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The most consistently flagged characteristic of jazz is that of the musician communicating emotions through his chosen instrument, that instrument a conduit of feeling improvised into sound in the moment. “Jazz music is born of emotion. . . . In jazz, emotion comes first; musical form is subservient to it,” is a common sentiment expressed in jazz literature, both popular and academic (Reger 1964). Jazzmen, those who have aligned their whole lives with the music, have used the language of emotion to categorize musicians, to define acceptable music behaviors, and to grade musicians’ expressivity. These behaviors and value judgments were shaped by competing inter- and intraracial expectations of music as a social practice, as an opportunity for expressions of individuality, and as a representation of cultural traditions. The emotions have become both a critical and aesthetic language used to capture the uniqueness of jazz as music, a culture, and a political worldview. Despite the prevalence of the trope of emotion in jazz, little effort has been made to parse through how it has been used in the culture. In this chapter, I explore these ideas through discussion of Hazel Scott, Lena Horne, Charles Mingus, and Jimmy Guiffre.

The language of emotion is fundamentally about gender in jazz culture. By listening to how jazzmen describe their feelings, describe their interactions with one another, and describe the music, we hear them talk about jazzmasculinity, an “ethos of male camaraderie . . . , a model for behavior on the bandstand, and an ethos for artistic growth in a friendly yet competitive atmosphere (Porter 2002).” Further, by understanding that “race is everywhere in music,” we talk about racialized jazzmasculinity, shaping a culture marked by “the ambiguity of men reproducing men without women (Carby 1998),” despite the culture’s historical roots among blues women singers (Carby 1998; Porter 2002). In the postwar period, the racialization of that gendered context intensified as associations between race, creativity, and oppositionality were linked with black men primarily, white men secondarily, and women not at all (Feldstein 2005, Feldstein 2013, Tucker 1996–1997).

I explore this story of women’s exclusion by focusing on the experiences of Hazel Scott and Lena Horne at Café Society in the 1940s. Representing the intersection of jazzmasculinity and race womanhood, Scott and Horne illustrate how black middle-class women artists understood themselves to be speaking to and for black experience and emotion. In the predominately male music scene of New York in the forties, female instrumentalists, white or black, were heavily scrutinized, and their femininity was often read as a measure of their lack of musical knowledge, skill, and authenticity (Erenberg 1998; Tucker 2000). And yet pianist Hazel Scott found a home at Café Society Downtown, “jazzing the classics” and mastering “boogie-woogie,” a piano style that had emerged in the late nineteenth century (Holt 1945; Gioia 1997; Ulanov 1952; Ulanov 1958; Gitler
1983; Hairston 2009). Critic Leonard Feather explains that Scott maintained aesthetic integrity while simultaneously appealing to a wide audience because what she offered was “not aimed solely at the jazz specialists. . . . [S]he has learned how to combine an innate musicianship and orthodox technique with an unusually commercial quality which is aural as well as visual (Feather 1942).” Feather praises Scott’s technical skill, her awareness of the demands of commercial appeal, and her nuanced understanding of the relationship of jazz to other music. Scott’s appreciation of these characteristics of jazmasculinity, including the recognition of jazz both as a business and a form of work, positioned her to chart a career as a successful soloist.

Scott relied on a proliferating discourse of racialized and feminized genius, the story of her start as a child prodigy, to counter reviewers who found her style too gimmicky and lacking in understanding of classical music. They are as scathing in their interpretation of her talent as LeRoi Jones had been when he claimed that the emotionality of her music was inauthentic and laughable, writing that her performance was like a crude “kind of modern minstrelsy.” Unlike Billie Holiday, Scott did not remain in the streets, but sought the affirmation of middle-class whites (Jones 1963).

As Scott matured from precocious talent to femme fatale, the increased attention on her femininity and sexuality illustrates both the limited language for women’s musical genius and an increasing conservatism around gender during the postwar period. Scott’s femininity made her a relatable and accessible star. She was “sweet and hot,” and her inexpensive strapless evening gowns, which she called her “overalls,” a term more associated with work than feminine vanity, provided an enticing display. Her sensuality enhanced the physicality of her performance.

