

Dave Brubeck's Southern Strategy

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Abstract: In January 1960, white jazz pianist Dave Brubeck made headlines for cancelling a twenty-five-date tour of colleges and universities across the American South after twenty-two schools had refused to allow his black bassist, Eugene Wright, to perform. This cancellation became a defining moment in Brubeck's career, forever marking him as an advocate for racial justice. This essay follows Brubeck's engagement with early civil rights-era protests, examining the moments leading up to Brubeck's cancellation of his 1960 tour of the South. In doing so, I uncover new details in Brubeck's steps toward race activism that highlight the ways in which Brubeck leveraged his whiteness to support integration efforts, even as he simultaneously benefited from a system that privileged his voice over the voices of people of color. While Brubeck has been hailed as a civil rights advocate simply for cancelling his 1960 tour, I argue that Brubeck's activism worked on a deeper level, one that inspired him to adopt a new musical and promotional strategy that married commercial interests with political ideology. Brubeck's advocacy relied on his power and privilege within the mainstream music industry to craft albums and marketing approaches that promoted integration in the segregationist South. Ultimately, this period in Brubeck's career is significant because it allows deep consideration of who Brubeck spoke for and above, who listened, and for whom his actions as a civil rights advocate were meaningful.

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In January 1960, white jazz pianist Dave Brubeck made headlines after twenty-two colleges and universities across the American South refused to allow his interracial quartet to perform. Initially, eleven of the schools backed out of their contracts with Brubeck upon learning that he and two other white musicians, saxophonist Paul Desmond and drummer Joe Morello, would be performing with African American bassist Eugene Wright. After Brubeck informed the remaining fourteen schools of Wright's presence in his quartet, eleven more insisted Brubeck replace Wright with a white bassist, leaving only three willing to allow the integrated combo to perform. Brubeck refused to replace Wright, forgoing the \$40,000 in revenue (worth nearly \$400,000 today) he would have received had he instead performed with a white bassist.

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Representatives of the various schools insisted, one after the other, that their cancellations of Brubeck's contracts were not based in prejudice, but on principle and policy. For the schools and their administrators, Brubeck broke his contract; for Brubeck, contracts requiring segregation had no legal or moral basis.¹

Taken together, these cancellations became a defining moment in Brubeck's career. Jazz and entertainment newspapers, such as *DownBeat* and *Variety*, and black newspapers, including the *New York Amsterdam News*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Baltimore Afro-American*, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, and *Chicago Daily Defender*, covered the event extensively, and nearly all positioned Brubeck as a kind of civil rights hero.² After his death, many of Brubeck's obituaries remembered him as having stood up for civil rights when he refused to replace Wright in the segregated South.

This essay follows Brubeck's engagement with early civil rights-era protests, examining the moments leading up to Brubeck's cancelled 1960 tour of the South. I uncover new details in Brubeck's steps toward race activism that highlight the ways in which Brubeck leveraged his whiteness to support integration efforts, as well as the ways in which he benefited from a system that privileged his voice over those for whom he advocated. While Brubeck has been hailed as a civil rights advocate simply for refusing to appear without Wright, I argue that Brubeck's activism worked on a deeper level, one that inspired him to adopt a new musical and promotional strategy that married commercial interest with political ideology. Still, Brubeck's story is similar to those of other "white heroes" of jazz (such as Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, and Norman Granz): white bandleaders who though largely well-meaning were ultimately blind to racial politics and power dynamics, and whose careers were

the primary beneficiaries of their decisions to advocate for racial justice. In other words, Brubeck possessed the power to choose how and when to protest segregation, and because of that privilege, his image also benefited from those decisions.

By his 1960 Southern tour, Brubeck had long been considered a "respectable" jazz musician: a racially coded term indicating that Brubeck was an acceptable choice for college campuses and concert halls, and could bring "new" (that is, white) audiences to jazz. Though he began the Brubeck Quartet in relative obscurity in 1951, Brubeck experienced a steep rise in popularity in the early 1950s, primarily through his performances on college campuses, and in 1954, he was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine – only the second jazz musician to be so featured (Louis Armstrong was the first in 1949). Brubeck's image quickly reached newsstands across the nation through other mainstream publications, such as *Vogue*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Life*. Brubeck frequently explained in interviews that his quartet brought a "new" audience to jazz music, one that was "serious" and that had previously been put off by jazz's supposedly low-brow, low-class associations.³ On a 1954 television broadcast with Dave Garroway, Garroway asked Brubeck if his picture on *Time* lent "a certain amount of respectability to the jazz business," asking whether or not that respectability was good for jazz.⁴ Brubeck answered, "Well, I think it's good, because the thing that's held jazz back has been the environment. And every time a club is run decently, there's an audience, a wonderful audience, that usually won't go into a nightclub." Brubeck explained that groups and musicians like the Brubeck Quartet, Gerry Mulligan Quartet, and Stan Getz (all white) were helping to "make converts" of nonjazz audiences. Though Brubeck's response to Garroway

was not explicit, words like “respectable” and “decent” signified white spaces, while “environment” tended to mean urban, was associated with drugs, alcohol, prostitution, and crime, and was therefore often coded black.

