The Next American President?
Henry Berger on Barack Obama
Director’s Notes

Nothing is so welcome as the sense of relief that accompanies the end of having orchestrated a major, pressure-packed event. It is akin to the feeling of being able to unclench one’s jaw, of experiencing the evaporation of tension and the return of the normal frets and annoyances of banal life, which seem a familiar comfort. If the event is a success, the anxiety, as life-shortening as it probably is, seems worth the price.

On Friday and Saturday, March 14 and 15, the WU Center for the Humanities hosted the annual meeting of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI), the major international organization of entities such as this one, a sort of showcase event for our center, our international coming-out party, so to speak, or coming of age moment. The theme of this year’s conference was “The Humanities in an Age of Science.” Humanities center directors came from all over the United States as well as Ireland, Germany, England, Australia, the Netherlands, and other countries. Even our neighbors across the street, so to speak, the director and associate director of the Center for the Humanities at University of Missouri–St. Louis came and played an important role in one of the conference’s workshops. Our keynote speakers, Mary Poovey of New York University, who spoke on the social history of the fact, and Peter Galison of Harvard University, who spoke on the history of scientific objectivity, were outstanding. Many found them inspiring in the range and power of their scholarship. We also held a panel session at the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, thanks much to the gracious hospitality of executive director Matthias Waschek.

What I am most grateful for is the participation of several of my Washington University colleagues, who did so much to make the conference so enormously incisive and intellectually rigorous, yet so remarkably accessible and open. Dean Robert Thach of the Graduate School gave welcoming remarks. Among the panelists were Sarah Rivett of the English Department, Garland Allen of Biology, Carl Craver of the Philosophy Department, Patricia Olynyk of the Sam Fox School, and Walt Schlicker, former WU professor of medicine. I am especially grateful to Steven Meyer of the English Department, who provided a brief address on the significance of the theme of the conference that was both witty and wonderfully insightful. I thought his remarks were worth sharing, as they had the compactness and narrative coherence of a well-turned essay, and so, with his kind permission, they are included in this issue of Belles Lettres.

The success of the conference was in large measure due to the hard work of associate director Jian Leng and her two assistants, administrative assistant Barbara Liebmann and financial bookkeeper Robbi Jones. Never has a director been more enabled by such a capable staff!

This issue’s core is music, with essays by WU professor of dance Mary Jean Cowell on Jerome Robbins, probably most famous for his choreography for West Side Story; by Michael MacCambridge on St. Louis’s greatest musician, Chuck Berry, and the disturbingly brittle yet insouciant nature of his genius; and by Wayne Zade on jazz singer and, in effect, literary scholar Nancy Harrow, one of the truly underappreciated gems of modern American music. In addition, we have book reviews by WU graduate student Jerome Camal on the art of practicing and WU history PhD Ben Cawthra on the history of jazz criticism.

In addition, we have two nonmusic essays that, in some way, frame this issue: WU history professor emeritus Henry Berger writes about the political marvel Barack Obama—the man who would be president, and the African American who is poised to change American electoral politics forever—in a review of Shelby Steele’s book about the famed Illinois senator. Also, Benjamin Israel writes an essay about how a black police officer and a black defense lawyer earned an acquittal for a black man who admitted killing a white police officer back during the halcyon days of segregation in St. Louis, a tale so amazing that it might have garnered a place in Ripley’s Believe It or Not but one that, more importantly, reminds us of the astonishing competence and secret institutional courage of many black professionals back in the old days of segregated America. I am pleased to publish it in Belles Lettres.

Finally, we have an active blog on our website at http://cchenum.arts.wustl.edu/publications/blog.html. Please read our entries, which are timely enough. I have written about the candidacies of both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Log some posts! I wrote about them mostly because I felt they would elicit no shortage of commentary, no matter what I said. I will probably write something later on John McCain, but after that, I doubt if there will ever be anything about politics again. I don’t even like politics! But experience teaches one, as bedeviled as we mortals are by our inconsistencies and failed promises, to never say never.
The Humanities in an Age of Science

Remarks by Steven Meyer at the annual meeting of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes

In my few minutes I’ll try to frame the concerns of this conjoint CHCI/Center for the Humanities conference (and in particular tomorrow’s workshop on models of collaborative work in humanities centers and institutes) in such a way that we might be able to start our deliberations from some point beyond the tired two-cultures debate we’ve inherited from the past century.¹

I will be combining two approaches, first that of hometown booster, bringing several traditions of thought to your attention that possess particularly strong associations with this University, with St. Louis, and with Missouri; then proposing an alternative to what I take to be the dominant understanding of interdisciplinary study today.

