fell by the wayside due to the ensemble's stable profitability:

The band traveled by airplane most of the time... There was rarely a hassle about money—you got paid on payday and received a draw on draw day. Never late, sometimes early. Extra money was automatic when the band was overseas or anywhere that the cost of living was higher.<sup>432</sup>

Taken together, these anecdotes from Jones and Wesley show how individual performances of social validity served as litmus tests for membership into the Basie “institution.” And, just as a player at a jam session revises a longstanding framework with contemporaneous musical rhetoric in order to signal their authenticity in the jazz space, the members of the Basie Orchestra utilized an intertemporal, intra-institutional dialogue of social critique which was greatly shaped by each generation's professional conditions. While not necessarily contingent on an individual's fluency in Signifyin(g) rhetorical tropes, the recollections of these Basie sidemen show that the primary social mechanism of a Signifyin(g) trope—the signaling of one's validity in a sociocultural space, and the discursive critique of that gesture by other initiates—was one of the guiding principles of the Count Basie Orchestra as a social entity.

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<sup>432</sup> Wesley, *Hit Me, Fred*, 216-217.

As I have argued, the resonances of Signifyin(g) rhetoric are apparent in both Black social dynamics and the performance of Black musical idioms. Indeed, just as the social institution of the Basie Orchestra was gatekept by an intergenerational system of testing individuals' validity, its music also functioned under such tropological processes. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates claims that jazz music such as Basie's is "structured around the idea of formal revision and implication."<sup>433</sup> In essence, he argues here that Black American music has the capacity to intertemporally Signify on a musical discourse and has the potential to be analyzed as an intertextual tapestry of musical allusion. Though Gates does not substantially expand upon this claim himself, it has invited some musicologists to analyze Black American music through similar tropological frameworks. Among the more robust musical answers to Gates's rhetorical theories comes from the prolific scholar of Black American music Samuel Floyd and his theory of Call-Response.

### **Calls and Responses in the Music of the Count Basie Orchestra**

Building from Gates's formulation of Signifyin(g) as a means to conceive of Black vernacular rhetoric at the broadest level, Floyd coined the term "Call-Response" in order to theorize about Black musical tropes:

The term Call-Response is used here to convey the dialogical, conversational character of black music. Its processes include the Signifyin(g), troping practices of the early calls, cries, whoops, and hollers of early Afro-American culture, which themselves were tropes from which evolved—through extension, elaboration, and refinement—varieties of the subtropes: call-and-response, elision, multimeter, pendular and blue thirds, and all the rest including interlocking rhythms, monosyllabic melodic expressions, instrumental imitations

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<sup>433</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 123.

of vocal qualities, parlando, and other processes that have a kind of implicative musical, as well as semantic, value.<sup>434</sup>

Essentially, Call-Response is to Black American vernacular music what Signifyin(g) is to Black American vernacular rhetoric: a “master...trope of tropes” which “implies revisions [or] responses...depending on their context.”<sup>435</sup> Floyd conveniently offers a concrete example of this process: “When pendular thirds are used in an original melodic statement, they may constitute a ‘call’; when they are used to comment on, or ‘trope,’ a preexisting use of such thirds, they can be said to constitute a ‘response,’ a Signifyin(g) revision.”<sup>436</sup>

The term Call-Response is potentially confusing given its nearness to the term “call-and-response”: a concept associated both with Afrodiasporic music (e.g. ring shouts and Sanctified Church heterophony) and that of the European tradition (e.g. responsorial or antiphonal realizations of Catholic chant). Floyd provides a valuable distinction between the two, given the potential for semantic. As he explains, “Call-Response must not be confused with call-and-response. The latter is a musical *device*, but Call-Response is meant here to name a musical *principle*—a dialogical musical rhetoric under which are subsumed all the musical tropological devices, including call-and-response.”<sup>437</sup> The dialogue at play with Call-Response is very similar to that of Signifyin(g); rather than a back-and-forth between musical or linguistic participants (i.e. call-and-response or the dozens, respectively), both theoretical frameworks constitute an intergenerational

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<sup>434</sup> Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., “Ring Shout! Literary Studies, Historical Studies, and Black Music Inquiry,” reprinted in *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History*, ed. Robert Walser (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 327.

<sup>435</sup> Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 95-96.

<sup>436</sup> Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 95-96.

<sup>437</sup> Floyd, “Ring Shout!” 327.

dialogue based in allusions to and revision of preexisting musical works, expressions, and devices. In this light, we may perceive many Black American musical tropes as a “Response” to the “Calls” of bygone generations of African Americans, even if said trope is not necessarily call-and-response.

Consider the Count Basie’s Orchestra’s landmark recording of “April in Paris” from the 1957 album of the same name. “April in Paris” had long been a jazz standard, having been rendered by innumerable musicians by the time Wild Bill Davis penned his arrangement for the Basie Orchestra. To expand a jazz standard into the context of a big band arrangement can intimate a high degree of respect for the original tune while also leveraging listeners’ familiarity with it. Unlike most other arrangements in the Basie repertoire, which usually begin with Basie setting the tempo on the piano, Davis’s “April in Paris” arrangement begins with a bright trumpet fanfare, recalling the sweeping overtures of American musicals such as *South Pacific* (1949) and *Gypsy* (1959) and innumerable contemporaneous Hollywood films. The arrangement grips the listener from the outset, ensuring that their attention is fully available when the melody is lushly stated by the saxophones in the ninth measure. Davis’s introduction serves to spotlight the familiar melody of “April in Paris,” placing it on a sonic pedestal as a piece of music worthy of such a grand revisional Response.

Later in the same recording, though, we see an example of how an allusion may not necessarily be a gesture of reverence. Following the showy introduction, the arrangement moves into a relatively conventional expression of the thirty-two-bar, ABCD-form melody. The saxophones homophonically play the melody alone during the A section and are then joined by the trombones’ counter-line in the B section. Then in the

bridge, trombonist Benny Powell lyrically plays the melody alone in the upper-middle register.<sup>438</sup> The melody in the final section is split in half, with the saxophone section leading into a full-ensemble texture for the final four measures. As a whole, Davis's arrangement of the melody represents traditional big band arranging practices, particularly the textural format of ensemble-ensemble-soloist-ensemble. Norms are dashed, however, at the beginning of the second chorus when trumpeter Thad Jones opens his half-chorus solo by exactly quoting the first three measures of the children's song "Pop Goes the Weasel." The irony of Jones' allusion lies in the highbrow, Broadway-esque framing of Davis's arrangement and the more idiomatic material in the second half of his solo, but the rhetorical significance of this trope would only be evident if listeners were already aware of the quoted material; were they not, the stilted gesture might have just sounded out of place. That Jones took this calculated risk suggests that he felt enough listeners would be familiar with the allusion for them to grasp the irony of the trope.

In recycling the preexisting musical material of "Weasel," Jones revised its meaning by ironically juxtaposing it with the canonicity of "April in Paris" and, more broadly, the New Testament Basie Orchestra's tuxedo-clad polish. Though allusion is indeed one of the tropes which Floyd subsumes within the theory of Call-Response, Jones's use of the trope occupies a curious space in Floyd's framework because he quotes something in his solo which is starkly outside the realm of Black American musical traditions. While many allusions may be considered Responses in Floyd's model, I argue that Jones's "Weasel" quote may be better understood as a Call due to the fact that it has

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<sup>438</sup> Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 402-404.

become nearly synonymous with the arrangement itself over the years; indeed, many trumpet players—myself included—opt to perform Jones’s entire sixteen-measure solo verbatim when performing Davis’s arrangement of “April in Paris.” From this perspective, the “Weasel” quote can be understood to be an intertemporal Call to which future performers may Respond.<sup>439</sup>

Another famous recording from the Basie Orchestra—Frank Foster’s “Blues in Hoss’ Flat”—exemplifies how Call-Response analyses place musical expressions from different times into dialogue with each other. First recorded on the 1959 album *Chairman of the Board*, “Hoss’ Flat” is a rollicking, up-tempo blues in Db major. Foster takes classic hallmarks of the early Basie style—compounding riffs, call-and-response across the wind sections, and a foregrounding of solo sections—and frames them within a tidy, well-paced arrangement which gives the illusion of an extremely well-rehearsed head chart. The linchpin of the arrangement is the trumpet soloist. For the second and third choruses, as well as the coda, the fourth trumpet player utilizes a plunger mute in order to achieve a sassy, vocalistic affect; Joe Newman masterfully fills this role on the *Chairman of the Board* recording. Though the distinct “wa-wa” sounds of plungers and derbies have become virtually synonymous with early-twentieth-century big band music, the practice comes from conscious efforts by Black musicians to evoke and imitate the sound of Black styles of vocalization. Through the lens of Call-Response, what appears at first

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<sup>439</sup> Similar claims may be made regarding other ironic allusions to Eurocentric music among jazz musicians. For example, many jazz musicians—particularly tenor saxophonists—have quoted the colloquially termed “Here comes the bride” melody from the “Bridal Chorus” of Wagner’s *Lohengrin*. Gene Ammons makes the allusion in “Blues Up and Down” from the 1961 album *Boss Tenors: Gene Ammons and Sonny Stitt*, and Dexter Gordon follows suit on the live recording of “Gingerbread Boy” from his 1977 album *Homecoming: Live at the Village Vanguard*.

glance to be just a nostalgic callback to an earlier style, reveals new, broader significance when viewed as a part of an intergenerational, tropological dialogue.

The extreme timbral flexibility of the plunger mute is perfectly suited for approximating the sound of a blues vocalist; indeed, the description of its sound—“wa-wa”—is onomatopoeic. Floyd communicates that this technique—essential to “Hoss Flat” and innumerable other works of the genre—is a Call-Response trope, in which “instrumental imitations of vocal qualities” signify upon the vocal roots of Black American music.<sup>440</sup> Brothers points out that brass players’ use of plunger-like mutes is traceable to New Orleans at the turn of the twentieth century, and a briefly-lived blues sub-genre known as “freak music”: “Beer buckets, toilet plungers, glasses, derby hats, coconuts, and kazoos combined with half valving, flutter tonguing, fake fingering, vibrato, growls, and subtle changes of tension in the lips” all served to evoke the hallmarks of the vocalized blues.<sup>441</sup> During the first decades of the twentieth century, the vocal evocations of “freak” instrumentalists were perceived as little more than novelty music and were often associated with the weird and bizarre. For example, as early as 1890, a “freak” ensemble was used to draw in curious customers to a New Orleans “Dime Museum.”<sup>442</sup> To many patrons, the sound of the music matched the ostensibly grotesque visuals which lay behind the doors of the “museum”; however, Brothers also points out that there is evidence which indicates that many Black Americans heard this so-called “freak” music in a very different way:

The virtuoso slide guitarist Robert Johnson...once played...for an audience in St. Louis. “His guitar seemed to talk—repeat and say words with him like no one else

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<sup>440</sup> Floyd, “Ring Shout!” 327.

<sup>441</sup> Brothers, *Louis Armstrong’s New Orleans*, 122.

<sup>442</sup> Brothers, *Louis Armstrong’s New Orleans*, 122-123.

in the world could,” said his traveling companion [blues singer and guitarist] Johnny Shines. In the middle of the St. Louis performance, Shines noticed that the room was totally quiet. He looked up to see everyone crying, men as well as women.<sup>443</sup>

Similarly, New Orleanian Mutt Carey describes fellow cornetist Joe “King” Oliver’s top-notch “freak” playing, echoing Shines’ story about Johnson’s vocalistic guitar style: ““Joe could make his horn sound like a holy roller meeting; God, what that man could do with his horn.””<sup>444</sup> From these anecdotes, we can see that “freak music” was anything but freakish to many Black listeners during this time. The vocalistic timbres carried with them the emotional weight of the blues and field cries after which they were modeled. While the emotional characters of “Hoss’ Flat” and Newman’s solo on the *Chairman of the Board* recording are certainly more celebratory than contemplative, these contextual revisions of the trope underline the way an allusionary Response may recycle it while also modifying its meaning.

Oliver’s legacy of vocalistic mute playing lives on in the realm of big bands. Indeed, James “Bubber” Miley—the most significant early practitioner of this trope in such an ensemble—was directly inspired by Oliver. In 1921, while on tour with Mamie Smith, the eighteen-year-old Miley heard Oliver at the Dreamland in Chicago, and it was a revelation for the youngster.<sup>445</sup> The emotional and rhetorical power of Oliver’s vocalistic techniques resonated with Miley, and he immediately began experimenting with a rubber toilet plunger, setting off on a musical journey which would help define the

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<sup>443</sup> Brothers, *Louis Armstrong’s New Orleans*, 123.

<sup>444</sup> Brothers, *Louis Armstrong’s New Orleans*, 123.

<sup>445</sup> Mark Tucker, *Ellington: The Early Years* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 101.

sound of the Duke Ellington Orchestra during his tenure and beyond.<sup>446</sup> Armed with the plunger, growls, and numerous other vocalistic extended techniques, Miley made his name as a featured soloist with the Washingtonians and the earliest iterations of the Duke Ellington Orchestra.<sup>447</sup>

Like Johnson and Oliver before him, Miley seems to have been mindful of the spiritual potential for the instrumental vocalization trope. Miley himself points out that the main theme from “Black and Tan Fantasy”—which he plays in plunger with a low, growling timbre—was inspired by a spiritual he heard his mother sing called “Hosanna.”<sup>448</sup> Crediting the recollection of Roger Pryor Dodge, Mark Tucker notes that this “Hosanna” melody was likely derived from the 1892 sacred song “The Holy City” by Stephen Adams.<sup>449</sup> Thus, Miley’s compositional and performative approaches to “Black and Tan Fantasy” were rooted in simultaneous references and allusions to multiple dimensions of Black American musical traditions. Miley synthesized the “freak” music of Oliver, with its capacity for allusion to emotional and spiritual history, the refined blues of Ellington’s compositional character, and his memories of his mother’s spiritual music—itsself a prism of cultural memory—and congealed each point of reference into one coherent musical expression. Moreover, while Miley’s style continues to be replicated, revised, and reimagined by performers, composers, and arrangers, the cultural

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<sup>446</sup> Charles Chamberlain notes that Miley’s successor in the Ellington Orchestra—Cootie Williams—also learned the plunger style and techniques from hearing New Orleans-based cornetists in his hometown of Mobile, Alabama. Charles Chamberlain, “Searching for ‘The Gulf Coast Circuit’: Mobility and Cultural Diffusion in the Age of Jim Crow, 1900-1930,” *Jazz Archivist* 14 (2000): 1-14. Brothers, *Louis Armstrong’s New Orleans*, 336.

<sup>447</sup> Tucker, *Ellington: The Early Years*, 101.

<sup>448</sup> Tucker, *Ellington: The Early Years*, 243.

<sup>449</sup> Dodge was a dancer who had performed with Miley. Tucker, *Ellington: The Early Years*, 307n.

constellation of his troping became embedded into the fabric of twentieth-century American music through the singularity of his voice. From this perspective, the extensive plunger-mute trumpet soloing in “Hoss’ Flat” may be interpreted in numerous new ways. While Newman ostensibly intended his realization of the trumpet solo in “Hoss’ Flat” to reflect the good-time blues stomping of 1930s Kansas City and the early Basie Orchestra, it may also be interpreted as a Response to a lineage of Calls passed between New Orleans “freak” musicians, ecstatic worshipers, a mother’s musical memory, and the Ellington aesthetic.

“April in Paris” and “Hoss’ Flat” both exemplify how various types of allusions may constitute both Calls and Responses in the context of big band arrangements and recorded trumpet solos. Additionally, based on Floyd’s writings on the troping of “riffing, shouting, driving, black big bands” such as Basie’s, I argue that Basie’s own piano style may be interpreted as an intertemporal, trans-Atlantic Response to African musical practices.<sup>450</sup> To Floyd, the head arrangements of the early Basie Orchestra specifically represented an adherence to this musical legacy:

These [head arrangement] constructions, similar to and reminiscent of African performance practice, consisted generally of a basic riff (read “time line”) against which other riffs and rhythmic-melodic figures would be set. The rhythmic result was usually a percussive and polyrhythmic overlapping of call-and-response patterns.<sup>451</sup>

The “time line” to which Floyd refers is explained by J. H. Kwabena Nketia in his study *The Music of Africa*. Nketia explains that African rhythmic divisions—whether they be duple or triple, slow or quick, and/or serve to articulate or obscure regular divisions—are

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<sup>450</sup> Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 168n.

<sup>451</sup> Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 168.

conceived through relating them to a fixed “time span”: essentially a block of real time.<sup>452</sup> Given the obvious challenges in keeping time in this manner, Nketia points out that “African traditions facilitate this process by externalizing the [time span]...The guideline which is related to the time span in this manner has come to be described as a *time line*. [emphasis original]”<sup>453</sup> While the time span is an unsounded duration of real time, the time line is a performed rhythm which anchors the rest of the music to the given time span.

In his reading of Nketia’s explanation of African rhythmic patterns, Floyd observes a clear parallel between the time line of African music and the “basic riff[s]” around which ensembles such as the Basie Orchestra formulated head arrangements. “It is against the time line,” Floyd states, “that the other instruments play the multilinear rhythms that yield...exciting interlocking, cross-rhythmic, and polyrhythmic configurations.”<sup>454</sup> While in the African tradition, the time line is typically performed via clapping or a bell, Floyd argues that the core riff of a head arrangement functions in much the same manner as the time line. In *The Power of Black Music*, he drives this point home with a quote from Old Testament Basie trombonist Dicky Wells:

Basie would start out and vamp a little, set a tempo, and call out ‘That’s it!’ He’d set a rhythm for the saxes first, and Earl Warren would pick that up and lead the saxes. Then he’d set one for the bones and we’d pick that up. Now it’s our rhythm against theirs. The third rhythm would be for the trumpets.<sup>455</sup>

Judging from this quotation, it is apparent that Floyd is rather liberal with his application of the concept of “time line” in the context of swing music. In Nketia’s definition, the

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<sup>452</sup> J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *The Music of Africa* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 125-131.

<sup>453</sup> Nketia, *The Music of Africa*, 131.

<sup>454</sup> Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 29.

<sup>455</sup> Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 167-168.

time line is a rhythmic pattern that is constantly played throughout a performance. But in Floyd's interpretation of Basie head arrangements, it is unclear what he claims precisely functions as the time line. The compounding riffs in the wind sections function against each other in clockwork fashion, yet none of them serve as the rhythmic keystone of the piece.

I contend that Basie's piano introductions may have been understood by the members of the orchestra to have served as something like a time line. Though not repeated continuously throughout arrangements, according to Wells, Basie's orally-transmitted arranging process was rooted in a vamp which would "set the tempo," serving very much the same purpose as an African time line. As Basie himself states in his autobiography, "the main thing about being the Chief is that you get to call the tunes. (And set the tempo. And the mood.)"<sup>456</sup> Floyd states that Basie's introductions typically "set the stage for what is to come."<sup>457</sup> Indeed, it is telling that Wells refers to each section's parts not as riffs but as rhythms, but it is not clear whether Wells or Basie were specifically aware of the parallels to African music to which Floyd refers. What is clear, however, is that the compounding riffs of the Basie head arrangements were perceived by some of his chief sidemen as primarily a rhythmic endeavor. In short, Basie's introductory material on head arrangements served as a springboard for the time line; once he had set the tempo and the rhythmic character, the time line continued on implicitly, beneath the surface of the ensemble's collective rhythmic counterpoint.<sup>458</sup> As

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<sup>456</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 382.

<sup>457</sup> Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 168.

<sup>458</sup> Gunther Schuller observed as much when he quipped: "Basie is a groovemaker [*sic*], not a melodymaker [*sic*]." Gunther Schuller, *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz 1930-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 253n.

such, Basie's piano introductions—one of his signature musical gestures—may be understood to be a Response to a long-standing African musical tradition.

### **History, Theory, and Memory: Expanding the Call-Response Framework**

A decade after Floyd published his Call-Response theory, Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr., endeavored to “push [it] further” in his book *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop*.<sup>459</sup> Ramsey states:

If we situate [Floyd's theory] more firmly in specific historical and social contexts, we can add nuance to the provocative Call-and-Response idea. By attending to the specific historical moment and social setting in which a music gesture appears, we avoid the appearance of reifying or ‘essentializing’ cultural expressions.<sup>460</sup>

Ramsey's holistically minded revision of Floyd's theory extends a lineage of tropological theorization which is traceable back to Gates. Much like the intergenerational dialogue between temporally separated musicians, one could say that Floyd's theory Signifies on Gates's, and is, in turn, Signified upon by Ramsey's. With this in mind, I synthesize all three of these voices in my own analysis by using Ramsey's broad, interdisciplinary interpretation of Floyd's Call-Response theory to analyze a musical work which served as Gates's primary example of musical Signifyin(g) in *The Signifying Monkey*: Count Basie's significantly titled piano composition “Signifying.”

Ramsey's Call-Response-inspired methodology in *Race Music* negotiates a pathway between blues-centric theories and late-twentieth-century critiques of them. Much like the blues theorizations of Houston A. Baker and Albert Murray, theories such

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<sup>459</sup> Ramsey, *Race Music*, 21.

<sup>460</sup> Ramsey, *Race Music*, 21.

as Signifyin(g) and Call-Response foreground the cohesiveness of the Afro-diasporic lineage; Ramsey points out that contemporaneous scholars such as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Hazel Carby, and Sherry B. Ortner, have, from various perspectives, “sought to replace monolithic depictions of black culture with diverse ones that take into account the full spectrum of black life in America.”<sup>461</sup> Additionally, Ramsey points out that works on Black music by Higginbotham, Ronald Radano, and Ann du Cille “warn us against overemphasizing the blues...in black culture.”<sup>462</sup> Notably, Radano claims that theories such as Signifyin(g) perpetuate “romantic myths of music’s super-structural capacities without acknowledging how these myths had developed out of the racialist language of folk authenticity.”<sup>463</sup> But Ramsey retorts: “I think it is fruitful to recognize the importance of the blues modality in black culture...Can we, somehow, acknowledge the influence of blues modality in black music history as singular and ever-present, yet not precluding other possibilities?”<sup>464</sup>

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<sup>461</sup> Race music, 23. Carby has critiqued the centrality of Black middle-class narratives in histories of urban Black life. Hazel Carby, “Policing the Black Woman’s Body in an Urban Context,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Summer 1992): 738-755. Higginbotham observes that considerations which foreground socioeconomic conditions have problematically homogenized the experiences of Black men and women. E. B. Higginbotham “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” *Signs* 17, no. 2 (Winter 1992): 251-274. Ortner asserts that studies of race and power structures insufficiently focus on ethnography, resulting in an incomplete picture of intraracial power dynamics. Sherry B. Ortner, “Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, no. 1 (January 1995): 173-193.

<sup>462</sup> Race music, 46. DuCille argues that a disproportionate focus on the blues has overshadowed literary perspectives not based in the Black vernacular. Ann duCille, “Blue Notes on Black Sexuality: Sex and the Texts of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larson,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no. 3 (January 1993): 418-444. Higginbotham observes that religious music and recordings of religious sermons constitute as much a part of Black authenticity as does the blues idiom. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “Rethinking Vernacular Culture: Black Religion and Race Records in the 1920s and 1930s,” in *The House That Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Pantheon, 1997).

<sup>463</sup> Ronald M. Radano, “Soul Texts and the Blackness of Folk,” *Modernism/Modernity* 2, no.1 (1995): 73, quoted in Ramsey, *Race Music*, 45.

<sup>464</sup> Ramsey, *Race Music*, 46.

In *Race Music*, Ramsey shows that such a methodology is both possible and highly valuable. His central question deals with musical meaning, specifically “the ways in which meaning is achieved in various styles of African American music.”<sup>465</sup> Ramsey’s implicit assertion that meaning is a thing which is “achieved” echoes one of the most important elements of his theory: that music “performs...cultural work” in Black American “sites of cultural memory” which Ramsey terms “community theaters.”<sup>466</sup> While Call-Response is useful for linearly tracing the Afro-diasporic heritage of Black American musical tropes, Ramsey’s study of community theaters concerns what a certain musical expression means or meant to people at a place and point time. In order to create as sharp an image as possible for this so-called “living photograph,” Ramsey casts a wide intellectual net, drawing on a variety of research methods which “cluster into three broad modes of investigation: history, memory, and theory.” For my analysis of “Signifying,” I adopt this trifurcated model to complement the sources I have at my disposal, beginning with the historical context of the album *Kansas City Shout*, on which “Signifying” appears. I point out that Ramsey’s community theater analyses are heavily rooted in his own personal experiences as a Black man with a Black family. I do not possess such memories which are necessary to reflectively theorize about Black community theaters, and it would be disingenuous to attempt to do so. Therefore, my use of Ramsey’s framework is instead grounded in a wide array of primary and secondary research.

*Kansas City Shout* was recorded on April 7-8, 1980 in Hollywood, California.<sup>467</sup> It was produced by longtime jazz producer and promoter Norman Granz on his

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<sup>465</sup> Ramsey, *Race Music*, 3.

<sup>466</sup> Ramsey, *Race Music*, 4.

<sup>467</sup> Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 932.

independent jazz label Pablo Records. Granz had been a champion of the New Testament Basie Orchestra since the early 1950s, disseminating the new Basie band's music nationally via his earlier record companies: the Clef, Norgran, and Verve labels.<sup>468</sup>

Granz's role as an impresario during the tentative beginnings of the New Testament Basie Orchestra was extremely valuable; Verve records such as *Count Basie Swings*, *Joe Williams Sings* (1956), *April in Paris* (1956), and *Count Basie at Newport* (1957) solidified the post-1952 band's status as a tightly rehearsed, arrangement-driven big band.

While Basie's albums with Verve from the 1950s are generally polished, full-ensemble studio recordings, his outings with the Pablo label beginning in 1972 achieved a completely different effect informed significantly by Granz's experiences producing and recording the jam session-oriented Jazz at the Philharmonic (JATP) concerts.<sup>469</sup> After producing Basie Orchestra tours in 1970, 1971, and 1972, Granz organized a concert at the Civic Auditorium in Santa Monica, California which was modeled directly after JATP.<sup>470</sup> Granz recorded the concert, which featured the full Basie Orchestra alongside small group jams with special guests such as Tommy Flanigan, Roy Eldridge, Harry "Sweets" Edison, and Ray Brown along with the Granz-managed Oscar Peterson and Ella Fitzgerald. The resulting record was the first for the Pablo label and set the stage for numerous subsequent Basie records such as *Basie Jam* (1973), *The Bosses* (1973), *Basie and Zoot* (1975), and *Kansas City Seven* (1980) which all feature small groups and

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<sup>468</sup> Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 326.

<sup>469</sup> Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 791.