In a 1957 interview, Brubeck further explained that his “fan mail frequently mentions how they have become interested in jazz through us, even though they never liked it before. And that, by playing our records, they’ve become interested in most of the other jazz records of serious jazz artists.”⁵ Brubeck saw his appeal to “new” jazz audiences (that is, mostly white, economically privileged, and educated audiences) as performing a service to the genre; he often cited the fact that, in 1955, he was the first jazz musician asked to speak at the Music Teachers’ National Convention as evidence that he brought nonjazz audiences to jazz, and he credited his performances at colleges for students’ interest in other jazz groups, including the Modern Jazz Quartet, an all-black quartet. Such achievements, according to Brubeck, were never attributable to his group’s overwhelming whiteness; he initially seemed to ignore the fact that black jazz musicians’ access to colleges and other educational settings, as well as promotion in mainstream magazines, was significantly limited compared to his own.

In addition to Brubeck’s media image, critics and audiences also closely linked Brubeck’s sound to sonic signifiers of whiteness. From its earliest recordings, jazz critics described the quartet in terms that maintained legacies of musical binaries that understood black musicians as natural and emotional and white musicians as rational and cerebral. That white critics would consider white jazz musicians’ primary musical contributions to be intellectual, or of the mind, stems from a centuries-long legacy of European

and American primitivism that simultaneously viewed black musicians’ talent as being primarily emotional, or of the body.⁶ Using terminology from the European concert tradition, including “counterpoint,” “passacaglia,” “polyphonic,” “sonata,” “fugue,” and “canon,” and drawing comparisons between Brubeck’s music and that of Bach, Mozart, and Stravinsky, critics asserted Brubeck’s decidedly “intellectual” approach to jazz. That they did so in a language that, in the 1950s, was primarily reserved for white composers and musicians, further entrenched Brubeck’s music in sonic signifiers of whiteness.

Jazz critics’ use of terminology from European classical music to describe cool jazz generally, and Brubeck’s music specifically, ultimately determined what sounds passed as white in a typically black genre. For instance, in a 1955 article, Arnold Shaw mapped clear visual images of whiteness associated with colleges and concert halls onto Brubeck’s musical style: “When you first hear the Brubeck Quartet you are immediately struck by the novel blending of crew-cut and long-hair elements.”⁷ Shaw elaborated on the “echoes of Milhaud and Stravinsky” that listeners could find in Brubeck’s music, as well as the quotes and influences from Grieg, Chopin, and Rachmaninoff. He explained to his *Esquire* readers that “Brubeck is excited by the devices of counterpoint,” and he noted “delightful fugal exchanges” between Brubeck and Desmond. These “fugal” exchanges and counterpoint were often meant to describe Brubeck and Desmond’s method of improvising together, which usually took the form of “following the leader”: Brubeck might begin a chorus of improvised counterpoint first, and Desmond would follow, playing in the breaks of Brubeck’s solo. It was a method that was extremely familiar and even formulaic for

Desmond and Brubeck, but which critics overwhelmingly found to be a sonic indicator of intellect.

Descriptions of similar sonic resonances of classical music in the music of black jazz musicians were rare, even in cases that would have easily warranted them, such as in recordings by the Modern Jazz Quartet.⁸ Critics and audiences were simply more likely to accept Brubeck as an intellectual, to accept his music as cerebral, to view him as having credentials as a classical musician, and as being respectable because he was white. This facilitated Brubeck's entrance to spaces (including colleges around the country and segregated institutions in the South) and audiences to which, as a jazz musician, he otherwise would not have had access.⁹ However, that same relationship to respectability and intellect that came with Brubeck's whiteness may have also had the side effect of making Brubeck's protest all the more surprising to Southern universities and their administrators.

By 1957, Brubeck's relationship to white culture through image and sound had been well established by critics, audiences, promoters, and his own statements, and Brubeck, as with many musicians, had made no public announcement or action against racial prejudice or segregation. At that time, the civil rights movement was just beginning to take root, spurred in part by the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which declared segregation in schools to be illegal, the 1955 murder of Emmett Till, and the 1955–1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott. However, it was the 1957 Little Rock integration crisis that garnered the attention of many jazz musicians. On September 4, nine African American students attempted to enter the formerly all-white Little Rock Central High School. However, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus had ordered

the Arkansas National Guard to the high school to bar the students' entrance. It was not until September 23, when President Dwight D. Eisenhower federalized the Arkansas National Guard, thereby shifting their purpose from preventing to facilitating integration, that the students were allowed entrance.

While jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Charles Mingus, and their supporters openly decried the Little Rock integration crisis, Brubeck mounted his own private protest, even as he maintained his public silence. On September 10, small regional papers around Texas began to report that Brubeck and white jazz impresario Norman Granz had cancelled their upcoming concert dates at the State Fair Park auditorium in Dallas, Texas. Brubeck and his quartet were scheduled to perform on September 29, and Granz's Jazz at the Philharmonic was to perform on October 1. As Ingrid Monson explains, Granz had been cancelling Jazz at the Philharmonic concert dates at segregated venues like the State Fair Park since the late 1940s, and according to newspaper reports, had cancelled this date for that reason as well.¹⁰

But Brubeck neglected to explain why he cancelled the date; all newspaper accounts simply write that "Brubeck sent word only that his mixed group would be unavailable" – an unusual statement, given that at that time, Brubeck was regularly performing with white bassist Norman Bates.¹¹ Brubeck's cancellation of the date was only briefly mentioned in regional papers in Texas, Arizona, and Southern California; major newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* and black newspapers including the *Chicago Defender*, *Daily Defender*, and *New York Amsterdam News* mention nothing about the concert. Brubeck's September 29 concert, the cancellation of which was announced just one week after the

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beginning of the Little Rock crisis, is an unstudied moment in Brubeck's performance history that reveals a nearly inaudible moment in Brubeck's move toward race activism.