Each year before classes start, incoming Wash. U. freshmen are asked to read a book of general interest and then discuss it in groups of twenty or so. The selection this past August was Alan Lightman’s novel Einstein’s Dreams (1993), and after everyone in my group had gathered, I asked the students to identify themselves as prospective science majors (or pre-meds) and humanities majors. After we went around the room, we looked at one another with dismay, as the students on the left-hand side had all indicated they were going to major in the sciences, and the students on the right-hand side, with one exception, were leaning toward the humanities. The exception in this self-organizing scheme wondered aloud whether he ought to move to the “science” side. The same student later proved to be the only one familiar with Italo Calvino, whose Invisible Cities (1972) had inspired Lightman; where Calvino imagined dozens of alternative worlds in spatial terms, Lightman offered alternate temporal configurations for Einstein’s Basel. The students insisted that their seating had just fallen out this way—they were all hallmates— and doubtless it would not have been replicated in the fifty other discussion groups meeting simultaneously. Still, it was enough to give them, and me, pause.

I’m going to take the young reader of Calvino as my exemplary figure (however exceptional he may have been in the context of his peers) and sketch a bit of the prehistory of the highly productive position he found himself in at the confluence of the two great rivers, the Missouri and the Mississippi, for my purposes today figuring the humanities and the sciences. In particular I’d like to invoke Pudd’nhead Wilson, Mark Twain’s grim 1894 masterwork, which takes place in “the town of Dawson’s Landing, on the Missouri side of the Mississippi, half a day’s journey, per steamboat, below St. Louis.” The narrative starts in 1830 and centers in 1853, smack dab in the midst of the protracted Dred Scott case,² with the plotline of Twain’s tale set in motion by a classic baby switch, in this American instance a slave “thirty-one parts white” of thirty-two exchanged for a pure-white infant.

Three aspects of Pudd’nhead Wilson bear directly on our present concerns. In the first place, in writing the novel Twain relied heavily on Francis Galton’s 1892 treatise on Finger Prints, which firmly placed the study of fingerprints on a scientific basis. The actual identities of the now-grown men who had been exchanged as infants could thereby be established and the very fact of the switch discovered. So here we have a work of literature fully (if, given the historical nature of the narrative, anachronistically) engaged with the most current science. To be sure, this was fairly common practice in the late nineteenth century, what with the increased popularity of science fiction as well as “scientific” fictions such as Edwin A. Abbott’s Flatland (1884) and Lewis Carroll’s Hunting of the Snark (1876). (I should also mention, in light of the talk we’ll be hearing later this morning by Gar Allen on “race and genetics,” that Galton coined the term eugenics in 1883.)

Second, there’s the quite extraordinary formal quality of Pudd’nhead Wilson. I’ve never run across anyone, outside of courses of mine, who will admit to having read a work called Those Extraordinary Twins alongside Pudd’nhead Wilson. I don’t know how to explain this, as the two works are bound together in the Norton Critical Edition. In his introductory remarks to Those Extraordinary Twins, Twain described the unhappy situation he found himself in, in composing Pudd’nhead Wilson, as it “changed itself from a farce to a tragedy while I was going along with it.” “What was a good deal worse,” he added, “was, that it was not one story, but two stories tangled together; and they obstructed and interrupted each other at every turn and created no end of confusion and annoyance,” so ultimately he was obliged to “pull one of the stories out by the roots” and leave “the other one—a kind of literary Caesarean operation.” Perhaps you find here, as I do, an allegory for “the humanities in an age
of science,” or more exactly of the humanities and the sciences in an age of interdisciplinarity.

But wait, it gets better. “Originally,” Twain remarked, “the story was called ‘Those Extraordinary Twins’.... I had seen a picture of a youthful Italian ‘freak’—or ‘freaks’—which was—or were—on exhibition in our cities—a combination consisting of two heads and four arms joined in a single body and a single pair of legs.” To bring the tale of these Siamese twins to a fitting conclusion, he had them fall into a well and drown along with several other characters. Yet when he “pulled out the farce and left the tragedy....their prominence was wholly gone; they were not even worth drowning; so I removed that detail. Also I took the twins apart and made two separate men of them. They had no occasion to have foreign names now, but it was too much trouble to remove them all through, so I left them christened as they were and made no explanation”.

“The suppressed farce” then follows: the twins are conjoined again, and in the true spirit of farce, one proves bad, the other good, the bad boy murdering someone and the community having to determine whether to execute him, which unfortunately would do away with the good twin as well. Not only do Twain’s twins embody the complex relations between his conjoined tales, but like the Snark and Boojum of Carroll’s Hunting of the Snark—Snark turning into Boojum at the very moment of...of what?...of something happening,...still not clear what it is...why not hazard a guess?—they prove endlessly suggestive for thinking about the relations between the humanities and the sciences.

Pudd’nhead Wilson, I’d like to suggest, may be understood as a model for a certain kind of interdisciplinarity, where the conversation between disciplines occurs within an individual.

The third aspect of Pudd’nhead Wilson that possesses direct relevance to our conference theme is Pudd’nhead Wilson himself—more specifically, the story of his name. This act of interpellation will also lead us to the alternate understanding of interdisciplinary study I’ve promised. First, however, as I near the end of my allotted time, I’ll list several more of the local relevances I would have liked to address: among them, the post–Civil War St. Louis Hegelians, with their Journal of Speculative Philosophy, the first English-language journal devoted solely to philosophy, in which Peirce, James, and Dewey all published important work; also the sharp contrast between T. S. Eliot and Marianne Moore, major American poets born a year apart in St. Louis, with regard to poetry’s proper relations with science. (Eliot’s grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, was of course the key figure in the early history of Washington University.) To these I would add the “poetry of science” of James Merrill, whose archives are housed in the University library, including twenty years of Ouija board transcripts that served as “raw material” for his masterpiece, The Changing Light at Sandover (1982); the University’s Philosophy-Neuroscience-Psychology program, “designed to provide philosophers with an understanding of the modes of inquiry and the empirical results and theoretical perspectives of contemporary psychology and the neurosciences”; the significant role played by University faculty in the 1930s and ‘40s within the Phage Group, which also included James Watson’s teacher, Salvador Luria at Indiana—the same Jim Watson whose luck so abruptly ran out recently, but who in the guise of “lucky Jim” composed “a personal account of the discovery of the structure of DNA” that navigates between molecular biology and narrative art in a manner that would have done Twain proud.

As for the name Pudd’nhead, please allow me to refresh your memory: In 1830 David Wilson was a newly minted lawyer setting up shop in Dawson’s Landing. His first day in town, having “just made the acquaintance of a group of citizens,” he uttered the “fatal” statement that subsequently “gauged” him:

An invisible dog began to yelp and snarl and make himself very comprehensibly disagreeable, whereupon young Wilson said, much as one who is thinking aloud:

“I wish I owned half of that dog.”

“Why?” someone asked.

“Because, I would kill my half.”

The group searched his face with curiosity, with anxiety even, but found no light there, no expression that they could read. They fell away from him as from something.

The question, then, is whether our own structures of interdisciplinary exchange, chief among them humanities centers and institutes, are any better prepared to encourage the form of interdisciplinarity that Pudd’nhead Wilson represents.
uncanny, and went into privacy to discuss him. One said:  
"'Pears to be a fool."

"'Pears?' said another. "Is, I reckon you better say."

"Said he wished he owned half of the dog, the idiot," said a third. "What did he reckon would become of the other half if he killed his half? Did he reckon he thought it would live?"

And so on, until another of the local geniuses joins in:

"'I'm with you, gentlemen," said No. 6. "Perfect jackass—yes, and it ain't going too far to say he is a pudd'nhead. If he ain't a pudd'nhead, I ain't no judge, that's all."

Within a week our hero "had lost his first name; Pudd'nhead took its place."

Pudd'nhead Wilson, I'd like to suggest, may be understood as a model for a certain kind of interdisciplinarity, where the conversation between disciplines occurs within an individual—although not exclusively inside, so that others will occasionally have the "uncanny" sense, to use Twain's word, of overhearing something notably hard to place—instead of chiefly occurring between representatives of different disciplines, the dominant institutional form interdisciplinarity takes in our universities today. Wilson's "deadly remark," Twain went on to observe, "had ruined his chance—at least in the law." The flip side was that "he had a rich abundance of idle time," which "never hung heavy on his hands, for he interested himself in every new thing that was born into the universe of ideas, and studied it and experimented upon it at his house"—set off, in other words, from the prevailing social institutions of Dawson's Landing. The question, then, is whether our own structures of interdisciplinary exchange, chief among them humanities centers and institutes, are any better prepared to encourage the form of interdisciplinarity that Pudd'nhead Wilson represents. One of his "pet fads was palmistry"; and "to another one," Twain continued, "he gave no name, neither would he explain to anybody what its purpose was, but merely said it was an amusement...." The fad without a name was one which dealt with people's fingerprints.

I have presented James Watson as a throwback to the Twain who navigated the Mississippi between disciplinary banks on either side. Equally, Watson may be regarded as a precursor of the kayaker whom Bruno Latour recently invoked as "apprehending" the riverbanks from the point of view of "the turbulent river"—thereby modeling the brand of science studies Latour himself practices, along with fellow voyagers such as Isabelle Stengers and Donna Haraway. Watson also stands, however, as the very prototype behind the current rage for interdisciplinarity in the sciences (most breathtakingly manifested perhaps in Stanford's Bio X initiative). For it was the training Watson received in the Phage Group—an interest, it so happens, triggered by a youthful encounter with Sinclair Lewis's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Arrowsmith* (1925), with its compelling account of early investigations of bacteriophages—that made his participation in the fateful conversations with Francis Crick in Cambridge in the early 1950s so indispensable. Watson's and Crick's differences in personality are striking, their differences in training even more so. Yet, as I've tried to suggest, this interdisciplinary model is not the whole story, certainly if what one is after is an adequate understanding of the complex interactions among the sciences and the humanities. In conceiving of these various domains of knowledge, with their respective ways of knowing, as rivers not just riverbanks (thereby acknowledging that the banks are themselves products of the rivers), one would be well advised not to limit one's notions of interdisciplinarity to the admittedly essential activity of bridge building.

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2 Twain's novel was published two years before the famous *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that upheld the constitutionality of state-sponsored racial segregation. It is interesting to note that the plaintiff in the case, Homer Plessy, who sued Louisiana for its segregated railroad cars, was seven-eighths white and only one-eighth black.

Talking to Chuck Berry about his music is a little like meeting God and finding out He doesn't remember making the Earth or care what people did there.
—Bill Flanagan, Written in My Soul

There are at least two great mysteries about Chuck Berry. The first is why the father of rock 'n' roll, the consummate striver who worked tirelessly for his shot at stardom in the '50s, became so cavalier and dismissive about his work once he achieved that popularity. To look at Berry’s career from any angle—be it musical, personal, financial, or psychological—is to see a man increasingly embittered and alienated from the outside world, even as he keeps flashing his signature smile. And this leads to the second mystery, which is how someone so deeply scarred as he could continue, at least for a period in the '60s, to create music infused with so much joy, feeling, whimsy, and bristling intelligence.

Elvis Presley will forever remain rock 'n' roll’s totemic, galvanizing figure. But without Berry to further refine and define the revolutionary lightning that Elvis helped capture, the musical form may well have withered on the vine. Berry’s seminal double-string guitar style provided an unshakable sonic foundation upon which generations would build. Through his astonishing lyrical gifts he had a similarly powerful impact, not merely expanding the vocabulary of popular music but codifying the idea of rock 'n' roll.

Berry was twenty-nine years old when he completed his first composition, and for the next decade his songwriting distilled modern American urban youth culture in all its seductive trappings, from young love to dances to mobility, both literal and figurative. “They’re really rockin’ in Boston, and Pittsburgh, P-A / Deep in the heart of Texas, and round the ‘Frisco Bay,” he sang. And what Berry was describing was nothing so inconsequential as a fad or a musical style but something more profound and lasting, a social revolution that would resonate across the country and the decades. What Brown v. Board of Education did for American schools, rock ‘n’ roll would do for American culture: It set the country inexorably on a path where it would have to reconcile itself to its own egalitarian ideals. Roll over Supreme Court, and tell George Wallace the news.

After too long of a wait, the excellent 1987 documentary Chuck Berry Hail! Hail! Rock 'n' Roll has been released on DVD in a lavish four-disc boxed set. Included here is nearly eight hours of additional footage, ranging from the obligatory (and in this case, highly informative) documentary about the making of the film to several hours of largely unedited interview footage with the founding fathers of rock ‘n’ roll, many of whom were interviewed for the picture. Outside of Berry’s music itself, director Taylor Hackford’s intimate, engrossing, flawed film may well remain the most lasting testament we have to Berry’s revelatory artistry. As an insight into the true nature of the elusive, confounding man himself, the package raises as many questions as it answers.

Much of the movie was shot during a week in the fall of 1986, culminating with two concerts held at the Fox Theatre in St. Louis. In the days prior to the show, Hackford filmed Berry in and around the city, spending long hours at the singer’s Wentzville, Missouri, home, where Berry rehearsed with an all-star band led by his greatest disciple, the Rolling Stones’ indomitable guitarist, Keith Richards. It was Berry’s rote, pedestrian live touring shows—often stingy, sloppy, hour-long affairs, always with a hired local band of complete strangers—that convinced Richards he owed it to his inspiration to “set Chuck up with a proper band.”

This much he clearly did. The concert material shot at the Fox that made it into the film is almost uniformly strong, with Robert Cray sweetly leading the band through “Brown-Eyed
Handsome Man” and an energetic Linda Ronstadt pairing with Berry on “Livin’ in the U.S.A.” Time stands still during the lone clinker, Berry's duet on “Johnny B. Goode” with a shrill, green Julian Lennon (looking disconcertingly like the singer k.d. lang). But even this is redeemed by the showstopper, in which Berry and Etta James give a joyous rendition of “Rock ’n’ Roll Music,” with James's powerful voice and formidable presence raising stakes that the beaming Berry gladly calls.

More interesting than the songs themselves is the footage documenting the rehearsals to prepare for the performance (perhaps the only conscientious rehearsing with a band that Berry had done in decades), during which we see the inevitable, titan clash of wills between Berry and Richards—what the director Hackford describes as “the alpha male thing between Chuck and Keith.” The pair is shown arguing loudly, first over the way Berry sets his amp for recording the rehearsal, then over the style in which Richards plays Berry's signature opening guitar riff on “Carol.” We begin to get a sense of just how obstinate the star has become, and how hard he can make it on those who care about him.

Then there’s the proud gypsy Keith Richards. He moves through the film like a prodigal son returning home to celebrate the life of a father who at times seems to have grown too bitter and crotchety to abide a proper celebration. There are moments in the rehearsal standoffs when Berry is so maddeningly obdurate that if Richards had literally bitten his tongue, he surely would have drawn blood. Instead, he just glares and takes another swig of beer, steadfastly fulfilling his mission, tolerating Berry’s willful behavior for the greater good.

The interview with Richards, which we see glimpses of throughout the film, occurred in the hours following the second and final concert at the Fox, when he had been awake for more than thirty-six hours. Working on an ever-present cigarette, hair disheveled, the famously careworn face looking all the more lined, Richards sits back regally in a chair, a bottle of bourbon in a nearby sink, recounting the experience. And in these moments, he becomes the conscience of the film, the man willing to speak the hard truths that no one else at the time had the nerve to utter. Crucially, Richards—a man as famed as Berry for living life on his own terms—saved those truths until after the concerts, for he must have realized that if he’d said them to Berry's face during the week of rehearsal, the picture might never have gotten made.

It nearly didn’t get made anyway. In the original movie, Berry is by turns vibrant and wistful, modest about his talents and yet justifiably proud of all he has accomplished. But he also comes across as a domineering, disingenuous, licentious, money-hungry, philandering bully who could get away with this and more because of a combination of genuine charm, a commanding presence, and a darkly Machiavellian streak.

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After watching the three discs of behind-the-scenes extras, it’s evident that under the circumstances the filmmakers were not being unfair to Berry; if anything, they soft-pedaled the prickly nature of his persona. It is certainly the only “making of” docu-

mentary I’ve ever seen in which the film’s producer (Stephanie Bennett) recalls throwing a bagful of cash at the star and telling him what she really thought of him, or mentioning rather wearily that if he hadn’t made a pass at her, she would have felt insulted, “because he made a pass at every other woman on the set.”

Those who have followed Berry’s career closely won’t be surprised at any of the revelations. We hear about Berry showing up for a preproduction meeting at a chic restaurant in the Hollywood Hills with a sack from McDonald’s containing a hamburger, soda, and an apple pie. His apoplectic host stammered that he would certainly be glad to buy him dinner. “I know what I like to eat,” Berry responded. “Now let’s get down to business.”

There’s also an undeniable coldness to some of Berry’s behavior. The documentary about the making of Hail! Hail! relates that Berry led a contingent including two women on a visit to the grounds of the Algoa Correctional Center (where he served part of two prison sentences) in Missouri, then nearly prompted a prison riot by walking away and leaving the two females (one of whom was the producer Bennett) nearly unattended in a prison yard full of hundreds of inmates. The various descriptions of the effort to get those women to safety—through the jeering, pawing, groping mass of inmates—is harrowing, as is the account of how indifferent Berry was about the whole matter afterward.

As the crew was preparing to shoot the first day, and waiting for Berry to show up, Berry called a payphone on the corner of the block where the crew was setting up to begin filming and demanded $10,000 more in cash before he would deign to show up. This would be a recurring theme during the week of shooting. Despite all of this, Hackford remains warmly admiring of Berry and his artistry. This echoes a sentiment that Richards delivers near the end of the film: “He's caused me more headaches than Mick Jagger, but I can't dislike the man.”

* * *

The music was so dead at that time that all you had to do was back the hearse up and bring the coffin. Rock and roll to me was like an explosion...like a great big explosion.

—Little Richard

The third and fourth discs of the DVD package are dominated by interview segments with many of the other crucial personalities in the birth of rock ‘n’ roll. The seminal figures seem as in the dark as anyone else about the true genesis of the form. Roy Orbison comes closest, citing a New Year's Eve night he and his combo spent at a West Texas honky-tonk where they tried to comply with a request for Big Joe Turner’s “Shake, Rattle, and Roll.” The strong backbeat kicked in and, in Orbison’s words, “that was when the rhythm caught up with the blues...it was terrific.”

That Berry would play such a pivotal role in the revolution is something of a miracle. His first stint in prison, for stealing a car, came in 1944, before the eighteen-year-old had graduated
high school. Consider the prospects of a young man who, in the midst of World War II, is convicted of a crime. Berry would have been serving time on both VE and VJ day, and it’s hard to think of a greater sense of disconnection than being a black American behind bars on the days when the United States successfully saves the free world.

But America, as ever a land of reinvention, offered Berry a second chance, first through physical labor, much of it menial, and later, cosmetology school. In turn Berry, in so many ways the archetypal American, seized upon the opportunities and ran with them. Eventually, the hard work he did during his first time in prison (earning his high school equivalency degree and reading poetry) paid off, as he took his guitar to the Cosmopolitan Club in East St. Louis and joined the trio fronted by Johnnie Johnson, a top-level boogie-woogie piano player who would become Berry’s longtime friend, foil, and, in many eyes, silent collaborator.

Keith Richards posits in the film that it wasn’t Berry who wrote the music to his hits at all, but instead Johnson. There is enough circumstantial evidence to support this theory. Berry’s music is written in unusual keys for a guitar player, and he hadn’t written any musical compositions of his own prior to his audition with Leonard Chess (though he’d written plenty of poems and verses and he’d adapted some of this doggerel to other people’s songs, including a reworking of “South of the Border” into a song with a risqué punch line that he might have titled “That Louse of a Boarder.”) But he hadn’t written any music. Then, in the week after his first meeting with Chess, he returned to St. Louis, spent time making some demos with Johnson, and returned to Chess with four new songs. “But without Johnnie Johnson,” argues Richards, “there’s no music. No chords. Just a bunch of words.” The film then cuts to Johnson, looking utterly guileless, taking pains to explain, “No, I didn’t write the music; I just sometimes would be in the studio with Chuck when he was writing it.” Johnson then proceeds to describe a process that sounds exactly like the collaborative one used by the Beatles and the Rolling Stones and other groups in which multiple composers share songwriting credit.

When Johnson finally sued Berry for royalties and songwriting credit in 2000, a court dismissed the case on the grounds that too much time had passed since the songs were written. But even if Johnson were granted full partnership in those compositions, there’s still the unmistakable signature Chuck Berry guitar riff and, of course, those glorious lyrics. You could have every other element in place—the rock ‘n’ roll myth, the prison time, the duck walk, and the ringing guitar solos—and it’s still not half as interesting without the magnificently idiosyncratic lexicon of Chuck Berry’s poetic rock ