Dave Brubeck's Southern Strategy

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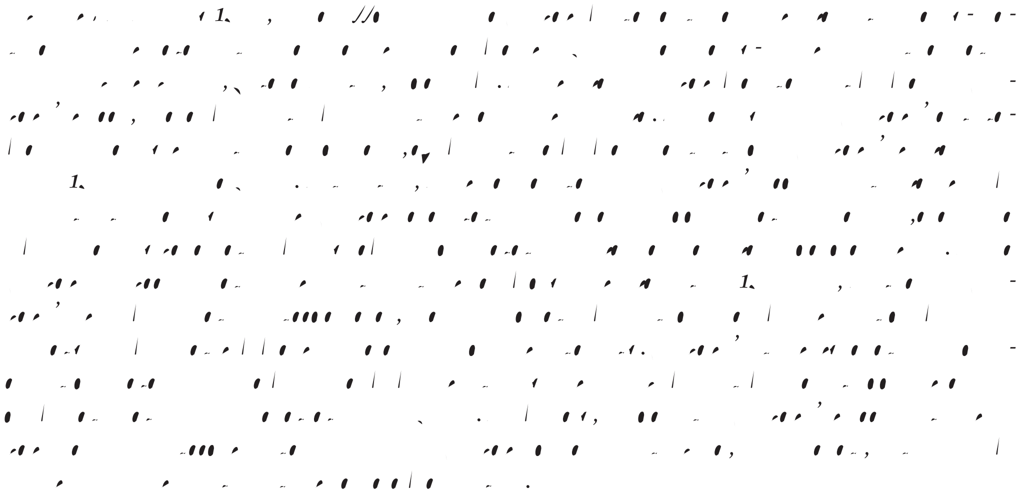

In January 1960, white jazz pianist Dave Brubeck made headlines after twenty-two colleges and universities across the American South refused to allow his interracial quartet to perform. Initially, eleven of the schools backed out of their contracts with Brubeck upon learning that he and two other white 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 [illegible] and [illegible], and black newspapers, including the [illegible], [illegible], [illegible], [illegible], and [illegible], 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 [illegible] 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 [illegible], [illegible], and [illegible]. 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 [illegible] 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

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 [illegible] 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

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 extent 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.

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."

protests, in addition to Northern cities, such as Waterloo, Iowa, where Furgerson 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 ( ) in Athens, Georgia, on March 4, 1959. Shortly before the concert, Stuart Woods, a senior sociology major and the head of '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, had instituted a policy banning integrated entertainment groups from performing on campus; similar policies were implemented in schools across the South following the 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."

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

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 [illegible], 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 [illegible] 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, 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 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 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 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.

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 [illegible], 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 meaningfteagj 0.216 Tyor's90ec2l6Df-white peraciania0 Twpt-

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