By all accounts, the reason for Brubeck's cancellation of this single concert was ambiguous; any publicly stated views on social justice and racial prejudice were nonexistent. However, a fan letter written to Brubeck a few weeks after the cancellation suggests that three years prior to Brubeck's infamous cancellation of his \$40,000 tour of the South, Brubeck was already protesting segregation, however quietly. In the letter, dated October 22, 1957, Betty Jean Furgerson, a black woman from Waterloo, Iowa, thanked Brubeck for cancelling the concert "because of the policy of segregated seating."¹²

Furgerson's relationship with Brubeck went beyond that of a simple fan who had once asked Brubeck for an autograph. Her family had close connections to members of the Duke Ellington Orchestra, with whom Brubeck had toured, and frequently hosted jazz musicians in their home beginning in the late 1940s, feeding them and offering them relaxation.¹³ Iowa musician Roger Maxwell recalled meeting Brubeck at Furgerson's family's house in the 1950s, explaining, "It isn't everyday that you can walk into a friend's kitchen and see an internationally renowned musician sitting in a breakfast nook. Mrs. Furgerson greeted me and Betty Jean said, 'Roger, have you met Dave?'"¹⁴ Even though Brubeck had not told the press why he cancelled the concert, Furgerson's account connected his actions to a conversation the two had in the privacy of her family home. As she explained, "I know from talking with you that you have deep feelings about such practices."

Reading Furgerson's letter alongside Brubeck's actions demonstrates the ex-

tent to which musical and political meaning was made at the level of the individual; that Brubeck's cancellation was meaningful to Furgerson was enough for her, even if it was an underpublicized, ambiguous, or invisible act to most of the country. For Furgerson, it was an affirmation of what she had discussed with Brubeck at her mother's kitchen table, writing,

All this is to thank you for acting like a decent, feeling human being. You can never know how much it means to me to know that there are people [who] react positively to injustices. Too many of us give lip service to it. It's much easier and less convenient and more comfortable. It is a terrible thing to have to deny people the beauty of your music because they fear unintelligently.

Furgerson's words speak to struggles for racial equality across the century, and in her final sentence, she links Brubeck's music, and his live performances in particular, to a broader political effort to disrupt segregationist practices.

One year later, on October 19, 1958, jazz critic Ralph Gleason reported that Brubeck had turned down a tour of South Africa worth \$17,000 (approximately \$145,000 today) because the apartheid-era South African government had refused to allow Eugene Wright to perform with the group—or even to enter the country. Gleason's article in the *Daily Boston Globe*, which was subsequently covered in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* and the *Philadelphia Tribune*, both black newspapers, focused on an interview with Brubeck regarding the cancellation. In it, Brubeck explained the effect his 1958 State Department tour of the Iron Curtain had on his understanding of racial prejudice as detrimental to American foreign interests within a Cold War context: "Prejudice is indescribable. To me, it is the reason we would lose the world. I have been through Asia and India and the Middle

East and we have to realize how many brown-skinned people there are in this world. Prejudice here or in South Africa is setting up our world for one terrible let down.”¹⁵ These words were later reprinted, without the explicit reference to South Africa, to explain why Brubeck had refused to appear in the South without Wright in 1960. Though Brubeck’s cancellation of the South African tour was an explicit foreign policy message from a former U.S. State Department–sponsored cultural ambassador, coverage was again nonexistent in mainstream papers like *The New York Times* and jazz magazines like *DownBeat*.

While Brubeck’s cancellation of his South African tour is notable, its coverage revealed an earlier near cancellation of a Brubeck performance at East Carolina College (now East Carolina University). This event offers a glimpse into the goals Brubeck had for his Southern performances with Wright, as well as the confidence he might have gained from a successful protest. On February 5, 1958, the Brubeck Quartet was preparing to go onstage in the ironically named Wright Auditorium when they were stopped by the Dean of Student Affairs for East Carolina College, James Tucker. Tucker informed Brubeck that the school’s policy would not allow Wright to perform. Brubeck’s account centered on his experiences with his 1958 tour abroad; he reported to Gleason that he told Tucker “that the next morning we were to leave for Europe sponsored by the State Department to represent this country and one of the best things we could do was to show that prejudice was not everywhere in the United States, as we were a mixed group. And they wanted to do this to us the night before!”

A retrospective by East Carolina University demonstrates the levels of bureaucracy the college went through to

allow Brubeck to perform without losing state funding: the president of the college, John Messick, telephoned North Carolina Governor Luther Hodges, who apparently reminded Messick that “because the school had signed a contract for the performance, it would have to pay the band whether they played or not.”¹⁶ According to Brubeck, Brubeck’s argument swayed the dean, who announced to the audience that the Brubeck Quartet would appear after all; Tucker told the waiting crowd that “Mr. Brubeck and his quartet leave tomorrow for a State Department tour of Europe and we want them to tell the world that North Carolina is not Little Rock.”¹⁷ Brubeck’s near miss resulted in institutional change at East Carolina College: later that month, the Board of Trustees enacted a new policy, one that no longer banned black performers outright, and placed the issue of campus performances by black musicians at the discretion of the administration, essentially, though not officially, allowing black musicians to perform on campus.¹⁸