<sup>470</sup> Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 791.

variously foreground the stylistic looseness, solo-centrism, and blues shouting of 1930s Kansas City. Sheridan points out:

[B]y 1979, Basie was leading a band where the emphasis had...switched away from arrangements and where soloists were beginning to assume the more dominant role. That is not to say that, with the exception of Basie himself, any was the equal of [Buck] Clayton, [Harry 'Sweets'] Edison, [Dicky] Wells, [Herschel] Evans, or [Lester] Young, but the wheel had turned almost full circle.<sup>471</sup>

In short, during the final years of Basie's life, written arrangements—which were the hallmark of the New Testament Basie orchestra—took a back seat to the soloist-driven, orally-transmitted “head charts” that had defined the orchestra's performative approach during the 1930s. *Kansas City Shout* neatly falls into this category; Sheridan reports that Granz's goal with this record was to “recreate the Sunday Dances of '30s Kansas City.”<sup>472</sup>

The specificity of time and place evoked by this album—1930s Kansas City—represented more than just nostalgia for a bygone era. Frankly, Basie was seventy-five years old when he recorded *Kansas City Shout*, and his health was declining sharply. To compound arthritis, viral infections, and minor heart attacks, a nasty case of shingles forced him to cancel a weeks-long tour of Japan just a few months before *Kansas City Shout* was recorded.<sup>473</sup> With the end of the bandleader's life seemingly imminent, a look back to where it all began was a timely endeavor for Basie and complemented the JATP-esque style of Pablo Records at that time. Bruce Ricker's 1979 documentary *The Last of the Blue Devils: The Kansas City Jazz Story* showcases a broader interest in exploring the

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<sup>471</sup> Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 930.

<sup>472</sup> Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 932.

<sup>473</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 378-380.

roots of the city's jazz tradition while its originators were still capable of recounting it from their perspectives. Though shot during 1974 when Basie still had decent mobility, Leonard Feather's thoughts on Big Joe Turner's appearance in the film foreshadow the tone which would surround Basie when his own declining health became visibly apparent:

[T]he first words sung in the documentary...are intoned in the stark, hollow voice of Big Joe Turner, as he was called during his days as a singing bartender in the pre-repeal Kansas City of Tom Pendergast. Today he is Huge Joe Turner, walking with a cane but still alert enough to reminisce, and strong enough [in] voice to recapture some of the special magic that brings to life an era never preserved in a motion picture.<sup>474</sup>

Critical accounts from around the time *Kansas City Shout* was recorded evidence the common connection drawn between Basie's stylistic pivot and his advanced age. In the October, 1980 issue of *Jazz Journal*, Lee Jeske refers to Basie as "one of the last of those Kansas City rascals" before reassuring his readers that Basie was "as alive and charming as ever."<sup>475</sup> Writing for the *New York Times* in 1980, John S. Wilson similarly observed that, despite suffering a heart attack in 1976, "Mr. Basie, even at the age of 75, shows no signs of retiring or slowing down."<sup>476</sup> Significantly, Wilson also remarks in this article that Basie had recently been playing in small group settings that resembled the off-the-cuff, riffing style of his Old Testament ensemble.<sup>477</sup>

In order to accomplish the nostalgic pathos of *Kansas City Shout*, Granz and Basie included vocal blues numbers by Big Joe Turner and Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson,

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<sup>474</sup> Leonard Feather, "Moten+Basie+Turner+Bird: Documenting the KC Blues: Leonard Feather," *Los Angeles Times*, March 2, 1980.

<sup>475</sup> Quoted in Sheridan, *Count Basie*, 935.

<sup>476</sup> John S. Wilson, "After 22 Years Village Gate is Up for the Count: Village Gate Up for Count," *New York Times*, January 18, 1980, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>477</sup> Wilson, "Village Gate Up for Count."

both alumni of the Basie Orchestra from its Kaycee heyday. Six of the record’s tracks feature Turner or Vinson singing old-school shout blues songs, while only five numbers feature the winds in full force. All eleven tracks on the aptly-named album are twelve-bar major blues forms, and—with the exception of Vinson’s alto saxophone feature “Cherry Red”—each one is characterized by the looseness and spontaneity of the orally arranged, soloist-driven music associated with Basie during the 1930s and 1940s. Interspersed among the vocal features and full ensemble numbers are four tracks that feature the rhythm section alone: “Blues For Joel,” “Blues Au Four,” “Standing on the Corner,” and “Signifying.”

SECTION	CHARACTER	TIME STAMP
Introduction	out of time, ending with sustained Eb	0:00-0:07
Time line	sets tempo and groove	0:08-0:11
Chorus 1	“Basie” style	0:12-0:31
Chorus 2	two-note ascending patterns, big band-like chords	0:32-0:51
Chorus 3	stride, disrupting Eb, blues	0:52-1:12
Chorus 4	two-note homophony	1:13-1:32
Chorus 5	repeated blues riff	1:33-1:53
Chorus 6	right-hand octaves, single-note melodies	1:54-2:14
Chorus 7	dissonant, abstract “shout” chorus	2:15-2:34
Chorus 8	“Basie” style	2:35-3:00

Figure 1 – “Signifying” form with section descriptions.



Despite the majority of the introduction lacking metrical clarity, Basie still effectively sets the piece's time line, which leads into the first chorus.

The time line riff sounds intentionally hokey. If it concluded a prototypically metrical Basie time line, one might consider it to be uninspired; however, since it follows such an abstract gesture in "Signifying," its marked contrast seems intentionally ironic, much like the framing of Thad Jones's "Pop Goes the Weasel" allusion. As one waits with anticipation to see how Basie will follow up such an unusual expression, Basie seems to musically wink at them in this moment and brings the listener back to familiar aesthetic terrain. It is as if Basie deliberately begins his history of jazz piano with an assertion about himself: that he could snap even the most unsettled music into place with one simple gesture. This interpretation of Basie's introduction to "Signifying" slightly contradicts Gates's summary as it implies that the piece contains a level meaning which extends beyond a simple chronological progression of musical styles. Rather, I claim that "Signifying" may be interpreted as a history of these styles told through the revisional Responses of Basie's piano idiolect.

Significantly, the E-flat of the introduction's concluding gesture is recycled and embedded into the chord changes of the tune itself in the form of a structural

reharmonization.<sup>479</sup> Invariably, the chord of the ninth bar of the form is an E-flat 7 chord, which functions as a tritone substitution of the typical ii chord (Amin7).<sup>480</sup>

G7	G7	G7	G7
C7	(C#dim7)	G7	E7(b9)
<b>Eb7</b>	D7	G7	G7

Figure 3 – “Signifying” general harmonic scheme. Transcription by the author.

The lens of Call-Response helps answer a logical question: Why does the nostalgia-driven album *Kansas City Shout* conclude with a tune whose harmonic character is anachronistic to the context of 1930s Kansas City?<sup>481</sup> Further complicating Gates’s position that “Signifying” is a literal representation of the development of jazz piano styles, I contend that the harmonic framework—which is set in constant motion by the time line—constitutes an additional layer of intertemporal engagement which synthesizes with the piece’s intertextual, inter-stylistic character. The musical history of “Signifying” proceeds chorus by chorus and style by style, but all the while, each stage is also defined in part by the piece’s more contemporary harmonic signature. Therefore, “Signifying” acts as more than a one-way timeline. It is a snapshot of the two-way, dialogic cycle

<sup>479</sup> That a blues composition by Count Basie—a musician whose career was defined by the blues as much as anything—should contain such a striking harmonic deviation at its structural level is indeed conspicuous, however it is not unheard of in Basie’s later repertoire. “Blues For Stephanie”—a tightly-arranged instrumental composed around 1979 by bassist John Clayton—is a twelve-bar blues with the same ninth-bar tritone substitution as “Signifying.” Sheridan, *Count Basie*, 918.

<sup>480</sup> In jazz, tritone substitutions generally result in a dominant major-minor seventh chord even if the original chord differs in quality.

<sup>481</sup> Scott DeVeaux observes that Coleman Hawkins’ use of a tritone substitution in his 1939 recording of “Body and Soul” was still relatively unfamiliar to many listeners at that point. Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 104-110.

through which jazz and the blues are revised through repetition; as Basie Responds to the Calls of past musical genres and performers in “Signifying,” he also reframes them within the contemporaneous aesthetic conditions of the late-twentieth century.

After Basie sets the metrical, harmonic, and rhetorical aesthetic of “Signifying” via the time line riff, he and the rest of the trio—Cleveland Eaton on bass and Duffy Jackson on drums—snap into a light, buoyant 4/4 swing feel: a style which Eaton and Jackson maintain throughout the entire piece.<sup>482</sup> From the outset, “Signifying” seems to resemble more of a temporally liquid musical memoir than a strict history textbook; rather than starting with the earliest piano styles, Basie’s first chorus is characterized by the sort of minimalist, upper-register, single-note playing he was famous for at the time he made the recording.<sup>483</sup> In the next chorus, Basie’s style suddenly shifts to the early jazz style which echoes Fats Waller, a close friend and mentor to Basie. For the first eight measures, Basie plays ascending patterns in a two-note homophonic texture highly reminiscent of the way Waller states the melody on his famous 1935 recording of “Honeysuckle Rose.” Basie’s allusion may constitute a Response to Waller’s Call, because Basie revises this older texture: in the first measure of this chorus, Basie punctuates the two-note texture with a big band-like chord in the right hand on the “and” of beat four, resulting in the older solo piano style being placed into an interstylistic dialogue with a large-ensemble swing aesthetic.

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<sup>482</sup> Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 932.

<sup>483</sup> Perhaps coincidentally, the prologue of Basie’s autobiography *Good Morning Blues* similarly sets up the book with a reflective meditation on Basie’s point of view at the end of his life. For more on the narrative flexibility of this autobiography, see chapter two of this dissertation.

The third chorus begins with perhaps the most stylistically obvious allusion in the entire piece. For the first five measures, Basie clearly evokes the two-handed stride approach he learned from Waller, Willie “The Lion” Smith, James P. Johnson, and others during his early career. But Basie frustrates the spritely, staccato sound of this early-twentieth-century style in the sixth measure by suddenly interrupting it with a loud, jarring Eb in the left hand. This dissonance lingers for a few beats before Basie concludes the chorus with two-handed unison blues gestures which severely contrast the preceding Harlem stride style.

The stylistic juxtaposition in this chorus resists a Call-Response analysis based solely on my own observations of the recording. Thus, in the spirit of Ramsey’s analytical methodology, I turn here to Basie’s memories in order to flesh out deeper insights. Throughout *Good Morning Blues*, Basie conveys that he was often intimidated by pianists who were more technically proficient and/or more musically literate than him. For example, while describing a dazzling left-handed pianist known as Seminole he encountered in Tulsa around 1927, Basie recalls that he “had never been warned about him.”<sup>484</sup> Basie laments this fact; had he known that Seminole “had a left hand like everybody else had a right hand,” he would have actively avoided him in order to preserve his ego.<sup>485</sup> Basie’s first brush with Art Tatum reflects his experience with Seminole. While passing through Ohio with the Bennie Moten Orchestra, Basie went into a bar and began playing an unoccupied piano. Little did he know, this establishment was the main hangout of Tatum, and the “keyboard monster,” as Basie refers to him, was

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<sup>484</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 9.

<sup>485</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 9.

merely taking a break.<sup>486</sup> “I went over there and started bothering that piano,” Basie remembers, implying his ostensible unworthiness to compete with Tatum.<sup>487</sup> Tatum returned and resumed playing after Basie had finished: “[It was] just like when a cocky boxer in the gyms shows off, sparring around, and when he looked up, he saw Joe [Louis] coming through the ropes... ‘I could have told you,’ one of the girls at the bar said. ‘Why didn’t you, baby?’ I asked. ‘Why didn’t you?’”<sup>488</sup>

According to *Good Morning Blues*, Basie consistently avoided circumstances that would highlight elements of his musical abilities which he felt were deficient. The left-handed wizardry of Seminole and the all-time greatness of Tatum were enough to make Basie uneasy in cutting competitions with other stride pianists. Additionally, Basie was intimidated by the musical literacy of Fletcher Henderson. Basie recalls substituting for Henderson as the cinema organist at the Eblon Theater in Kansas City around 1928:

[Henderson] heard me on the organ and wrote out a few little things he wanted me to play ...and he gave me an envelope with the music on it and went to work [at the Pla More Ballroom]. Then that night...he asked me about it.

‘Did you play it?’

‘I didn’t,’ I said.

‘Why not?’

‘There were too many sharps in there.’ I said. I wasn’t about to mess with all them sharps.<sup>489</sup>

Basie tells another similar story from about a year later when Basie heard Henderson’s orchestra at the Roseland Ballroom in New York. Sitting “on a little step right on the side

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<sup>486</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 140.

<sup>487</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 140.

<sup>488</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 140.

<sup>489</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 110.

of the bandstand,” Basie was in awe of Henderson’s polished ensemble.<sup>490</sup> Henderson urgently beckoned Basie to sit in for him at the piano, claiming that he had some business which needed his immediate attention:

“Go on and play,” he said again, and he walked away. I got up there and looked at the sheet music on the piano *and everything I saw was in D or B-natural or something like that!* So I just got right back down and sat on those little steps where I had been in the first place. Then I realized that Fletcher could see every move I had made because he was looking out through the window of [the] control booth and he was laughing his can off. That band played some hard keys. I guess that’s why they sounded so good.<sup>491</sup>

Taken together, Basie’s memories of the technical and musical brilliance of these three pianists can offer a new line of insight into the stylistically bifurcated third chorus of “Signifying.” In Responding to the Harlem stride style, Basie’s revisional commentary may be understood to be centered around his frustrations with the technically and musically demanding idiom; he plays the stride style briefly, brusquely destroys the aesthetic with the bomb of the Eb, and then completes the chorus with the bluesy riffing style which became synonymous with his name. This is not a parody of the stride idiom; indeed, he renders it convincingly and sincerely for the first five measures of the chorus. Rather, we might interpret this chorus of “Signifying” as a Response to the Calls of stride masters because it seems to convey a certain degree of commentary vis-à-vis Basie’s unique personal experiences with the idiom.

Basie returns to the simple two-note homophony in the fourth chorus before turning to a repeated blues riff aesthetic in the fifth chorus. The compounding repetition of a single blues riff was essential to the head charts which Basie had created as far back

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<sup>490</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 134.

<sup>491</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 134.

as his tenure with the Bennie Moten Orchestra, so it is significant that, in the sixth chorus, he turns to a combination of right-hand octaves and single-note melodies: a common approach for Basie when playing medium-tempo numbers during his tenure with Moten.<sup>492</sup> Basie recalls in *Good Morning Blues* that being hired by the Moten Orchestra was the biggest achievement of his entire career.<sup>493</sup> Considering Basie's memories of musical intimidation, which he ostensibly expresses in the stride-oriented third chorus, we might view the fifth and sixth choruses as a heroic triumph over such difficulties; despite perceiving shortcomings in his own playing, Basie negotiated a place in the musical landscape by leaning into his strengths, rather than obsessing over his weaknesses.<sup>494</sup> From this perspective, we might interpret the fifth and sixth choruses of "Signifying" as Basie's Response to the musical tropes in which he himself found comfort and confidence as a fledgling pianist.

The climax of "Signifying" comes in the seventh chorus. Leading out of the preceding chorus, Basie plays a hemiola pattern which builds momentum and crescendos until the downbeat of what is essentially a penultimate shout chorus. But unlike the shout choruses of the Basie Orchestra, which generally gain their high energy from swinging, homophonic riffs in the wind sections, the shout chorus of "Signifying" is brash, dissonant, and rhythmically oblique. Basie alternates between heavy "bomb" gestures in the left hand—chords, open fifths, minor seconds, and unresolved leading tones—with densely voiced chordal responses in the upper register, resulting in a relatively avant-

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<sup>492</sup> This approach may be heard in the 1932 recordings of "Moten Swing" and "The Only Girl I Ever Loved." For recording information, see Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 15-16.

<sup>493</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 383.

<sup>494</sup> For more on Basie and heroic narratives, see chapter two.

garde sound which contrasts greatly with the older styles that lead up to it. Though Basie's recording projects during the 1970s and 1980s were significantly shaped by the nostalgic character of Granz's Pablo label, Basie occasionally recorded strikingly modern-sounding records during this period: most notably, the cultural concept album *Afrique* (1970) on the Flying Dutchman label, which featured cutting-edge arrangements by Oliver Nelson, and compositions by contemporary artists Pharoah Sanders ("Japan") and Albert Ayler ("Love Flower").<sup>495</sup> Remarking to Stanley Dance during the *Afrique* recording session, Basie intimates that he valued looking to the future as much as to the past: "You can't stand still. You have to try new things."<sup>496</sup> With this perspective in mind, it is possible that Basie may not have been attempting to evoke any contemporary styles per se in his abstract shout chorus on "Signifying"; instead, I interpret its character to be Basie's attempt at a completely fresh and unheard-of piano aesthetic. As a whole, then, "Signifying" may be understood as a Responsive history of Black American piano styles which also extends forward as a Call to future generations of musicians.

The eighth and final chorus resembles the first one, bookending "Signifying" with the simple, melody-driven aesthetic most generally associated with Basie. Perhaps this is itself a bit of Signifyin(g) humor, with Basie proceeding as if he was completely unfazed by the *sturm und drang* of the dramatic shout chorus. More broadly, though, I feel that the musical history of "Signifying" should be interpreted as one which—like the various

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<sup>495</sup> Scott Yanow writes that *Afrique* is "certainly the most modern" of any Basie album. Scott Yanow, *All Music Guide to Jazz: The Definitive Guide to Jazz Music*, eds. Vladimir Bogdanov, Chris Woodstra, and Stephen Thomas Erlewine (San Francisco: Backbeat, 2002), 79. Richard Cook and Brian Morton confirm this assessment, albeit in a negative review, calling *Afrique* "not great" and a "foolhardy [attempt] to 'update' Basie." Richard Cook and Brian Morton, *The Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD*, seventh edition (New York: Penguin, 2004), 111.

<sup>496</sup> Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 772.

styles within the piece—is contained within Basie’s memory at the time he recorded it around 1980. “Signifying” is in a constant state of temporal flux, so it is as if it serves more as a piece of oral history, expressed through Basie’s musical idiolect. As such, it seems to be a perfectly curated conclusion to a recording project that sought to capture the sound of a bygone era of jazz. *Kansas City Shout* does not end with a barnburner or a popular hit. In the words of Gates: “Disclosure...is never-ending; closure, on the other hand, simply does not exist until one’s death.”<sup>497</sup> “Signifying” almost seems to fade the album out on this perpetually recycled mode of Black American musical expression.

## Conclusion

To quote Ramsey again, Black American culture is inextricably linked to “community theaters”: social spaces ranging from the church to the home, the public to the private. By considering this context when analyzing works of Black American music, memories coalesce to form “living photographs, rich pools of experiences, and a cultural poetics upon which theoretical and analytical principles can be based.”<sup>498</sup> In this chapter, I applied Signifyin(g) and Call-Response analyses in order to demonstrate how social and musical meaning was activated in the community theater of the Basie Orchestra. In doing so, I have shown that the social and musical dynamics of the Basie Orchestra operated within similar discursive parameters. Moreover, in the context of the music itself, works such as “April in Paris,” “Hoss’ Flat,” and “Signifying” may be analyzed as singular expressions within an intertemporal critical dialogue between contemporary and bygone

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<sup>497</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 35.

<sup>498</sup> Ramsey, *Race Music*, 4.

musicians, melding the often disparate discourses of jazz performance and jazz scholarship.

## CHAPTER 4

### “EMPTINESS OF CONTENT”: NAVIGATING EUROCENTRIC PERSPECTIVES ON COUNT BASIE

“Jazz is America’s classical music.”<sup>499</sup> From the 1980s onward, this sentiment—plainly voiced by American pianist and music educator Billy Taylor—has become a rallying cry for many who, to quote Tom Arnold-Forster, desire an “upbeat” telling of the music’s history, in which “appealing narratives of art and nation subsume sticky questions of race.”<sup>500</sup> The contemporaneous philosophies of Wynton Marsalis and Stanley Crouch—both heavily influenced by the writings of Albert Murray—reflected Grover Sales’ description of jazz as a “miraculous cathedral” for all Americans.<sup>501</sup> This conceptualization of jazz has been extensively criticized as well, with many scholars echoing Scott DeVeaux’s claim that such an idea framed the music with “a kind of deadening uniformity of cultural meaning.”<sup>502</sup> This discourse circles a basic question which is essential to analyses of jazz expressions: to what degree should the music’s lineage be attributed to the traditions of the African diaspora versus those of western Europe? As I showed in the previous chapter, theories derived from Afrodiasporic

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<sup>499</sup> William “Billy” Taylor, “Jazz: America’s Classical Music,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1986): 21.

<sup>500</sup> Tom Arnold-Forster, “Dr. Billy Taylor, ‘America’s Classical Music,’ and the Role of the Jazz Ambassador,” *Journal of American Studies* 51, no. 1 (2017), 117.

<sup>501</sup> Grover Sales, *Jazz: America’s Classical Music* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1984), 4, quoted in Arnold-Forster, “Dr. Billy Taylor,” 117-118.

<sup>502</sup> Scott DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography,” in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 505. For more scholarly critiques of the “jazz as America’s classical music” paradigm, see: David Ake, *Jazz Matters: Sound, Place, and Time since Bebop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 5. Arnold-Forster, “Dr. Billy Taylor.” Mervyn Cooke, “Jazz among the Classics, and the Case of Duke Ellington,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz*, eds. Mervyn Cooke and David Horn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 153-174. John Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 13. Gary Giddens, *Visions of Jazz: The First Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 587.

traditions such as Signifyin(g) and Call-Response are highly valuable when analyzing the intertemporal, referential tropologies at the core of Black American music; but are attempts to synthesize the aesthetic philosophies traceable to Europe and Africa tantamount to what Amiri Baraka referred to as a “dilution of [the] Afro-American musical tradition”?<sup>503</sup>

In this chapter, I address these questions by examining the Eurocentric analytical methodologies employed by Gunther Schuller: one of the most prolific twentieth-century voices in jazz discourse. Specifically, Schuller heavily prioritized compositions and improvised solos in his studies of jazz, as they are particularly conducive to the sort of formalist score analysis he so vocally championed. In turn, though, Schuller was extremely dismissive of jazz works which do not fit neatly into this value system. Notable in this regard are Schuller’s diminishing critiques of the Basie Orchestra’s earliest recordings in his book *The Swing Era*. While Samuel A. Floyd Jr. was highly successful in applying the theories of Signifyin(g) and Call-Response to Schuller’s existing analysis of Jelly Roll Morton’s 1926 recording of “Black Bottom Stomp,” I claim that this useful coalescence of Black American and European perspectives was only possible because the work in question incidentally fit into Schuller’s Eurocentric value system in that it was—by his account—notated on a score by a singular composer. Head arrangements, on the other hand, occupy a liminal space on the margins of Schuller’s system of evaluation; as a result, he often regarded such works as little more than decoration for the ostensibly more significant expressions of great soloists. Due to

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<sup>503</sup> Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, 1963, reprint (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), 229.

this fact, the legacy of the Old Testament Count Basie Orchestra—the archetypes of Swing Era head arrangements—has been significantly shaped by Schuller’s widely circulated misunderstanding of its music.<sup>504</sup> Despite scholars’ substantial critiques of formalistic perceptions of jazz over the course of the past thirty years, the methodologies of individuals such as Schuller persist in jazz performance circles. Thus, this chapter builds upon the critical impetus of the New Jazz Studies scholarly paradigm while also providing practitioners with new ways of thinking and talking about Basie’s music.

As I show in the first section of this chapter, Schuller’s formalist analytical perspectives do indeed have the capacity to resonate with Afrodiasporic theories. But, I argue that such culturally pluralistic analyses only achieve synergy when the music fits into the Eurocentric frame in the first place: a point which echoes Floyd’s assertion that the more African-derived a musical expression, the less useful are European analytical methods.<sup>505</sup> Following my discussions of Schuller’s methodologies and his and Floyd’s synthesized analyses of “Black Bottom Stomp,” I apply Signifyin(g) and Call-Response to Schuller’s damning summary of the Basie Orchestra’s 1937 recording of “Honeysuckle Rose.”<sup>506</sup> In doing so, I show that such Afrodiasporic methodologies may

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<sup>504</sup> For example, in his book *The Jazz Tradition*, Martin Williams—who depended greatly on Schuller’s musical expertise while writing it—conflates the legacies of Count Basie and Lester Young in his chapter “Count Basie and Lester Young: Style Beyond Swing.” Martin Williams, *The Jazz Tradition*, 1970, reprint (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 107-119.

<sup>505</sup> Samuel A. Floyd Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 261.

<sup>506</sup> Count Basie and His Orchestra, “Honeysuckle Rose,” recorded January 21, 1937, Dec 1141, 10” 78.

both shed new light on the work's significances as well as critique Schuller's problematically limited framing of the Basie Orchestra.<sup>507</sup>

### **Gunther Schuller's Analytical Methodology**

Described by John Gennari as a “musical polymath,” Gunther Schuller was an accomplished performer and composer in both Western classical music and jazz, and his tenures in leadership positions at esteemed institutions such as the New England Conservatory of Music and the Tanglewood Berkshire Music Center solidified his status as one of the most highly respected and prolific intellectuals in the twentieth-century American musical discourse.<sup>508</sup> Schuller's profound esteem for individual compositional brilliance heavily shaped his analyses of jazz works. As Benjamin Givan observes: “[Schuller's] years performing under many of the twentieth century's greatest conductors at the [Metropolitan Opera] instilled in him an enduring reverence for notated musical scores, which he eventually came to regard as ‘sacred document[s].’”<sup>509</sup> In a review of

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<sup>507</sup> Mark Tucker performed a similar critique of André Hodier's negative summary of Basie's piano style from *Toward Jazz*. Though Tucker does not cite the works of Floyd or Gates, his critiques of Hodier's methodology substantially resonate with the Signifyin(g) humor and tropological references which I address in both this chapter and the previous one. Writing about the Basie Orchestra's 1939 recording of “Twelfth Street Rag,” Tucker writes: “After a deliberately old-fashioned introduction, Basie states the theme with exaggerated squareness as Jo Jones adds “period” breaks on wood blocks. Then in the second chorus Basie and his rhythm section give an updated, Swing Era response to ragtime[...]Basie changes accompaniment patterns with remarkable speed and ease, throwing a glance at his own styles past and present.” Mark Tucker, “Count Basie and the Piano That Swings the Band,” *Popular Music* 5 (1985): 67.

<sup>508</sup> John Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 224.

<sup>509</sup> Benjamin Givan, “Gunther Schuller and the Challenge of Sonny Rollins: Stylistic Context, Intentionality, and Jazz Analysis,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 67, no. 1 (2014): 169. Givan quotes here from Schuller's critical work on twentieth-century conductors, *The Compleat Conductor*. Gunther Schuller, *The Compleat Conductor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Schuller's critical look at twentieth-century conductors *The Compleat Conductor*, Leon Botstein echoes this assessment: "Schuller is firmly rooted in the image of the score as complete and sacred text...[He] assumes that the notated score, if one looks carefully enough, has within it all the implications of that intention. Right can be clearly distinguished from wrong."<sup>510</sup> Schuller upheld a commitment to artistic autonomy and formal integrity, which, Givan asserts, "ultimately places him within the philosophical orbit of high modernists such as...Milton Babbitt."<sup>511</sup> Richard Taruskin writes that musical intellectuals of this stripe adhere to a musical version of literary New Criticism which "decrees that the work of art is not to be described or valued for its effects (e.g., on an audience) or its human interest (e.g., with respect to its creator), but strictly on its own formal, quasi-mechanistic or quasi-organic terms."<sup>512</sup>

Such stringent standards for musical artistry resulted in Schuller having a complicated relationship with jazz compositions. He lavished praise on canonic jazz composers such as Duke Ellington, whom he compared to Beethoven, but he lamented that jazz "has produced preciously few composers (in the strictest sense of that term)."<sup>513</sup> Schuller concedes that the majority of the jazz repertoire is made up of original compositions, but he qualifies this point by saying that such works are virtually always "tunes based on standard chord progressions and forms."<sup>514</sup> "Composition in the stricter

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<sup>510</sup> Leon Botstein, "The Compleat Conductor," *Music Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 2.

<sup>511</sup> Givan, "Gunther Schuller," 170.

<sup>512</sup> Richard Taruskin, "The Limits of Authenticity: A Contribution," in *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 74. Cited in Givan, "Gunther Schuller," 170n18.

<sup>513</sup> Givan, "Gunther Schuller," 170. Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 134.

<sup>514</sup> Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 134.

sense,” Schuller clarifies, “has...played a curiously minor role in the development of jazz.”<sup>515</sup>

Schuller displays his prioritization of “strict” composition in jazz in his *Early Jazz* chapter on Jelly Roll Morton: “The First Great Composer.”<sup>516</sup> He describes the Red Hot Peppers recordings from September 1926 as “carefully...rehearsed” and “painstaking” and the “Black Bottom Stomp” side to be nearly “perfect.”<sup>517</sup> Moreover, Schuller treats Morton with a substantial degree of gravitas, mirroring Schuller’s own reverence for the unquestionable greatness of composers from the Western classical canon. He writes of Morton’s “instinct for structural cohesiveness,” rigorous ensemble rehearsing, and how he as the composer held the final say as to what would be played and in what fashion.<sup>518</sup> As Schuller detested loose interpretations of compositions, it is not surprising that he was impressed by Morton’s rigid standards for how his own compositions should be performed.<sup>519</sup>

For all the praise Schuller bestowed upon composers “in the stricter sense” such as Morton and Ellington, he was equally chilly in his reception of the jazz works which he portrayed as creatively lacking. To Schuller, both the elite jazz composer and the

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<sup>515</sup> Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 135.

<sup>516</sup> It also implicitly reinforces the linear canonic jazz narrative critiqued by New Jazz studies scholars such as Scott DeVeaux and Sherrie Tucker. DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition.” Sherrie Tucker, “Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition: The ‘Subjectless Subject’ of New Jazz Studies,” in *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries*, eds. David Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Goldmark (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012): 207-221. Significantly, Martin Williams relied heavily on Schuller’s musical expertise when constructing his influential book *The Jazz Tradition*. Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool*, 185.

<sup>517</sup> Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 155, 161.

<sup>518</sup> Gunther Schuller, *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz 1930-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 155, 158.

<sup>519</sup> For example, Schuller argues in *The Compleat Conductor* that the vast majority of tempos and phrasings made by conductors on twentieth-century recordings of Western classical works are patently incorrect. Botstein, “The Compleat Conductor,” 3.

inspired jazz improviser share an instinct for making the best musical choices possible and then either committing them to paper or to their instrument, respectively.<sup>520</sup> This dichotomy, though, left virtually no room for usefully evaluating the aesthetics of musical expressions which lay outside Schuller's formalist values. For example, Schuller consistently derided any works he interpreted to be commercially motivated.<sup>521</sup> Head arrangements were also marginalized amid Schuller's valorization of pure compositional and improvisational artistry because, as a genre, they occupy a liminal space between the two: they are not completely improvised, but they are also conceived of discursively, through trial and error, outside the vacuum of an individual composer's inkwell.<sup>522</sup> Not surprisingly, riffs—with their ease of recollection and potential for creating momentum when repeated—are indispensable to the collaborative creation of head arrangements; however, Schuller tended to interpret riffs as little more than clichés. Schuller loathed

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<sup>520</sup> Givan, "Gunther Schuller," 169. Gunther Schuller, "Qualitative Evaluation in the Arts," in *Musings: The Musical Worlds of Gunther Schuller* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 252.

<sup>521</sup> Schuller writes in *The Swing Era* about how the Basie Orchestra was "seduced" by commercialism in its 1938 recordings of "Stop Beatin' Around the Mulberry Bush" and "London Bridge Is Falling Down." Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 241-242. Writing about Schuller's reception of Ella Fitzgerald's similar recording of "A-Tisket, A-Tasket" with the Chick Webb Orchestra, Christi Jay Wells has argued that such criticisms of commercial repertoire contained a "specific set of discursive moves" which could serve to conflate commercialism with femininity. Christi Jay Wells (née Christopher J. Wells), "A Dreadful Bit of Silliness': Feminine Frivolity and Ella Fitzgerald's Early Critical Reception," *Women and Music* 21 (2017), 43-44.

<sup>522</sup> Jeffrey Magee defines a head arrangement as "an arrangement developed through discussion and demonstration with little or no written music." Jeffrey Magee, *The Uncrowned King of Swing: Fletcher Henderson and Big Band Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 131. John Hammond's view of the Basie Orchestra's repertoire stands in direct contrast to Schuller's. Hammond—who, Gennari writes, considered symphonic jazz to be "both a threat to hot jazz purism and...a misguided bid for cultural refinement"—wrote in November 1936 issue of *Down Beat* that the "unselfconscious and direct" head charts of the early Basie Orchestra was the its "only reason for existence." Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool*, 40-46.

artistic complacency, and the recycling of familiar musical material was, in his mind, tantamount to a lazy reliance on well-worn musical gestures.<sup>523</sup>

While Schuller regarded the practice as artistically negligent, recycling familiar material has always been a cornerstone of Black American music. As I discussed in chapter three, scholars such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., have argued that Afrodiasporic music may be understood to operate via an intertemporal, intergenerational critical dialogue wherein myriad idiomatic gestures may be alluded to and/or ironically Signified upon.<sup>524</sup> And Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr., in building upon these theories, has shown how communal and individual memories help provide contextual clarity when analyzing the use of Signifyin(g) tropes in Black American music.<sup>525</sup> Such considerations lie well beyond Schuller's formalist analytical scope; to him, the interpretive avenues of a piece—either composed or improvised—lie in a diligent, detailed study of the work as a singular text. A dance band playing all-too-familiar riffs over a head arrangement did not, in his estimation, constitute a composition worthy of his

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<sup>523</sup> Schuller harshly characterized Basie's piano style for its ostensible use of clichés: "And then, of course, sad to say, Basie's own pianistic clichés were beginning to mar many of these performances... The sad part is that Basie, forty years later, was *still* playing the same dozen "licks." Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 259. Furthermore, Schuller was sensitive to appearances of ostensible clichés even when evaluating expressions he found favorable. He notes in his famous analysis of Sonny Rollins' solo on "Blue 7" that Rollins "has experimented with [a] particular phrase in a number of pieces and it threatens to become a cliché with him." Gunther Schuller, "Sonny Rollins and the Challenge of Thematic Improvisation," 1958, reprinted in *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History*, ed. Robert Walser (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 197n7.

<sup>524</sup> Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., "Ring Shout! Literary Studies, Historical Studies, and Black Music Inquiry," reprinted in *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History*, ed. Robert Walser (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 324-332. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Vernacular Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>525</sup> Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

intellectual engagement. James A. Snead has claimed that European methods of music analysis such as Schuller's carry an ingrained philosophical condition which presupposes that repetition lacks value, initiative, and ambition. In twentieth-century Western cultures, Snead writes, "financial and production cycles have largely supplanted the conscious sort of natural return," resulting in the widespread conflation of linear growth with progress, and repetition with stagnation.<sup>526</sup> Black American culture, Snead continues, "highlights the observance of...repetition" with which European culture has ostensibly lost touch due to the ubiquity of capitalist epistemology.<sup>527</sup>

Other European-trained music scholars were also troubled by a perceived degree of complacency in the inner workings of Black music. The Frankfurt School musicologist Theodor Adorno saw parallels between the homogenization of mass-marketed commercial music in the U.S. and the collective loss of individuality which went hand-in-hand with the rise of European fascism in the twentieth century:

The most drastic example of standardization of presumably individualized features is to be found in so-called improvisations. Even though jazz musicians still improvise in practice, their improvisations have become so 'normalized' as to enable a whole terminology to be developed to express the standard devices of individualization.<sup>528</sup>

Here, however, Adorno mistakenly commingles the commercial mechanisms of corporate America with a discursive, Afrodiasporic musical tropology which arguably predates European capitalism itself. While Adorno is correct in stating that jazz is there is "a

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<sup>526</sup> James A. Snead, "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture," 1984, reprinted in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 69.

<sup>527</sup> Snead, "Repetition," 68-69.

<sup>528</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "On Popular Music," in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 203.

whole terminology” which “express[es] the standard devices” of the idiom, Floyd reminds us that European conceptualizations of music alone, “are insufficient for black music inquiry because they all separate the works from their cultural and aesthetic foundations.”<sup>529</sup> This is not to say that Floyd did not perceive any value in European methodologies; rather, he argues that since jazz constitutes a blend of European and African American practices, a culturally pluralistic methodology offers particularly useful insights into how European and Afrodiasporic aesthetics synthesize in jazz. Indeed, despite the stated limitations of Schuller’s Eurocentric methodology, many scholars agree that his critical analyses of jazz arrangements and solos provide a sturdy starting point for the application of non-European modes of analysis.<sup>530</sup> Floyd proved as much when he applied Signifyin(g) and Call-Response theorizations to Schuller’s glowing analyses of Jelly Roll Morton’s 1926 recording of “Black Bottom Stomp.”<sup>531</sup>

### **Synthesized Perspectives: Schuller, Floyd, and “Black Bottom Stomp”**

Schuller frames Morton’s “Black Bottom Stomp” as progressive, forward-looking, and “putting the world on notice” as to Morton’s compositional greatness; on the other hand, Floyd argues that the work “clearly looked back to New Orleans.”<sup>532</sup> It seems

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<sup>529</sup> Floyd, “Ring Shout!” 325-6.

<sup>530</sup> Givan, “Gunther Schuller and the Challenge of Sonny Rollins,” 168. Lawrence Gushee, “Review: *Sonny Rollins and the Big Brass* (Metrojazz E1002),” in *Jazz Panorama: From the Pages of The Jazz Review*, ed. Martin T. Williams (New York: Crowell-Collier Press, 1962), 253-257. Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 135. Robert Walser, “Deep Jazz: Notes on Interiority, Race, and Criticism,” in *Inventing the Psychological: Toward a Cultural History of Emotional Life in America*, ed. Joel Pfister and Nancy Schnog (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 288.

<sup>531</sup> Floyd, “Ring Shout!” 328-332.

<sup>532</sup> Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 155. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 123.

that the philosophies behind Floyd's and Schuller's interpretations are congruent with the points Snead made vis-à-vis Black and European American conceptualizations of repetition as a cultural figure; but, Floyd leans into this difference, arguing that Schuller's analysis of the work in *Early Jazz* is "as usual...perceptive, revealing, and informative."<sup>533</sup>

Schuller's analysis of "Black Bottom Stomp" deals with thematic development, harmonic scheme, formal structure, rhythmic variation, and textural characteristics: all of which are dealt with as mechanisms of the composition's cohesive whole.<sup>534</sup> But Floyd makes an important observation about Schuller's methodology here: Schuller tends to resort to abstract rhetoric when describing musical elements which lie beyond his Eurocentric scope. Floyd writes: "In 'Black Bottom Stomp' the 'exuberance and vitality,' the 'unique forward momentum,' and what constitutes 'those Morton ingredients,' all mentioned but not explained by Schuller, are the very derivations from the ring [i.e. Call-Response tropes] that are basic to Afro-American music."<sup>535</sup> This is Floyd's entry point in his analysis: where Eurocentric methodologies ostensibly fall short, Afrodiasporic ones may be used to fill in the gaps. Beneath Schuller's Roman numeral analysis and formal schematic of "Black Bottom Stomp," Floyd argues that the performance "is governed by the Call-Response principle, relying upon Signifyin(g) elisions, responses to calls, improvisations (in fact or in style), continuous rhythmic drive, and timbral and pitch distortions that I have identified as retentions from the ring."<sup>536</sup>

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<sup>533</sup> Floyd, "Ring Shout!" 329.

<sup>534</sup> Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 155-161.

<sup>535</sup> Floyd, "Ring Shout!" 329.

<sup>536</sup> Floyd, "Ring Shout!" 329.

The rhythmic character of “Black Bottom Stomp” is the first of Schuller’s ostensible blind spots which Floyd endeavors to clarify through his own analysis. Floyd claims that all the rhythmic gestures in “Black Bottom Stomp” may be understood to be related to a foundational, implied rhythm—much like an African “time line”—which serves as the referential bedrock for each metric structure, cross-rhythm, and additive rhythm across the piece.<sup>537</sup> Whereas Schuller’s discussion of the piece’s rhythmic character veers into historical lineages of performers and orchestrations, Floyd perceives the rhythms in “Black Bottom Stomp” to constitute a tapestry of Significations on Black dance rhythms, all of which are bound together by the piece’s time line.<sup>538</sup> Schuller marvels at the timbral and textual scheme of “Black Bottom Stomp,” calling it “one of Morton’s richest,” but his analysis only goes as far as his philosophical point of view will take it.<sup>539</sup> In analyzing Morton’s composition as a stage in a progressive, linear canon of “strict” jazz compositions, Schuller fails to see that the timbral and rhythmic schemes of “Black Bottom Stomp” are anything but separate entities; indeed, Floyd argues convincingly that the former is wholly derived from the latter. Specifically, Floyd asserts that variances in texture and volume serve to emphasize the time line rhythm, and “bring it into the foreground as a Signifyin(g) trope.”<sup>540</sup> Taking Floyd at his word that “all...rhythmic organization and activity take[s] place” within the framework of the time

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<sup>537</sup> Floyd, “Ring Shout!” 329-330. For more on time line theorizations of jazz works, see chapter three.