All the lights would go out, Hazel would make her way to the piano, and then suddenly a spotlight would catch her. For a moment the audience would gasp, because it looked as if she were seated there nude—the height of the piano, the bare-shouldered dress, nothing but the golden-brown shoulders and arms, the super-talented fingers.

(Hawes 1940; Powell 2002)

Lena Horne, unrivaled in her role as glamorous race woman and “a respectable sex symbol,” was also featured at Café Society (Feldstein 2013). The relationship between Horne and Scott makes clear the minefields racially conscious women faced making their way as artists in New York during the 1940s (Griffin 2013; Rustin 2005).

Though Scott and Horne were featured separately at the two Café Society nightclubs—one downtown, the other uptown—the animosity and competition between them was a public secret. And, according to Horne, “Hazel and I . . . we’d go to hear Billie [Holiday] together, and that’s one time we would settle down and not fight. Because here was this voice speaking for the people” (Denning 1996). The “original ‘woman singer’” at Café Society, Holiday had paved the way for both Scott and Horne. Her status as race woman was solidified with her 1939 performance of “Strange Fruit,” a song that articulated the heartache, despair, and anger that black communities experienced because of lynching. Her music made that racialized experience accessible so that a broader audience could feel outrage. Holiday exuded authority, femininity, and emotion. Her voice was an instrument finely tuned to the racial, gender, and musical registers of her times. Scott and Horne emulated Holiday in ways that affirmed their identities both as jazzmen and race women. But their individual efforts to inhabit those identities created tensions between them, providing insight into the pressures they each faced as a performer.

In her autobiography, Horne acknowledging that her development as a singer had as much to do with the quality of the musicians she worked with as it did with her changing political and racial consciousness and her parental responsibilities. Integration made for a better and happier performer, one who could emote freely through song and engage the audience as participants in the performance. She attributed that change partially to Barney Josephson, grateful for his willingness
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to challenge the status quo; his integrated clubs reflected his recognition of “the true meaning of democracy. He understood that he could not enjoy democracy fully so long as anyone else was denied its blessings.” She credited the change in her style to learning

to stop lumping everybody into a group and to recognize that people were individuals, irrespective of color, I loosened up when I sang. I was no longer singing to a roomful of enemies. . . . I was beginning to sing to them as much because I was learning to like them and wanted them to enjoy my performances as because I had to eat.

(Horne 1965, 177, 178–179, 192)

At Josephson’s behest, Horne began incorporating more “blues” into her repertoire. But he remained concerned about her ability to project racial authenticity, sending her to Holiday for instruction. He believed that if Horne acted “more black,” she’d become a better performer, whereas Horne felt that she was already performing a blackness that interpreted and expressed her experiences in both integrated and segregated spaces.

In telling of her own coming of age as a jazzman and race woman, Hazel Scott freely admits that she “worshipped” Holiday, even down to modeling her singing style after her. Scott first heard Holiday when she was 14, when Holiday was performing with Ralph Cooper’s band at the Apollo. “I couldn’t believe the way she sounded. I had never heard anything like it in my life.” Scott’s mother, Alma, and Holiday were close friends. As Scott recalls, Holiday “would be sitting in the kitchen talking to mama, and they would chase me away. She was closer to my age than she was to my mother’s, but she was a woman already and I was still a kid” (Taylor 1977). In Lady Sings the Blues, Holiday takes credit for both launching Scott’s career and striking a blow at inequality at Café Society.

Holiday’s account underscores the persistent fact of color prejudice at Café Society. By supporting Scott, she forces Josephson to acknowledge the privilege accorded black women who fit an ideal of beauty akin to that of white women and the limitations that black women labored under because of those prejudices. Holiday, again “speaking for the people,” draws on her own capital as a jazzman and race woman to make the case for Scott. She constructs Scott as an innocent, “a little girl in with her mother,” wearing a “pink mammy-made dress,” but one with talent, one who has been denied an opportunity because of color.