Within the context of the civil rights movement, Brubeck’s 1957 cancellation and 1958 near miss may seem small; after all, it was only Furgerson’s insider knowledge that allowed her to recognize Brubeck’s cancellation as an act of protest, not any public statement from Brubeck himself, and the few papers that covered the incidents at East Carolina College did so many months after the fact. However, though three years is a short period historically, the difference between the racial politics and activism of 1957 and 1960 is vast: this was the period during which the first lunch counter sit-ins began in Wichita, Kansas (1958), Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (1958), and Greensboro, North Carolina (1960), before spreading across the South in 1960 to Richmond, Virginia; Nashville, Tennessee; and Atlanta, Georgia, to name a few high-profile

protests, in addition to Northern cities, such as Waterloo, Iowa, where Furger-son lived.¹⁹ The visibility of Brubeck's protests likewise gradually shifted during this time period. As Brubeck continued to tour across the South, and with the permanent addition of Eugene Wright to his quartet, Brubeck eventually made public his commitment to combatting racial prejudice.

Five months after news of the South African tour broke, the Brubeck Quartet was scheduled to perform at the University of Georgia (UGA) in Athens, Georgia, on March 4, 1959. Shortly before the concert, Stuart Woods, a senior sociology major and the head of UGA's brand new Jazz Society, received publicity photos for the quartet that included Wright, and he immediately knew there would be a problem. Two years earlier, in 1957, UGA had instituted a policy banning integrated entertainment groups from performing on campus; similar policies were implemented in schools across the South following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the crisis in Little Rock in attempts to formally institute segregationist policies that had previously been standard practice. Furthermore, such pivotal historical moments also affected performers' engagement with racial politics on the bandstand. As Monson writes, "If in the mid-1940s playing with a mixed band was taken as a sign of a progressive racial attitude, by the mid-1950s a performer had to refuse to play to segregated audiences to meet the rising moral standards of the civil rights movement."²⁰ Stuart Woods had seen the Brubeck Quartet perform two years earlier, when white bassist Norman Bates was a regular member, and therefore had not anticipated any problems. With the addition of Wright and UGA's new policies, however, UGA's administration gave Woods no

choice but to cancel the performance. In press reports, Brubeck called the school's move to cancel the concert "unconstitutional and ridiculous," and he insisted that he would not perform with a white bassist "for a million dollars."²¹ Instead, *Variety* reported that Brubeck played a concert at Atlanta's Magnolia Ballroom, a black venue that became an integral staging ground for civil rights meetings.²²

Brubeck's cancelled concert reverberated across the UGA campus as students took sides debating integration and musical performance. The ensuing conversations make clear the complexity of the student body's feelings toward integration in an era and place that tended to simplify them. Woods immediately began a petition to repeal the university's policy requiring only segregated performing groups; but by April, it was clear that his petition had failed. Though the UGA Student Council denied his request for the body to sponsor a campus-wide poll to ascertain student opinion on the policy, the Student Council also denied a counter-motion that asked the group to make public its support of the policy.²³ Students wrote editorials in the independent student newspaper *The Red and Black* both in support of Brubeck and in support of the policy preventing Brubeck's appearance. Students in favor of the Brubeck concert argued that the quartet and other musical groups be allowed to play on the basis of skill and musical worth (a version of the "let's keep politics out of music" argument), or that students be allowed more autonomy to set their own policies (a riff on states' rights rhetoric frequently used in the South to fight against civil rights laws at the federal level).

For students and administrators against Brubeck's concert, Brubeck's near-performance at UGA ignited what historian Carol Anderson refers to as "white rage." As Anderson explains,

White rage is not about visible violence, but rather it works its way through the courts, the legislatures, and a range of government bureaucracies. . . . White rage doesn't have to wear sheets, burn crosses, or take to the streets. Working the halls of power, it can achieve its ends far more effectively, far more destructively.²⁴

White rage, Anderson argues, is often triggered by black advancement: "It is not the mere presence of black people that is the problem; rather, it is blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full and equal citizenship." In other words, those protesting Wright's presence in the quartet objected to the notion that Brubeck could not find a white musician who could equal Wright's musical ability. White rage was palpable on the pages of *The Red and Black*: Robert Ingram, a UGA student, suggested that all of Brubeck's records be broken, explaining that, "Accepting the skill of a Negro performer and even going so far as appreciating it is a giant step toward integration. We cannot afford to be the least bit broad minded – not even for the sake of art."²⁵ The support that UGA's policy banning integrated performing groups received across campus should not be surprising. After all, as many in the black press would point out, the policy was only two years old; in other words, it was enacted in the same year as the Little Rock integration crisis. Fear, however unfounded, fueled the rage that ultimately prompted Brubeck's own struggle against UGA's segregationist policies – and further, policies across the South.