<sup>538</sup> Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 159-161. Floyd, “Ring Shout!” 329.

<sup>539</sup> Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 156.

<sup>540</sup> Floyd, “Ring Shout!” 330.

line, the textural contrasts in Morton's composition may be interpreted to be Significations upon it.<sup>541</sup>

Floyd's Call-Response methodology also substantially transforms Schuller's limited conclusion vis-à-vis the improvisations in "Black Bottom Stomp." Schuller viewed the solos to be ultimately traceable to Morton's compositional aesthetic. As a result, he delves very little into the nuances of each solo, instead commenting on how the numerous instrumental combinations and grooves "[show] no signs of being merely jumbled and arbitrary" despite their rapid succession in Morton's three-minute-long composition.<sup>542</sup> This is perhaps surprising, given the innumerable in-depth discussions of improvised solos Schuller wrote throughout his career. Ever the formalist, though, Schuller's point of reference for his analyses virtually always lay in what he perceived to be the core creative expression of a recording; due to his philosophical stance that each work only has one score or "text" to study, Schuller typically eschewed analyzing solos when dealing with an ostensibly "great" composition, and vice versa.<sup>543</sup> Floyd, by comparison, goes into a great deal of depth regarding the recording's improvisations, arguing that each one "Signifies on (1) the structure of the piece itself, (2) the current Signifyin(g)s of other players in the group, and (3) the players' own and others'

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<sup>541</sup> Floyd, "Ring Shout!" 330.

<sup>542</sup> Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 158.

<sup>543</sup> At the same time, though, there is a conspicuous discrepancy between Schuller's formalism vis-à-vis compositional analysis and his emphasis on the intellectual intent of improvised jazz solos. Givan writes: "Schuller's rhetorical emphasis on...intellectual intent is notably at odds with the literary New Criticism whose formalism he otherwise basically shares." Givan, "Gunther Schuller," 176. Robert Walser argues that Schuller's concentration on the "inner emotional realm" of jazz improvisers is reflective of a broader trend among formalist critics in which they tended to misinterpret improvised solos as standalone expressions of individual brilliance rather than as culturally informed, discursive practices. Robert Walser, "Deep Jazz," 272.

Signifyin(g)s in previous performance.”<sup>544</sup> From this perspective, Morton’s composition is not the primary concern but instead serves as a point of reference for improvised Significations. Additionally, Floyd asserts that such Significations occur alongside individual Call-Response tropes.<sup>545</sup> Floyd articulates how these two tropological layers synthesize in “Black Bottom Stomp”:

The elisions (smears), call-and-response devices, meter changes, accented cross-rhythms, after-beats, breaks, stop-time tropes—indeed, all the shuckin’ and jivin’ Signifyin(g) figures in the piece (particularly those of the clarinet and piano)—are rhetorical Call-Response figures that Signify on the musical values and expressions of the ring and its musical derivations; each improvisation Signifies on Morton’s melodies and on the inventions of some of the other musicians; and the structure of the piece Signifies, most immediately, on ragtime and, though perhaps indirectly, on European social dance music.<sup>546</sup>

Taken together, Schuller’s and Floyd’s analyses of Morton’s “Black Bottom Stomp” provide useful insights into how the piece resonates with both European and Afrodiasporic aesthetic values. While Floyd held that “analytical theories from the European-derived tradition have something to offer black-music inquiry,” he also added a significant caveat: “The more African-derived the piece, the more the Signifyin(g) approach will be relied on; the more European-derived, the more traditional analytical strategies will suffice.”<sup>547</sup> Schuller implicitly argued that “Black Bottom Stomp” exhibited the formal cohesion of European-derived music, and Morton was certainly familiar with such genres.<sup>548</sup> Yet when addressing jazz works such as head

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<sup>544</sup> Floyd, “Ring Shout!” 330.

<sup>545</sup> Floyd, “Ring Shout!” 330.

<sup>546</sup> Floyd, “Ring Shout!” 331.

<sup>547</sup> Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 261.

<sup>548</sup> Writing about Morton’s rendition of the American march “Stars and Stripes Forever,” Charles Hersch observes that Morton had a penchant for “reclaim[ing]...European models” and recontextualizing them via Signifyin(g) variations. Charles Hersch, *Subversive Sounds: Race and the Birth of Jazz in New Orleans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1-3.

arrangements—which lie beyond the confines of text-based formal analysis—Schuller confuses the limitations of his methodology with aesthetic inferiority.

### **Interpreting Calls and Responses in “Honeysuckle Rose” (1937)**

Schuller’s critiques of the Basie Orchestra in *The Swing Era* perfectly demonstrate this cognitive dissonance. He describes the Old Testament Basie style as follows: “[By 1937], we can begin to hear the coalescence of the essential Basie style: simple, direct, uncluttered, but creatively un-innovative, mostly riff-in-blues pieces, with plentiful open spaces for [Jimmy] Rushing and the band’s major soloists.”<sup>549</sup> Schuller lavishes praise on the Basie band’s soloists throughout *The Swing Era*—particularly Lester Young—but he qualifies this statement, saying that moments of soloistic brilliance or a unique rhythm section style do not make an excellent ensemble, per se.<sup>550</sup> Without the gravity of a central compositional mind à la Duke Ellington or Jelly Roll Morton at the ensemble’s core, Schuller argues, the Basie Orchestra’s stylistic contributions fell short of being artistically exceptional: “[E]ven in its heyday, the Basie orchestra was admirable more for its performance skills than for any creative profundity or innovative compositional contribution.”<sup>551</sup> Schuller continues: “One may enjoy a Basie performance for its swing, its often exciting call-and-response brass and reed exchanges, and above all its superior soloists. But in all this we never remember the themes.”<sup>552</sup>

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<sup>549</sup> Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 238-239.

<sup>550</sup> Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 237.

<sup>551</sup> Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 225.

<sup>552</sup> Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 253.

The stylistic elements of Basie’s music which Schuller glosses over—driving swing, call-and-response, and idiomatic improvisations—are some of the core musical tropes articulated by Floyd. That Schuller casts them aside as mere pleasantries further underlines the limitations of his Eurocentric analyses. Floyd’s re-analysis of “Black Bottom Stomp” demonstrates this paradigm to a degree, but in the case of the Basie Orchestra’s four earliest recordings from 1937, Schuller perceives the ensemble’s prioritization of groove and collective improvisation to be a cheap stand-in for ostensible legitimacy of compositional genius. As a result, Schuller eschews serious engagement with them, instead bemoaning the Basie band’s ostensible “neglect of dynamics and lack of harmonic invention.”<sup>553</sup>

Schuller’s critical assessments of the Count Basie Orchestra’s first four studio recordings—“Honeysuckle Rose,” “Pennies From Heaven,” “Roseland Shuffle,” and “Swinging at the Daisy Chain”—demonstrate how the value of Signifyin(g) and Call-Response practices in head arrangements are lost in a purely Eurocentric framework.<sup>554</sup> Schuller states that these recordings “reflect the tentativeness that some of the early criticism...signaled.”<sup>555</sup> Indeed, the Basie Orchestra was initially dismissed by many upon their arrival in Chicago in late 1936, with one local reporter quipping: “by the time

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<sup>553</sup> Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 252-254.

<sup>554</sup> For recording information on these four sides, see: Chris Sheridan. *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, Discographies 22, ed. Michael Gray (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 23-25. It should be also noted that Basie’s first recordings in Chicago were recorded several months before in November 1936. Due to contractual obligations with the American Music Corporation’s Decca label, the eight small-group sides were originally released under the pseudonym “Jones-Smith Inc.” Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 20-22.

<sup>555</sup> Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 235.

you read this [the Basie band] will be on their way back to Kansas City.”<sup>556</sup> These initial criticisms of the Basie Orchestra’s early performances in the North seem to resonate with Schuller’s retrospective analyses of their earliest recordings from the same period: “The rough edges in [the] ensemble are not nearly as disturbing as the disparate quality of the solos and the frequent emptiness of content.”<sup>557</sup> Interestingly, though, contemporaneous accounts from the Black newspaper the *Chicago Defender* hailed the Basie band as “dazzling,” “sensational,” and “one of the leading swing organizations in the country.”<sup>558</sup> And *Defender* journalist James J. Gentry asserted that the Basie band was superior to the Grand Terrace feature acts and bemoaned the fact that their radio broadcast was cut short on November 20, 1936.<sup>559</sup> Nevertheless, as Schuller’s assessment indicates, the early negative reviews have come to define much of the narrative surrounding the earliest music of the Old Testament Basie Orchestra.

Schuller begins his critical analyses of these four sides from 1937 with the Basie Orchestra’s rendition of Fats Waller’s “Honeysuckle Rose.”<sup>560</sup> Though generally disapproving of all four sides, his review of “Honeysuckle Rose” stands apart in its negativity. As I have proposed, the grim contemporaneous reviews of the freshly

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<sup>556</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 179-180. I attempted to locate this article, but it appears in *Good Morning Blues* without citation.

<sup>557</sup> Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 235.

<sup>558</sup> “Count Basie and Jack Ellis in Big Jazz Battle: Count Basie, ‘Swing King’, to Play Jazzy Tunes,” *Chicago Defender*, November 21, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. “Party Will be the Swingiest, Gayest Event of the Year,” *Chicago Defender*, November 21, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. “Count Basie to Play Roseland Ballroom: Famous Band Leaves Grand Terrace for Month Dance Tour Benny Goodman Makes Hookup with Music Corporation of America for Count Basie and Band,” *Chicago Defender*, December 5, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>559</sup> James J. Gentry, “Bronzeville in Chicago: Armistice,” *Chicago Defender*, November 21, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>560</sup> Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 235.

migrated Basie band seem to have colored Schuller’s perspective somewhat, but his tone seems more to reflect the stoic, impersonal voice of a formalist theorist, sharply critiquing the content without any emotional investments. He voices three primary complaints regarding “Honeysuckle Rose,” and all of them concern the arrangement: that “an inept modulation to Prez’s [Lester Young’s] solo and an unwarranted banal overlay of ‘Tea for Two’ on Waller’s ‘changes,’ plus some further borrowings from [Fletcher] Henderson’s famous arrangement of ‘King Porter Stomp,’ all contrive to drag the piece down.”<sup>561</sup> I argue that these three complaints—the “inept” modulation, the “Tea for Two” quote, and the ostensible recycling of “King Porter Stomp” material—reflect Schuller’s myopically Eurocentric perspective because he views them as standalone phenomena, related neither to each other or any other musical expressions. Through Afrodiasporic lenses, though, new hermeneutical perspectives on these musical gestures take shape.

CHORUS	KEY	CHARACTER	TIME STAMP
Chorus 1 (AABA)	F major	melody, solo piano	0:00-0:35
Chorus 2 (AABA)	F major → Db major	piano solo, ending with tenor saxophone modulation	0:36-1:10
Chorus 3 (AABA)	Db major	tenor solo, brass backgrounds	1:11-1:45
Chorus 4 (AA)	Db major	“Tea for Two” riffs	1:46-2:02
Chorus 4 (B)	Db major	piano solo	2:03-2:11
Chorus 4 (A)	Db major	“Tea for Two” riffs	2:12-2:20
Chorus 5 (AA)	Db major	shout chorus, “King Porter Stomp” allusion	2:21-2:38

<sup>561</sup> Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 235.

Chorus 5 (B)	Db major	trumpet solo	2:39-2:47
Chorus 5 (A)	Db major	shout chorus, “King Porter Stomp” allusion	2:48-2:58

**Figure 4 – “Honeysuckle Rose” form with section descriptions.**

The “Tea for Two” gesture is clearly an intentional quotation. In all three A sections of the fourth chorus of “Honeysuckle Rose,” the saxophones cyclically repeat a slightly altered version of the first two measures of “Tea for Two” as a unison riff. Muted brass plays a pointillistic counter-riff, but the saxophones’ conspicuous quotation of “Tea for Two” is the feature here. Basie and his bandmates may have been amused by the ironic juxtaposition of sweet, Broadway romance projected upon the swinging drive of their bluesy ensemble, but they might have chosen any number of songs to this end. I contend that the answer may lie in the supposedly “inept” modulation to which Schuller referred. The harmonic character of “Tea for Two” is striking to the ear. It follows a thirty-two bar ABAC form wherein the B section is the A section transposed up a major third. Thus, the tonic modulation going from the B section to the second A section is the same as that of “Honeysuckle Rose”: a downward modulation by a major third. I cannot say for certain which came first in the formulation of this head arrangement: the modulation or the quotation. Nevertheless, it seems too great a coincidence to say that the aurally sensitive and vastly experienced members of the Basie Orchestra did not make this connection at some point. My guess is that, upon settling on the distinctive modulation following Basie’s setting of the time line, someone pointed out that the atypical key change was reminiscent of the hit Broadway song, and the riff was born. Therefore, the “Tea for Two” riff is a nexus for multiple dimensions of Signifyin(g) irony as well as musical Call-Response; most notably, the Basie Orchestra Signified upon the

song's romantic cuteness by recontextualizing it in their hard swinging style, and they revised the melody to fit within the ring-derived trope of a cyclically repeated compounding riff.<sup>562</sup>

Next, consider Schuller's critique of the ostensibly "inept" modulation in "Honeysuckle Rose." The arrangement is precisely five choruses of the thirty-two bar song form. The first chorus and the first thirty bars of the second are all in the tune's standard key of F major. The final two measures of the second chorus serve to modulate the arrangement down a major third to the key of Db major by way of an ingenious sequential passage performed by Lester Young, leading into his one-chorus solo. While the key of Db major is relatively foreign to F major, the modulation is perfectly suited to the harmonic character of "Honeysuckle Rose." The final two measures of the unmodulated chorus follow a I-IV-iii-VI7 turnaround. Since the first four measures of the A section each showcase ii-V7 cadences in the tonic key, the final two chords of the turnaround—iii and VI7—function as ii/ii and V7/ii. In F major, these chords are F-Bb-Amin-D7, but when the final two chords are transposed down a major third, the progression is F-Bb-Fmin-Bb7. As an experienced composer and musicologist, one would expect Schuller to have been aware of the theoretical advantage to modulating "Honeysuckle Rose" in this way.