The juxtaposition of Josephson’s attraction to Horne and his initial dismissal of Scott is a telling reminder of how differently the two women experienced their femininity and how the conditions of their work became embodied in their identities and performances. Josephson tells Horne he wants to mark her: “I want people to know who you are. Let me present you as a Negro performer.” He requires her to introduce the blues into her repertoire, “because the people sitting out front, the white people, won’t be sure what you are. When you sing the blues they’ll think, well, I guess she is [black]” (Josephson 2009). Color prejudice undoubtedly privileged Horne and disadvantaged Scott. Lighter skin provided Horne with opportunity; her politics radicalized her art and gave her a way of being black in an integrated setting. For Scott, a certified genius, color nearly derailed the launch of her career.

For some, emotion in jazz culture reveals evidence of traits typically associated with masculinity, including authority, creativity, truth-telling, self-determination, and authenticity. Emotions also included so-called feminine feelings of love, vulnerability, and melancholy. The language of “emotions,” music, allowed for a collective, ever-evolving political language, capable of wrestling with the meaning of the contemporary moment. The shorthand of “emotion” circulates in and through jazz culture primarily as a term inclusive of subjectivity and experience, rather than of physiological expressions of feeling (Rustin 2017; Meyer 1961; Livingson 1997). Jazzmen’s emotions are often richly imagined feelings of community, wellbeing, and selfhood. Though
jazzmen used the language of emotion to describe what they valued about jazz music, musicians, and culture in terms of “feeling,” the word “feeling” was usually intended as a “terminological variant” of emotion (Nussbaum 2001). Jazzmen like Mingus described emotion through bodily effects when, at specific moments in their personal experience, the music came alive for them emotionally and intellectually. For others, bodily feeling marked jazz as a site of the primitive and of unmediated expression. Despite these warring conceptions, both camps viewed jazz as key for an individual’s flourishing precisely because it articulated emotions and feelings that mainstream society diminished (Rustin 2017).

Mingus understood emotion as an expression of his ambitions as a composer and performer. As he grew more assured in his musical authority, he grew increasingly unwilling to make concessions with his art. In 1953 he commented that he’d “come to the point musically and personally, where I have to play the way I want to. I just can not compromise anymore” (Hentoff 1953). His ambitions were sometimes thwarted by his own actions, but more often than not he managed to create aural landscapes that spoke of his experience, his heart, and the world he knew.

Along with tongue-in-cheek descriptions of the recording process, damning takedowns of jazz critics, praise for the skill of his band members, and celebrations of his own genius, Mingus’s self-written liner notes often reproached jazz culture. He condemns a jazz audience who, by relying solely on the recommendations of critics, allows itself to be “brainwashed” rather than take responsibility itself for deciding what constitutes good music. “This means you need an analyst,” Mingus observes (Hentoff 1953). In fact, he invited his own analyst, Edmund Pollack, to contribute to the notes of The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady, drawing connections with the same narrative issues that concerned him in Beneath the Underdog: time, music, and an individual’s fragmentation. Though initially reluctant, Pollack eventually embraces the opportunity, reasoning that his training in interpreting “behavior and/or ideas communicated by words and behavior” could be applied as well to music. Pollack sees the album as a plea, for “all mankind must unite in revolution against any society that restricts freedom and human rights (Mingus 1963).” In Mingus’s recording, he discerns the sounds of both an American society inching closer to achieving integration and an individual’s continuing emotional evolution. He also hears a religious statement, one in which ecstatic tears of anguish, depression, love, and joy are released. The variety of emotions expressed, he concludes, reveals an essential dynamic of Mingus’s personality. Mingus “feels intensely. . . . He cannot accept that he is alone, all by himself, he wants to love and be loved.” Pollack writes, “Inarticulate in words, he is gifted in musical expression which he constantly uses to articulate what he perceives, knows, feels (Mingus 1963).”