Brubeck's experience with UGA set the stage for his 1960 Southern tour. In the lead up to the 1960 concert cancellations, Brubeck mounted a direct campaign for Southern audiences that included two

albums full of Southern songs: *Gone with the Wind*, recorded in April 1959 and released in August, and *Southern Scene*, recorded in September and October 1959 and released in the spring of 1960. *Gone with the Wind*, recorded less than two months after the UGA cancellation and as a commercial and financial safeguard against the experimental (and ultimately wildly popular) *Time Out* (1959), paid particular tribute to the state of Georgia through the inclusion of both its title track and "Georgia on My Mind." As Brubeck explained to Ralph Gleason after schools had cancelled his 1960 tour, "Let me reiterate: we want to play in the South. . . . Therefore, we appeal to them to help us."²⁶

Brubeck's plan, then, was to motivate Southern audiences to accept his integrated group through performances of popular Southern songs; in doing so, Brubeck again banked on his ability to attract "new" audiences to jazz. With *Gone with the Wind* and *Southern Scene*, Brubeck and his quartet-mates specifically chose popular Southern songs, including well-known minstrel songs by Stephen Foster ("Swanee River," "Camptown Races," and "Oh Susanna"), jazz standards ("Gone with the Wind" and "Basin Street Blues"), mainstream hits ("Little Rock Getaway," "Georgia on My Mind," and "Deep in the Heart of Texas"), and popular songs written by white composers from the perspective of black musicians ("The Lonesome Road," "Ol' Man River," and "Short'nin Bread"). Nearly all of the songs performed across both albums had been performed by popular musicians, such as Bing Crosby, Ray Charles, Julie London, and Frank Sinatra, in addition to well-known jazz musicians like Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, and Miles Davis. The diverse mix of original composers and subsequent performers in part indicate

Brubeck's interest in promoting musical integration to the widest possible audience.

Whereas in Brubeck's early career, his image and music had been described and promoted as decidedly "white," with *Gone with the Wind* and *Southern Scene*, Brubeck explicitly advanced an integrated visual image by making Wright especially visible on both album covers. *Gone with the Wind*'s cover artwork depicts the Brubeck Quartet on a covered pavilion surrounded by lush green trees, whose grandiose archways and pillars evoke a massive Southern plantation. Brubeck and Desmond, the group's more well-known members, are foregrounded, with Morello and Wright standing at a pillar in the background. The color photo could not be clearer: this is an integrated quartet. The cover of the later *Southern Scene* asserts the group's integration even more plainly. Amid illustrations of stereotypical scenes of the South (a plantation home and a steamboat) is a photo of the quartet in the shade of a tree on the bank of a river. Desmond, Wright, and Morello are seated together, wearing identical black suits, while Brubeck, in his gray leader's suit, leans over them, hand on Morello's shoulder. All four men are looking at the camera and smiling, and Wright, surrounded by his three white bandmates, is at the center of the image. The fact that apparently no one either objected to or noticed Wright's presence on *Gone with the Wind* prior to the 1960 tour suggests that Brubeck's image had previously been established as sufficiently white to render such an inclusion invisible – particularly to school administrators who may not have followed the quartet closely.

Throughout the 1950s, Brubeck's bassists were the least frequently featured members of the quartet. Therefore, Brubeck's decision to feature Wright prom-

inently on these albums, particularly on "Ol' Man River" and "Happy Times," is remarkable, and represents Brubeck's most explicit attempt to highlight Wright's musical contribution within the quartet directly to his Southern audiences. For those "in the know," these songs represented moments of sonic integration; for those who were not, the album demonstrated Brubeck's colorblind approach to music, in which white and black musicians could presumably freely cross what sound studies scholar Jennifer Lynn Stoeber has called the "sonic color line."²⁷ Simultaneously, Brubeck attempted to demonstrate why Wright was essential to his quartet's performances; and further, that Brubeck not only *would not* replace Wright, but he *could not* replace Wright.

According to Brubeck's autobiographer, Fred Hall, and liner notes for *Gone with the Wind* written by Teo Macero, Wright chose to perform "Ol' Man River."²⁸ The Brubeck Quartet's version is a bass feature that begins in a quick tempo with Wright performing the melody line, before a sudden transition to a half-time, bluesy improvisation from Wright. The song ends in a sudden and unaccompanied cadenza that tapers off as Wright descends in register, as if Wright's solo, like the Mississippi River, will "just keep rollin' along." As musicologist Todd Decker writes, "Ol' Man River" is "at its core – about the experience of being black in a segregated America."²⁹ The Brubeck version maintained the primacy of Wright's experience in performing a song that had, in its more than thirty-year history, been used as both a song of protest and a song of Southern nostalgia. In doing so, the quartet forced unwitting Southern segregationists to hear a song about the black experience in the South from a black man, supported by his white bandmates who insisted on Wright's integral musical

position within the quartet. That they did so in an album packaged for commercial audiences simultaneously cushioned the quartet from any overt retaliation from segregationists, and allowed Brubeck to advance his own subtle political ideology.

Brubeck not only highlighted Wright's musical contributions, but also emphasized the qualities of his personality that anyone, even audiences outside the music business, would understand as valuable character traits. According to liner notes written by Brubeck for "Happy Times," a Wright original and feature on *Southern Scene*, the song offered listeners a chance not only to hear Wright's composition, but to get to know Wright:

"Happy Times," an original by Gene Wright, is typical of the relaxed happy sound which has been the antidote to the history of trouble expressed in "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" [the previous track]. I think Gene's bass solo expressed the Wright attitude toward life – amiable, relaxed and smiling.³⁰

In these notes, Brubeck maps the easygoing and upbeat theme of "Happy Times" onto Wright's personality. To hear this song is essentially to enter into conversation with Wright: the arrangement chosen by the quartet makes it difficult for listeners to engage with any of the other musicians, as Brubeck and Morello perform accompanying roles and Desmond lays out. This allows Wright's voice, performed through his bass, to become the auditory focal point.

Brubeck does mention the other members of the quartet in the liner notes, but these primarily focus on Desmond's reactions to a certain take or a technique used by Morello, offering little in the way of information about Desmond and Morello's personalities and, in particular, do not focus on positive traits in as direct a manner as with Wright. However,

though Brubeck described Wright only in complimentary terms, the descriptions also adhered closely to negative stereotypes of black men as harmless to the point of subservience: an "Uncle Tom" stereotype represented solely through Brubeck's descriptions (not from any interview or quote from Wright) that nevertheless may have worked to Brubeck and Wright's advantage with Southern audiences ranging from squeamish to enraged at the thought of the quartet's integration. Nonetheless, in these liner notes, written just months after UGA had cancelled its concert over Wright's presence in the quartet, Brubeck makes the case that Wright is a crucial member of the group, explicitly marketing integration to Southern audiences.

As Brubeck navigated early civil rights protests, he worked to find an approach that suited his image and career, which he and his wife, managers, record producers, and advertisers had cultivated for nearly a decade. The result was a new musical and promotional approach for Brubeck, one that leveraged his whiteness to support integration efforts in the South. As Brubeck's concert cancellations became more visible, Brubeck became emboldened, and his indignation with policy-makers at Southern colleges and universities met the white rage of the segregationists protesting his performances. As Wynton Marsalis, trumpeter and artistic director for Jazz at Lincoln Center, once said, "[Brubeck] is important because he stood up for Civil Rights, when many of us – sat down."³¹ As a white man, Brubeck was able to simultaneously voice his anger and maintain a nonthreatening image in ways that, as Marsalis implies, black protesters typically could not. Ultimately, this period in Brubeck's career is important because it allows deep consideration of who Brubeck spoke for and

who he spoke over, who listened, and for whom his actions as a civil rights advocate were meaningful.

Certainly, the first person for whom Brubeck spoke was Wright, over whom Brubeck cancelled the South African tour, UGA concert, and 1960 Southern tour. But while Brubeck received glowing praise for doing so, Wright largely stayed quiet. In fact, Brubeck seemed to have shone a spotlight on issues Wright, a Chicago native, would rather not define him. An article in the *Pittsburgh Courier* by George Pitts quotes Wright as explaining that, "Whatever Dave does is okey [sic] by me."³² Wright continued, "If he wants to make the trip without me, it would be okey. I know he's all right, and I know if Brubeck decides to do something it will not be because of any feeling of his own on race." Wright's comments display considerable trust in Brubeck's decisions, but they did not have the impact many black journalists, including Pitts, desired. While Brubeck was lauded for his actions, Wright's experience with the press was more closely related to the criticisms faced by Nat King Cole, Duke Ellington, and Louis Armstrong when they failed to live up to the expectations the African American community held for highly visible black men – expectations that were significantly higher for black musicians than for white musicians.³³ Wright was subtly criticized by the black press for his comments: Pitts explained Wright's apparently unsatisfying statements thusly: "Wright finally found an opportunity to express his feelings, but all Americans knew his expression would be that of most Negroes who long have tasted the slurs of the Southland." The *Baltimore Afro-American* referred to Wright, a fairly dark-skinned man, as a "tan bassist," which suggests that the writer meant to criticize Wright for not being supportive enough to racial justice.³⁴ Despite such

criticism, Wright maintained his diplomatic stance in an interview decades later, as he recounted the story of a school that had initially refused to allow him to perform: "I won't say the name – that way nobody'll get hurt."³⁵

It seems as if, at least initially, Wright had little say in Brubeck's move toward race activism – even when Brubeck's protests positioned Wright as an activist as well. For example, in a 1981 interview, Brubeck spoke about the concert at East Carolina College, admitting that Wright had not known that the school was segregated and did not want to allow him to play; the school had approached Brubeck about the issue alone.³⁶ Further, Wright had not known that part of the compromise in allowing the quartet to perform at East Carolina College was that Wright stay in the background – so when Brubeck called him to the front of the group for a solo, Wright went. Likewise, Brubeck actually knew about the Southern universities' requirements for an all-white group: in a letter from ABC booking agent Bob Bundy to Dave Brubeck written three months prior to the cancellations, Bundy writes that the organization responsible for the Southern tour "will not accept . . . a mixed group."³⁷ Even though Brubeck likely had no intention of replacing Wright, he continued with his plans for the tour. Throughout this period, Brubeck made decisions that positioned both he and Wright as race activists, without seeming to understand the difference between what it meant for a white man to protest racial injustice in front of a white audience, and what it meant for a black man to do so.

Wright had the potential to be the focus of this story, and it certainly seems as if some audiences wanted him to be. But the fact that it was Brubeck at the center of this story, with Wright in the limelight, demonstrates the privilege Brubeck

had in potentially pushing Wright into a protest about which he was at best ambivalent. Brubeck's centrality to the story, however, also offered a unique challenge to audiences unused to hearing a white man explicitly position a black man as an integral part of his own career. Within the context of the early civil rights era, Brubeck's voice – as a bandleader, as an established musician, and as a white man whose career and image had been constructed around implicit norms of whiteness – simply weighed more than Wright's for many black and white audiences, members of the music industry, and Southern audiences. Further, Brubeck benefited from the lower standard to which these audiences held him, as a white performer, on issues of civil rights. William Pollard of the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, writing to commend Brubeck, agreed, arguing that “the majority race needs to lead the way in this respect,” emphasizing that “the perpetuation of racial discrimination is of their making.”³⁸ In other words, while it may have been Brubeck's responsibility to protest racial prejudice and segregation, the response to his actions reflected his privilege.