So what did he feel was "inept" about it? The nature of the I-bVI modulation was theoretically sound, though perhaps less familiar to listeners than, say, the I-IV

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<sup>562</sup> Additionally, "Tea for Two" (*No, No, Nanette*, 1925) and "Honeysuckle Rose" (*Load of Coal*, 1929) were both composed for shows from which Black people were barred attending, potentially adding an additional layer of ironic Signification vis-à-vis racial discrimination and Jim Crow legislation.

modulation which leads into the bridges of many popular songs as well as the trio sections of numerous American marches. It seems that Schuller was mostly concerned with the fact that the modulation was not expressed through the pen of an arranger, recalling his claim that the Basie Orchestra's music—like that of other riffing bands—is “rarely memorable thematically.”<sup>563</sup> Within the values of European music, this pithy modulation might be viewed as a missed opportunity for drama, foreshadowing of future motifs, and/or showcasing the sort of orchestrational prowess which Schuller perceived in Morton's “Black Bottom Stomp.” Yet, I argue that the modulation of “Honeysuckle Rose” is part of a broader musical and cultural dialogue. As I showed in chapter three, Basie's piano introductions set the tempo and rhythmic character of each head arrangement and thus may be conceived as a time line. With this in mind, it is understandable why Basie opted to play the first two choruses—the statement of the melody and his one-chorus solo—in the standard key of F major. Playing in the most familiar key enabled Basie to lay the most effective foundation for the rest of the arrangement, and as I have shown, he was somewhat hesitant to play in unfamiliar keys.<sup>564</sup> Once the arrangement modulated to Db major, Basie was free to accompany in his sparse, single-note style, but the momentum set in motion by his statement of the time line continued on.

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<sup>563</sup> Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 253. It should also be noted that “One O’Clock Jump”—one of the most memorable numbers from the Old Testament era—also modulates from F major to Db major.

<sup>564</sup> Db major was not an unusual key to Basie, per se, but he likely would have thought it a chore to have to transpose his solo realization down a major third from F major: his favorite key, according to Buster Smith. Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 170.

The decision to modulate may also have been a practical matter of accessibility for the winds, which brings us to Schuller's claim that the final shout chorus of "Honeysuckle Rose" was borrowed from the riff-based shout chorus of Fletcher Henderson's by-then famous arrangement of "King Porter Stomp."<sup>565</sup> To fortify the Basie Orchestra's minimal book of printed charts, Henderson graciously began sending them his own arrangements as early as 1935, one year prior to Basie and his "Barons of Rhythm" performing their mythical radio broadcasts from the Reno Club.<sup>566</sup> Henderson continued doing this until at least 1936, which Basie says was "a big help" to getting his band off the ground upon leaving Kansas City.<sup>567</sup> Among these charts was Henderson's arrangement of "King Porter Stomp" made famous by the Benny Goodman Orchestra in 1935; significantly, the piece's famous shout chorus is in Db major.<sup>568</sup> This means that the Basie band had already performed this exact material nearly a year prior to their recording of "Honeysuckle Rose." That Henderson's shout chorus is in Db major supports the notion that the Basie Orchestra shifted to Db major to accommodate such a borrowing.

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<sup>565</sup> For further analyses of various arrangements of "King Porter Stomp," see: Fred Sturm, *Changes Over Time: The Evolution of Jazz Arranging* (United States: Advance Music, 1995). For further discussion of these arrangements various arrangements constitute a Signifyin(g) musical discourse, see: Magee, *The Uncrowned King of Swing*, 130-135.

<sup>566</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 183. Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 18-19.

<sup>567</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 183.

<sup>568</sup> The Basie Orchestra performed this arrangement nearly verbatim during a WCAE radio broadcast on February 10, 1937 from the Chatterbox Room in Pittsburgh. Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 187. Count Basie and Benny Carter, "Count Basie - Benny Carter Legendary Radio Broadcasts," recorded February 10, 1937, track 2, Storyville Records, 2008. Basie and Carter, "Count Basie - Benny Carter," liner notes. Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 26-27.

The riff-based shout choruses of “King Porter Stomp” and “Honeysuckle Rose” are very similar; they both center around the flatted third, they both serve as the energetic apex of their respective arrangements, and they both derive their energy from the repetition of a single riff. Nevertheless, there are some key differences between these two shout choruses, casting doubt on Schuller’s notion that this instance of textual borrowing lacked creative initiative. The “Honeysuckle Rose” shout riff lies in the brass. It begins on the downbeat of the odd-numbered measures and is interspersed with full measures of rest in the even-numbered measures. All the while, the saxophones softly repeat a two-bar counter-riff underneath the brass. On the other hand, the “King Porter Stomp” shout chorus is based on a single riff which is passed back and forth between the brass and the saxophones. Furthermore, the rhythmic character of the Henderson riff is fundamentally different from that of “Honeysuckle Rose”; the “King Porter Stomp” shout chorus riff functions as an extended anacrusis, beginning on beat two and completing on the down beat of the following measure. Coupled with the fact that the Basie Orchestra could have played the “King Porter Stomp” shout chorus verbatim had they chosen to do so on “Honeysuckle Rose,” these differences seem to dispel Schuller’s opinion that the “Honeysuckle Rose” shout chorus was nothing more than another missed opportunity by a “riff-cum-blues” ensemble to be “thematically...memorable.”<sup>569</sup>

In short, the “Honeysuckle Rose” shout chorus can be understood as a Signifyin(g) gloss on the “King Porter Stomp” shout riff. Despite the rhythmic and textural differences I have described, Schuller is not completely wrong; the “Honeysuckle Rose” shout chorus still *sounds* like “King Porter Stomp” because both arrangements use

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<sup>569</sup> Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 253.

the same Call-Response tropes—pendular flatted thirds and riff repetition—in the identical contexts of concluding shout choruses. Since we know that the Basie Orchestra was intimately familiar with Henderson’s “King Porter Stomp,” the tropological connection between the two is almost certainly not coincidental. Therefore, it seems likely that in the case of “Honeysuckle Rose,” the Basie Orchestra sought to offer their own version of the Henderson shout gesture by simultaneously repeating the existing trope in the same context of their arrangement, while also revising it in their own style: the very quintessence of musical Call-Response and rhetorical Signifyin(g).

### **“This Time, This Place, These Participants”**

By applying Call-Response and Signifyin(g) theories to Schuller’s critiques, I have shown how they may serve as useful lenses for critiquing problematic Eurocentric conclusions; however, Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., has shown that such methodologies have the potential to be as rigidly formalistic as the Eurocentric ones they are designed to critique.<sup>570</sup> To combat this, Ramsey points to a question posed by Christopher Small in his influential book *Musicking: The Meanings of Performance and Listening*: “What does it mean when this performance (of this work) takes place at this time, in this place, with these participants?”<sup>571</sup> Basie expresses in his autobiography that he had a deep admiration for Henderson and was indebted to him for the notated arrangements which bolstered the early Basie Orchestra book. Nevertheless, as Stanley Dance remarks, Basie and his musicians experienced “more than a little nervousness” amid the “magic-carpet transfer

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<sup>570</sup> Ramsey, *Race Music*. For more on how Ramsey introduces a holistic, interdisciplinary methodology to Call-Response analysis, see chapter three of this dissertation.

<sup>571</sup> Christopher Small, quoted in Ramsey, *Race Music*, 17.

from Kansas City...engineered by critic John Hammond.”<sup>572</sup> In their first major booking outside Kansas City, the relatively inexperienced Basie Orchestra replaced Henderson’s polished, well-received band at the Grand Terrace Cafe in Chicago. With Ramsey’s methodology in mind, I turn to Basie’s contemporaneous relationship with Henderson in order to flesh out what the “King Porter Stomp” allusion might have meant at that time, at that place, with those participants.

The fledgling Basie band from Kansas City was pulled in multiple aesthetic directions upon arriving in their first northern metropolitan stop of Chicago. Their first engagement—a stint as the floor show band at Chicago’s Grand Terrace Cafe from November 3 to December 3, 1936—was a severe departure from the sort of playing they had mastered in Kansas City.<sup>573</sup> At Kaycee establishments such as the Paseo Ballroom, the Basie Orchestra was free to swing hard and focus their musical intentions on electrifying the dancers with infectious, improvised riffs and on galvanizing the wizardry of soloists such as Lester Young, Buck Clayton, and Herschel Evans. The engagement at the Grand Terrace, however, placed a very different set of expectations on Basie and his musicians.

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<sup>572</sup> Stanley Dance, *The World of Count Basie* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1980), 4.

<sup>573</sup> Their “farewell” performance in Kansas City on October 31, 1936 was possibly a battle of the bands with the Duke Ellington Orchestra at the Paseo Ballroom. There is a discrepancy between Sheridan’s and Basie’s accounts of this event. According to Basie’s autobiography, the Ellington band did not appear on Basie’s “farewell” show on Halloween of 1936; rather, he recalls that his band served as the opener for Ellington’s the following Monday, which was actually their last performance before leaving Kansas City. Basie also claims that the band was packed up and loaded onto the bus headed for Chicago by the time Ellington’s band went on that evening, so the notion of a “battle” between the two is questionable. Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 20. Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 175-177.

The floor show at the Grand Terrace Cafe was a musical reflection of the establishment's brand identity. In an advertisement from January 11, 1936 in the *Chicago Defender*, manager Dave Walker marketed the club as "swanky," featuring a "modernistic streamlined bar."<sup>574</sup> Bringing in some of the top dance bands such as those led by Henderson and Earl Hines was practical, but such ensembles also walked the line between audiences' perception of jazz music as authentically Black and western European music as technically precise. Dave Dexter Jr., wrote that the Grand Terrace was "one of the more ornate of the South side niteries [*sic*] [which catered] to both colored and white patronage," so the balancing of patrons' musical expectations along the fault lines of race was essential.<sup>575</sup>

Moreover, the primary responsibilities of the band at the Grand Terrace were to support the multitude of performers for the floor show and plug featured popular songs over the nightly coast-to-coast radio broadcast through NBC.<sup>576</sup> The hard swinging blues for which the Basie band was renowned was welcome, but only after the conclusion of the floor show and the radio broadcast: "We probably played as many, and sometimes more, of those [popular songs] than our own things," Basie remarks.<sup>577</sup> The pop songs were provided to the band in the form of stock arrangements, and the Basie band handled

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<sup>574</sup> "Grand Terrace Starts New Policy; D. Walker Manager," *Chicago Defender*, January 11, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>575</sup> Dave Dexter, Jr., *Jazz Cavalcade: The Inside Story of Jazz* (New York: Criterion, 1946), 40. Papa Jo Jones recalls walking into the Grand Terrace around 1930 with "a white woman on each arm." Papa Jo Jones, *Riffide: The Life and Opinions of Papa Jo Jones, as told to Albert Murray*, ed. Paul Devlin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 68.

<sup>576</sup> "Chicago to Have Two Big Time Bands: Fletcher Henderson Comes to Terrace; Sissle In Loop," *Chicago Defender*, January 25, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>577</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 181.

these with ease.<sup>578</sup> The floor show repertoire, on the other hand, was made up of numerous pieces which caused the Basie Orchestra serious trouble due to their collective lack of experience sight-reading in a commercial setting.<sup>579</sup> *Chicago Defender* articles from earlier in 1936 intimate the breadth of variety in genre for which the Grand Terrace house bands were responsible; there was Valaida Snow, a trumpeter and singer; Louise “Jota” Cook, an exotic dancer; Katheryn Perry, a stage actress; Alice Whitman, a tap dancer and the youngest of the famous The Whitman Sisters; and Arthur Lee Simpkins, a singer of jazz, opera, and other European classical genres who was known as the “Black Caruso.”<sup>580</sup> But two weeks into the residency, the *Philadelphia Tribune*’s Franklyn Frank maintained that “Count Basie may have a difficult time pleasing Grand Terrace patrons who have become sold on Fletcher Henderson’s music.”<sup>581</sup>

Prior to moving the band north, Basie was nervous about following the high technical standard of Henderson’s orchestra at the Grand Terrace. A few months before the band made the trek northward, Basie and drummer Jo Jones made an impromptu trip

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<sup>578</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 181-182.

<sup>579</sup> An arrangement of Franz von Suppé’s overture *Dichter und Bauer (Poet and Peasant)* caused Basie to convince the Grand Terrace manager to send out for a union pianist who could execute the challenging Western classical work. Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 181. Trumpeter Buck Clayton—one of the more capable readers in the band—played himself into a lip injury by carrying the wind section through these arrangements during their stint at the Grand Terrace. This caused him to be incapable of playing the four sides cut by the truncated Basie band pseudonymously recorded for Columbia’s Vocalion label as “Jones-Smith Inc.” He was replaced by Carl “Tatti” Smith. Sheridan, *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, 20. In his telling of this series of events, Gunther Schuller mistakes Clayton for Oran “Hot Lips” Page: Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 230.

<sup>580</sup> “Grand Terrace Starts New Policy.” “Rush For Dates At Grand Terrace; New Policy Takes,” *Chicago Defender*, January 18, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. “Out Of Grand Terrace Show,” *Chicago Defender*, June 6, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>581</sup> Franklyn Frank, “Things Theatrical,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, November 12, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

to hear Henderson's orchestra play at the Grand Terrace.<sup>582</sup> Basie writes: "We went to the Grand Terrace and caught Fletcher Henderson, and when Fletcher asked me if I wanted to sit in for a few numbers, Jo told him we would just wait our turn with our own band."<sup>583</sup> Jones' recollection is nearly identical, but he infuses the story with a more adversarial tone than the unflappably diplomatic Basie:

[W]e go into the Grand Terrace in Chicago, and Fletcher Henderson's playing there, and we sitting out ringside. Fletcher walked over to say, 'Want to sit in, Basie?' I said he's not gonna sit in the band, he's gonna come in here with a band of his own! That's *July* 1936. Fletcher laughed. I said he'll be in here—with fourteen pieces. He did! I said, but Fletcher, you sold your birthright. He look at me. I said, he did! He sold everything to Benny Goodman so he could buy the chorus girl a mink coat!<sup>584</sup>

While Jones recalls a more hostile exchange, it is indisputable that Basie declined Henderson's offer of a chance to sit in at the Grand Terrace in July 1936. It is certainly plausible that Basie turned Henderson down on account of his pride in himself and his own orchestra, however Basie had a history of being intimidated by Henderson's fluent literacy in notated music.<sup>585</sup> Judging from their preexisting dynamic, Henderson had a penchant for pushing Basie out of his musical comfort zone.<sup>586</sup> While Basie was grateful

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<sup>582</sup> Basie recalls it was spurred by some personal troubles, likely referring to his troubled marriage to his first wife Vivian. Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 175. Jones, *Riff tide*, 58.

<sup>583</sup> Basie and Murray, *Good Morning Blues*, 175.

<sup>584</sup> Jones, *Riff tide*, 54

<sup>585</sup> For more on Basie's recollections vis-à-vis being intimidated by Henderson's and other pianists' technical proficiency and musical fluency, see chapter three.

<sup>586</sup> Henderson's behavior may have been coming from a place of playful hazing, but he also knew firsthand the value of being pushed beyond one's musical limits. For example, Henderson was required to hone his blues and stride playing in order to effectively accompany blues singers for Black Swan Records during the 1920s. Nearly seven years Basie's senior, Henderson may have taken it upon himself to pass on this challenging lesson to a pianist and bandleader who may have reminded him of an inverted version of his younger musical self: an excellent blues and stride player who needed to shed his commercial technique. Magee, *The Uncrowned King of Swing*, 24. Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz: From Ragtime to Bebop — A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4.

for this show of tough love—he called Henderson “the only leader in the business that ever went out of his way to help me”—Basie’s 1936 residency at the Grand Terrace Cafe was a perfect storm which encapsulated many of the intimidating musical requirements which Henderson seems to have personified in Basie’s perception.

Significantly, “Honeysuckle Rose” was arranged, rehearsed, and recorded amid this atmosphere of professional uncertainty. By quoting “King Porter Stomp,” Basie and his collaborators may have sought to utilize musical material that was commercially successful and well-known to listeners and widely associated with the Henderson: the benchmark for elite Black dance ensembles. Or perhaps it was a nod to Henderson himself, sincerely thanking him for the seed arrangements, while also playfully Signifying that “this is the way *we* do things.” Speculations notwithstanding, many of the significant details of discursive compositions such as “Honeysuckle Rose”—easily misunderstood by European formalism—are multiplied when research centers around the lived experiences which resulted in their creation.

## **Conclusion**

Is jazz America’s classical music? I believe one possible answer to this question hinges on one’s definition of “classical music.” If one frames jazz as America’s version of European art music—with its linear progression of compositional and virtuosic “geniuses”—then the system for evaluating the music stands rigidly limited. To this day, this perspective remains in jazz performance studies. Ensembles learn to perform the “greatest” works by the “greatest” figures, and the tradition is still commonly conceived as a unidirectional march toward greater complexity and away from charmingly

antiquated works more likely to be found in the pages of a history textbook than in a performance program. Yet if one conceives of “classical music” as a complex product of sociocultural conditions at a particular time and place, to borrow again from Christopher Small, where the music came from becomes at least as consequential as what it itself preceded.

In this chapter, I utilized Afrodiasporic analytical frameworks to critique a formalistic evaluation of one of Basie’s earliest recordings while also shedding light on the sociocultural resonances embedded within the piece. By applying the theories of rhetorical Signifyin(g) and musical Call-Response, I built upon Floyd’s claim that Black methodologies can be synthesized with European ones. And by drawing upon contemporaneous memories of the conditions in which this “Honeysuckle Rose” arrangement was conceived, I prioritized how the piece mattered to some of the major agents involved in its creation. At the same time, though, I showed that Floyd was correct in claiming that the more African-derived a piece of music, the more incomplete and problematic are conclusions drawn by European-oriented methodologies. By applying Afrodiasporic methodologies to Schuller’s problematically rigid critiques of this discursive piece of Black vernacular music, I demonstrated how such analytical frameworks may serve to critique the Eurocentric perspective as a default framing of Black American music.

Moreover, I have contributed to Basie’s narrative by usefully complicating the legacy of his orchestra’s earliest recordings. Works such as the 1937 “Honeysuckle Rose” side occupy a liminal space in Basie’s body of work; it lacks the impressive scope of many New Testament works, and its subtle compositional devices are easily

overshadowed by the recorded solos. By extracting Basie's earliest recordings from the confines of Eurocentric values, and placing it into dialogue with Afrodiasporic aesthetics, I have begun shifting the narrative surrounding the Basie's music toward a more culturally appropriate context.

## CONCLUSION

The development of this dissertation is a story unto itself. When I entered the musicology PhD program at Arizona State University 2019 as an experienced performer, I knew I wanted to dedicate my time to studying Count Basie as he had long been one of my favorite musicians. Initially, I approached my research with the intention of uncovering unknown, yet irrefutable facts about the man and his music. This was occasionally fruitful, but as the project developed, I struggled to put such historical findings into dialogue with any broader scholarly discourses. This was frustrating as someone who was cutting his musicological teeth, but more so, it threw into sharp relief the distinct ways performers and scholars continue to think and talk about jazz. In *Knowing Jazz*, Ken Prouty discusses the academic power structures that have conditioned practitioners of jazz studies (performance) and jazz studies (scholarship) to perceive their respective endeavors as disjointed from each other.<sup>587</sup> While this is indeed a reality, such institutional constraints are not the only factor which barricades jazz scholars and practitioners from each other; there is a distinct disparity between the ways individuals from each group talk about the music.

As someone with a robust background in both spheres, I can certainly attest to this. For example, as I discussed in chapter three, jazz musicians often feel compelled to assert their validity in a performance space. In my experience, this process typically begins before instruments leave their cases, especially when a new group of players get together for the first time. By talking about the music's most objective elements—

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<sup>587</sup> Kenneth Prouty, *Knowing Jazz, Community, Pedagogy, and Canon in the Information Age* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 11.

knowing tunes, citing specific recordings, discussing who played on what album—players can demonstrate their mastery of the idiom prior to the first tune being counted off. In short, while scholars such as Paul F. Berliner, Ingrid Monson, and Travis A. Jackson have shown that jazz musicians’ improvisational performances are rooted in the interpretation of a tune, its harmonic scheme, and the musical contributions of bandmates, positivistic knowledge is also foundational to the way performers talk about jazz.<sup>588</sup>

As this dissertation progressed, I began engaging with scholarly approaches that hinged on one element that can be at odds with the immediacy with which performers talk about jazz: interpretation. From feminist musicologists, I learned how to reimagine the biographical narratives of canonic “greats” such as Basie as interrelated with a vast network of individuals; Albert Murray provided the means to read between the lines of Basie’s autobiography *Good Morning Blues*; and the interdisciplinary dialogue of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., and Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., provided a blueprint for imagining Basie’s music as dynamic, discursive, and endlessly interpretable. Still, while it is perfectly acceptable to discuss paintings, films, or novels as interpretable works, I cannot recall many instances in which I talked with another performer about a jazz composition, arrangement, or solo without relying on binary evaluations which boil down to “good” and “not good.” This is not to say that my development as a scholar has made me no longer find value in the way jazz musicians talk about the music they

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<sup>588</sup> Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 192. Travis A. Jackson, *Blowin’ the Blues Away: Performance and Meaning in the New York Jazz Scene* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 14-15. Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 87-88.

perform. On the contrary, I continue to learn from other musicians—particularly my elders—who are often so generous in sharing their immense knowledge.<sup>589</sup> Rather, I hope the musical stories and significations I have elucidated in this dissertation on Count Basie may serve as a template for talking about the historical and musical legacies of jazz musicians more broadly.

In Basie’s case, his legacy continues to be shaped by performers and scholars alike. In the scholarly context, the Institute of Jazz Studies (IJS) at Rutgers University is in the process of digitizing Basie’s voluminous personal archive. The correspondences, photographs, and artifacts contained within it offer a plethora of new insights into Basie’s life, and the research to be done in this archive has the potential to spur new narratives regarding the complex tapestry of Basie’s professional collaborations. Furthermore, the current iteration of The Basie Orchestra—directed by trumpeter, historian, and educator Scotty Barnhart—released their latest album *Late Night Basie* four days after I defended this dissertation in April of 2023.<sup>590</sup> It features musicians from across the spectrum of Black American music engaging in the very sort of intertemporal dialogue I discuss in chapters three and four. Rappers, funk bands, contemporary instrumentalists, and more revise and Signify upon classic Basie numbers such as “One O’Clock Jump,” “Jumpin’ at the Woodside,” and “Didn’t You” in a way that foregrounds the musical connections between artists who otherwise might appear to be stylistically distinct from both Basie

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<sup>589</sup> I note that my discussion here hinges on my own experience, but there is a broader spectrum of ways musicians have participated in jazz discourse. For example, Eric Porter has shown how the published writings and commentaries of jazz musicians offer valuable insights into their own personal and musical histories. Eric Porter, *What Is Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), xiii.

<sup>590</sup> Count Basie, *Late Night Basie*, Primary Wave, released April 7, 2023, Spotify streaming audio.

and each other. Significantly, one critic remarked before the album's release that the featured artists are "seemingly unrelated."<sup>591</sup> While this does imply that these artists are in fact on some level related, it also conveys the fact that the connections between them are likely lost on most. Afrodiasporic tropological analyses are ideal modes for discussing such music. For instance, in "Didn't You"—perhaps the most marked diversion from the Basie Orchestra's usual style—rapper Talib Kweli provides a linear history of Basie's early career which is framed within the cyclical, intertemporal dialogue of Significations occurring between the original piece and contemporary funk band Lettuce. And in the rendition of "One O'Clock Jump" featuring singer Jazzmeia Horn and keyboardist Ray Angry, the opening blues section is replaced by a New Orleans-evoking vamp, inviting one to consider how this Call-Response musical dialogue might also constitute a spatial interaction between the musical traditions of New Orleans and Kansas City. In short, the interpretive avenues I have outlined in this dissertation are well suited for understanding the Significations and Responses embedded within Black American musical works such as *Late Night Basie*.

Sherrie Tucker once quipped that scholars and performers might be able to usefully collaborate, provided they do not "kill each other first."<sup>592</sup> As one who identifies as member of both these communities, I believe that the continuing dialogue surrounding Basie's life and music would greatly benefit from scholars and performers being able to

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<sup>591</sup> "A New Celebration of Count Basie: 'Late Night Basie' Out April 7<sup>th</sup> Via Primary Wave Music," *Grateful Web* (blog), February 1, 2023, <https://www.gratefulweb.com/articles/new-celebration-count-basie-late-night-basie-out-april-7th-primary-wave-music>.

<sup>592</sup> Sherrie Tucker, "Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition: The 'Subjectless Subject' of New Jazz Studies," In *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries*, ed. David Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Goldmark (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 219.

value and understand each other's perspectives on the matter. Moreover, as I recently discussed on a panel with Ken Prouty, Christi Jay Wells, and Zachary Wiggins at the 2022 Rhythm Changes conference, so-called "hybrid" scholar/performers are increasingly called upon to access both sides of our training.<sup>593</sup> In my experience leading jazz ensembles at Arizona State University, my students have learned a great deal about the music's history by interpreting the potential Significations and Responses embedded within the repertoire. This endeavor is not centered around being irrefutably correct; rather it is a pathway which students in the performance space can take toward perceiving jazz works as constellations of artistic, social, and cultural meaning.

I hope that the stories and significations in this dissertation will resonate with both camps of "jazz studies" such that the methods at the core of my research will serve as a bridge between these two all-too-divorced sectors of the jazz academy, with performers seeing a path to speaking about music more interpretively and scholars grasping how profoundly significant the practice of storytelling is to performers. Through such an interdisciplinary collaboration, the biographical and musical legacies of musicians—past and present—may become more detailed, more complex, and more relevant to scholars and performers alike.

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<sup>593</sup> Jayson Davis, Ken Prouty, Christi Jay Wells, Zachary Wiggins, "Knowing Jazz/Making Jazz: The University Ensemble and the Fields of Jazz Studies" (panel presented at the Rhythm Changes conference, Amsterdam, NL, August 25, 2022).

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## RECORDINGS

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