Bob Thiele produced both The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady and Mingus Plays Piano, Mingus’s only solo piano album. He had signed Mingus after attending the 1962 Town Hall concert and Mingus’s performances at the Village Vanguard. Of the Vanguard performances, Thiele remarked that the “music . . . just had to be recorded (Thiele 1964).” What started out as an artistic match made in heaven, however, soon revealed conflict about who controlled the recording session. In JAZZ magazine, Mingus accused Thiele of losing a number of tapes that contained better cuts of the various tracks on The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady. He reported spending a number of nights recomposing the missing music; when they had finished recording, the original tapes were then found. An outraged Thiele faulted Mingus in turn, belittling his professionalism and discipline. Thiele’s attacks, however, did not manage to refute the truth of Mingus’s claim, but rather underscored them.

During the contract negotiations with Impulse!, Mingus made extensive demands, knowing that it was rare for black jazzmen to be adequately compensated for their work. He never hesitated to draw attention to the inequities between musicians and those who profited off their music. Dannie Richmond explains Mingus’s position like this: “He felt exploited. If he worked for you, you were exploiting him. The money you paid him was never enough. Maybe it wasn’t”
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When Mingus learned that Thiele was paid every two weeks, he demanded that a similar clause be added to his own contract. “I want to be like an executive—like a white man—I want to be paid every two weeks (Priestley 1982, 145).” As a professional in a world in which musicians depended on infrequent recording gigs, short runs at nightclubs, or long tours, a demand to be paid fairly and consistently could have been viewed as an assertion of dignity, but it struck Thiele as an aggressive display of Mingus’s racial biases. “This was my first confrontation with certain of Mingus’ Negro and white views.” Thiele’s disdain intensified as their working relationship deteriorated. He characterized Mingus as a race-baiter: “Mingus ranged from friendly tirades about the white oppressor—the a & r man in the booth? The engineer?” But described himself as a no-nonsense boss:

I took no BS from Mingus—without any question he sensed that I meant business—I was not interested in racial problems while actually at work in the studio; get to the job, do it well and be done with it.

(Thiele 1964; Priestley 1982)

Whether or not Thiele thought of himself as a racist, he embraced a discourse that valued black jazzmen as vessels for emotion but not as self-determining architects of creative and economically sustaining careers. Thiele reflected:

Perhaps his trouble is a deep-rooted hatred of white people—indeed in humanity itself? . . . I believe that his orchestrating ability is limited—and this, coupled with a strong admiration for Ellington, could be inflicting strong depressant factors on his psyche. Has he completely matured?

(Thiele 1964)

Though Thiele disliked having to serve as a “lay psychologist,” he had no doubt that Mingus suffered from mental disturbances and was too needy. Mingus, he claimed, could not distinguish between a friendship and a professional relationship. Mingus was someone who “needed a friend and some guidance (Thiele 1964).” Despite his expressed concern about Mingus’s supposed emotional instability, Thiele couldn’t resist the chance to make a record that captured that emotionality for profit and posterity. Thiele’s assessment differs wildly from Pollack’s, who considered Mingus an advanced social subject, one who has been able to integrate the concentric sites of experience that are his daily life into his identity. The conflict between Mingus and Thiele echoes the disharmony within jazz culture, between the emotional expressivity demanded of jazzmen and the authority to make claims about that emotionality.

Mingus’s desire for music without labels did not preclude him from understanding that what he was creating—and the traditions he drew on—were contributions to a distinctly black cultural project.

Jazz is still an ethnic music, fundamentally. Duke Ellington used to explain that this was a Negro music. He told that to me and Max Roach . . . and we felt good. When the society is straight, when people really are integrated, when they feel integrated, maybe you can have innovations coming from someplace else. But as of now, jazz is still our music, and we’re still the ones who make the major changes in it.

(Walser 1998)

Mingus had a consuming interest in the complex social and personal negotiations required by integration. While he could claim that jazz is essentially an “ethnic music” and that only with
genuine integration would that change, it is not so clear that he believed that jazz was “race” music. Though Mingus challenged “race” as an identity, he nevertheless remained committed to a social politics and identity defined by race. He believed black musicians were owed economic and social debts. Jazz was not just black music, nor simply entertainment, nor art for art’s sake. It was rooted in a particular experience and reflected ways of being in the world. The twinned bogies of “race” and authenticity obscured the roles played by a deep knowledge about the music’s traditions and the disciplined musicianship required to develop emotional articulateness.

In his autobiography, Raise Up Off Me, pianist Hampton Hawes explains that

the reason I play the way I do is that I’m taking the years of being pushed off laps, denied love and holding in my natural instincts when I was a kid, of listening to the beautiful spirituals in my father’s church and going in the back doors of clubs to play for white audiences, of getting strung and burned in the streets and locked up in dungeons when I tried to find my way—taking all that natural bitterness and suppressed animal feeling out on the piano.

(Hawes 2001)

Eschewing labels for the music, except for good or bad, Hawes tells us that his music is inextricably linked to his experience from his youth, through his years on heroin, through his recovery. The music is him, revealing his becoming at each stage of Being. Like other black jazzmen, Hawes understood that to play with feeling was to play from experience, to craft emotionally resonant performances out of an understanding of the self. How, though, did white musicians and critics writing about white musicians approach the idea of emotion in narratives about their art, about becoming at each stage of Being?

In 1959, Lorin Stephens interviewed saxophonist, clarinetist, and composer Jimmy Giuffre for The Jazz Review. In introducing the interview, Stephens explained it would delve into the “impact of hipness in jazz,” and he expected the reader to “be moved by Jimmy Giuffre’s willingness to expose himself honestly in the interest of furthering understanding of jazz and the jazz artist” (Stephens 1960). The Dallas, TX-born Guiffre moved to Los Angeles in the mid-forties, after college and a stint in the Army. Guiffre had been a member of Howard Rumsey’s Lighthouse All Stars and had been featured on the CBS program “The Sound of Jazz” with his trio of Jim Hall on guitar and Jim Atlas on bass by the time of Stephen’s interview. Guiffre explained to host John Crosby that his music was “modern jazz,” a “mixture of happiness and sadness . . . . I try to let the feeling or the flow of things get the last word over the mathematical. A big pool of feeling (Stephens 1960).”

Stephens opens the interview wondering why jazz musicians seem to fall under the sway of certain artists, like Charlie Parker, and completely change their styles in imitation of them. Stephens’s question echoed the complaints of many critics who believed that individuality was being sacrificed to mimicry. The result, critics feared, would be the existential death of jazz. Stephens asked, “do most musicians who pattern their ways after, say Sonny Rollins do so to achieve freedom or to serve the hip ritual?” (Stephens 1960). Implicit in the question is a conflation of concern about both technique and emotional authenticity. Were you free or constrained by a fad? How did styles evolve and come to shape jazz, and how does the individual musician find freedom within the form to express true emotion? Rather than disentangling the questions, Stephens fixated on the idea that form existed outside of a situated experience.

“The thing that’s hard for a non-performer to understand is how things keep changing inside. A listener often analyzes changes as being arbitrary, but they’re not,” replied Guiffre. “You must go through different changes.” As he relates his musical story, Guiffre offers that he had been consumed, for at least twenty years, with the desire that his playing “required this
sound, this subtle, soft, mellow, deep sound.” Guiffre then analyzes how and why he changed his approach—essentially what he had come to learn about himself through an understanding of the relationship between experience, emotion, and musicality to explain his personality in relationship to his music.

Perhaps it comes from my childhood. It was sort of like not wanting to out unless I was dressed properly. I couldn’t release this music inside of me unless it sounded perfect—that was the first consideration—to have a beautiful sound quality . . . . The ideas in the whole thing were secondary to sound.

(Stephens 1960)

This “beautiful sound” was intimately linked, Guiffre suspected, to his personality. He wanted his music to be “pretty,” though he wasn’t sure why. “I can’t figure it out except that I just didn’t want to look ugly, didn’t want to offend anybody.” The sound was also elusive when played in a group setting; increasingly he “just wanted to play the instrument by itself and hear the sound.” Now, remember, Guiffre is attempting to explain to Stephens that musicians change their approach to music not because they are influenced primarily by the new “hip” thing, but because they have engaged in an organic process over the course of their career. He begins by describing the draw to a particular, as he’ll call it, “concept”—in this instance the desire for softness, prettiness—and evolution to a new concept. Guiffre insists that the new doesn’t invalidate the old, but what is key is overcoming fear to cultivate the new, to embrace change.

Guiffre appreciated the assertion of personality, the certainty of perspective that imbued the playing of Monk, Rollins, and Art Tatum. He recognized that they had a way of approaching the world in their music, a mature expression of their beliefs that suggested to him a new attitude for himself. “And this began to be interesting. I was tired of being soft, as valid as softness is.” He was in a “sound prison” and needed a key out.

Well this time something happened, either in my experience, my success, my maturity or something, I reached the point where I’m not afraid to sound ugly for a little bit . . . . I discovered how full of fear I was before—I was holding back a lot of things because I was afraid of sounding ugly. . . . It was a revelation. (Stephens 1960)

Abandoning his fear of sounding ugly, of his dependence on softness, opened Guiffre up to exploring freedom in his improvising and composing.

The wonderful thing about this point is that it has nothing to do with the ideas or the musical content, it has to do with the statement—and when somebody gets to this point where he can be this free and this sure in his statement, then it’s just a matter of his speaking.

(Stephens 1960)

Freedom lies in connecting and communicating, the willingness to be unafraid in the moment of being.

While Guiffre did not express a completely new idea about freedom as a signature aspiration for a jazzman, he did, as Maurice Capel noted, to his delight, speak convincingly about what it was to be in the moment of creation. Capel, writing in Jazz Monthly, kvelled that Guiffre had propelled the project of a “Jazz Philosophy” forward by describ[ing] himself, in purely existential terms, his processes of creation and improvisation. . . . We now have a text that, in sheer psychological and technical importance, is in
the nature of a revelation: for the first time a musician shows us the moment of creation as he lives it in his own consciousness.  

(Capel 1960)

For Capel, the power of creation in jazz improvisation is that it precedes musical consciousness. To improvise is to be free of the constraints of introspection and open to “musical flow,” which “literally speaking, IS the consciousness, and the consciousness is nothing before its own ‘substance’.” Capel suggests that each new improvisation is a becoming, the birthing “in a new solo the new-born soul of a man” (Capel 1960).

Capel recognizes in the jazz performance, particularly that of the genius like Charlie Parker or Miles Davis, the communication of the ineffable, a “catharsis” by which the musician liberates the man who in turn liberates the musician, ad infinitum. Jazz is singular in its power, Cabel argues, “to be and to create all at once, in a single act of Freedom, the individual as an artist, and the artist as an individual” (Capel 1960). This presentation of the self is, in his mind, exactly what Guiffre suggests in his description of the “conviction” he was struck by in the musical statements of Monk and Rollins. However, Guiffre was insistent that his new stance (as LeRoi Jones writes, “The music is the result of the attitude, the stance” (Jones 1970)) was the result of introspection, of a conscious desire to say something new about who he was as a musician, how he’d come to understand that what Monk and others were most successful at was the relating of experience, not evading it.

Bringing Hazel Scott, Lena Horne, Charles Mingus, and Jimmy Giuffre together to explore ideas about emotion and its role in jazz performance helps us to understand how jazzmen wanted their work to be understood beyond categories of genre, modernity, or hipness. These jazzmen articulated complex ideas about the relationship between and permutations among gender and authority, race, and ambition, experience, and emotion. Their intellectual projects show the scope of feeling and practice imbued in the music and help us to think more broadly about how to tell the story of jazz, how to listen in the silences for ideas about creativity and artistry that have compelled musicians to keep making music even in the face of marginalization, criticism of ambition, and the next new thing.

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