However, there lies an uneasy tension between Brubeck's outspoken support of integration and Wright's relative silence. That tension highlights a primary issue in white advocacy for racial justice causes: namely, that in supporting those whose voices have been systematically silenced throughout history, it can be easy to speak over the very voices advocates mean to amplify. Brubeck's actions and rhetoric were meaningful to countless fans and organizations, including the California chapter of the NAACP, who wrote to *DownBeat* and Brubeck, thanking Brubeck for taking a visible stand against prejudice, and clearly Wright supported Brubeck's decisions as bandleader. However, for Wright, Brubeck did not need to

take the steps he did. Had Brubeck been true to Wright's voice, he may not have cancelled any concerts; as Wright's comments above suggest, Wright knew Brubeck was “all right.” But though Wright was the reason for Brubeck's advocacy, Brubeck ultimately did not take this stand for Wright, but for people like Betty Jean Furgerson, whose letter to Brubeck made clear her belief that his actions could support her perspective. He spoke directly to his Southern supporters, appealing to their musical tastes, to make the case for musical integration. He inspired students like Stuart Woods, who attempted to reverse UGA's segregationist policy, and institutions like East Carolina College, which reconsidered discriminatory policies that prevented black musicians from performing. And, ultimately, Brubeck took this stand for himself, possibly for reasons based in both principle and self-interest. In interviews looking back on this period, Brubeck's indignance at justice unfulfilled is clear; however, his fear for his own livelihood is also apparent. But even if Brubeck believed he could have lost his career by confronting segregation more directly, and even if he believed he was making a broader stand against racism, it was Brubeck – his image and his legacy – that benefited most from his decisions. Brubeck's advocacy relied on his power and privilege within the mainstream music industry to craft albums and marketing approaches that amplified the music and beliefs of the African Americans with whom he had grown close. In doing so, Brubeck harnessed his white image in order to once again bring new audiences to jazz – and to his own music – in the segregationist South.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Ralph J. Gleason, "An Appeal from Dave Brubeck," *DownBeat*, February 1960.
- ² One exception was Norman Granz, who, as founder of Jazz at the Philharmonic, had been cancelling concerts at venues with segregated audiences since the 1940s. For Granz, Brubeck's insistence on performing in an integrated ensemble had not gone far enough: by 1960, Brubeck should have insisted that the audiences be integrated. Norman Granz, "The Brubeck Stand: A Divergent View By Norman Granz," *DownBeat*, July 1960.
- ³ Nat Hentoff, "Review of Jazz at Oberlin, by Dave Brubeck," *DownBeat*, December 1953; Dave Brubeck, "The New Jazz Audience," *Playboy*, August 1955; Ralph J. Gleason, "Brubeck: 'I Did Do Some Things First,'" *DownBeat*, September 1957; C. H. Garrigues, "Brubeck's Fans Learned About Jazz in College," *San Francisco Examiner*, November 3, 1957; and "Jazz Climbs Up the Social Ladder—With a Mighty Shove from Dave Brubeck," *New York National Enquirer*, March 16, 1958.
- ⁴ Dave Garroway, *Friday with Garroway*, November 12, 1954, NBC Radio Collection, Motion Picture, Broadcasting & Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
- ⁵ Gleason, "Brubeck," 14.
- ⁶ Mariana Torgovnick argues that Homer's *Odyssey* anticipated later colonial encounters with the "primitive" Other. However, such binaries were widely used across the centuries by philosophers, historians, and critics to designate and denigrate an Other, whether defined by race, gender, sexuality, or other characteristics. Also see René Descartes, "Part IV," in *A Discourse on the Method*, trans. Ian Maclean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 28; Simon Frith, "Rhythm: Race, Sex, and the Body," in *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 123–144; Ted Gioia, "Jazz and the Primitivist Myth," in *The Imperfect Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Mariana Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
- ⁷ Arnold Shaw, "West Coast Jazz," *Esquire*, September 1955, 127.
- ⁸ The Modern Jazz Quartet employed strict fugal arrangements and a blend of improvised and precomposed counterpoint, particularly between John Lewis (piano) and Milt Jackson (vibraphone). These include a strict fugue, "Vendôme," and the quartet's direct quotation of J. S. Bach's *Musical Offering* in "Softly, As in a Morning Sunrise."
- ⁹ Of course, being called "intellectual" was not a benefit within most jazz circles; "intellect" countered the improvisation required for "authentic" jazz performances. Therefore, Brubeck tended to promote the spontaneity of his music over his precomposition, explaining many times throughout his career that "composition is selective improvisation" (a quote he misattributed to Igor Stravinsky).
- ¹⁰ Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 63–64. The Dallas State Fair Park was a site of frequent protest for black activists fighting segregation on the grounds. In addition to the segregation of many of the rides and food establishments within the park, the State Fair held a "Negro Achievement Day," the only day in which black patrons could fully participate in the State Fair. Martin Herman Kuhlman, "The Civil Rights Movement in Texas: Desegregation of Public Accommodations, 1950–1964" (Ph.D. diss., Texas Tech University, 1994); Donald Payton, "Timeline: A Concise

- History: Black Dallas since 1842,” *D Magazine*, June 1998, <http://www.dmagazine.com/publications/d-magazine/1998/june/timeline-a-concise-history>; and Kathryn Siefker, “NAACP Youth Council Picket Line, 1955 Texas State Fair,” *Bullock Texas State History Museum*, <https://www.thestoryoftexas.com/discover/artifacts/naacp-state-fair-spotlight-012315>. Kelsey A. K. Klotz
- ¹¹ “Brubeck Cancels Dallas Booking,” *The Daily Journal*, Commerce, Texas, September 10, 1957; “Brubeck Band Cancels Out Dallas Date,” *The Times*, San Mateo, California, September 10, 1957; “Jazz Combos Cancel Dallas Bookings,” *Tucson Daily Citizen*, September 10, 1957; “Jazz Groups Skip Trips over South,” *Corsicana Daily Sun*, September 12, 1957; and “Jazz Concerts Cancelled over Racial Issue,” *The Galveston Daily News*, September 12, 1957.
- ¹² B. J. Furgerson, personal letter to Dave Brubeck, October 22, 1957, Brubeck Collection, Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library, Stockton, California.
- ¹³ Betty Jean Furgerson, “Jazz in Iowa: Betty Jean (BJ) Furgerson’s Memories,” Iowa Public Television, http://www.iptv.org/jazz/bj_furgerson.cfm (accessed October 31, 2015). The Ellington Orchestra’s frequent stops could have been due to policies of segregation and discrimination in the area. Even though Iowa passed one of the first state statutes banning discrimination in the 1880s, the statute was not enforced in the 1950s, and many restaurants, cafés, and hotels in Waterloo—one of the state’s most segregated cities, then and now—denied service to blacks and other minority citizens. As Furgerson remembers, “I learned they came to those dinners because we only had family members other than band members. They knew they did not have to be on stage and/or talk or be the entertainment. They could relax!” Bruce Fehn, “The Only Hope We Had: United Packinghouse Workers Local 46 and the Struggle for Racial Equality in Waterloo, Iowa, 1948–1960,” *The Annals of Iowa* 54 (3) (Summer 1995): 185–216; Kyle Munson, “Black Iowa: Waterloo Rallies to Combat Violence, Racial Divides,” *Des Moines Register*, July 13, 2015, <http://dmreg.co/11RVh1e> (accessed November 28, 2015); and Theresa E. Shirey, “Common Patterns in an Uncommon Place: The Civil Rights Movement and Persistence of Racial Inequality in Waterloo, Iowa” (honors project, Bowdoin College, 2014).
- ¹⁴ Roger Maxwell, “Jazz in Iowa: Backstage Conversations, Impressions and Remembrances, My Experiences with Popular and Jazz Artists,” Iowa Public Television, <http://www.iptv.org/jazz/backstage.cfm#brubeck> (accessed October 31, 2015).
- ¹⁵ Ralph Gleason, “Brubeck Cancels South Africa Because of Negro Artist Ban,” *Daily Boston Globe*, October 19, 1958.
- ¹⁶ Steve Tuttle, “When Music Broke the Color Barrier,” *East* 12 (1) (2013): 14.
- ¹⁷ Gleason, “Brubeck Cancels South Africa.”
- ¹⁸ Tuttle, “When Music Broke the Color Barrier,” 14.
- ¹⁹ Fehn, “The Only Hope We Had,” 213.
- ²⁰ Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 61.
- ²¹ John Keasler, “Jazz Society Cancels Brubeck Appearance for Campus Concert,” *The Red and Black*, February 26, 1959.
- ²² “U. of Ga. Nixes Brubeck (Bassist a Negro) but OK at Atlanta ‘Race’ Spot,” *Variety*, March 4, 1959, 49.
- ²³ “Council Discusses Jazz Club Petition,” *The Red and Black*, April 16, 1959.
- ²⁴ Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 3.
- ²⁵ Robert Ingram, “Letters to the Editor,” *The Red and Black*, February 26, 1959.
- ²⁶ Gleason, “An Appeal from Dave Brubeck.”
- ²⁷ Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

- ²⁸ Fred M. Hall, *It's About Time: The Dave Brubeck Story* (Fayetteville, Ark.: University of Arkansas Press, 1996), 63; and Teo Macero, liner notes for The Dave Brubeck Quartet, *Gone with the Wind*, Columbia Records, 1959.
- ²⁹ Todd Decker, *Who Should Sing "Ol' Man River"?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 14.
- ³⁰ Dave Brubeck, liner notes for *Southern Scene*, Columbia Records, 1960.
- ³¹ Wynton Marsalis, "The Life and Music of Dave Brubeck," concert featuring the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, April 12, 2014, Rose Theater, Jazz at Lincoln Center, New York, <https://youtu.be/PQ-yXQItCGg> (accessed October 30, 2015). As for Brubeck, he firmly believed that jazz had "always been an example set to the world of true integration." "Editorial," *San Francisco Chronicle*, n.d., c. 1960, Brubeck Collection, Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library, Stockton, California.
- ³² George E. Pitts, "Give Brubeck Credit for a Slap at Bias," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 12, 1960, 12. The "[sic]" is original to Pitts's quotation of Wright.
- ³³ Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 29–65.
- ³⁴ "Tan Bassist given OK in Memphis," *Afro-American*, January 23, 1960.
- ³⁵ Hall, *It's About Time*, 87.
- ³⁶ Dave Brubeck, interview with Kerry Frumkin, WFMT, October 17, 1981, Brubeck Collection, Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library, Stockton, California.
- ³⁷ Bob Bundy to Dave Brubeck, personal letter, October 6, 1959, Brubeck Collection, Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library, Stockton, California. Many thanks to Stephen Crist for bringing this document to my attention.
- ³⁸ William E. Pollard, "Labor's Side," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 28, 1960.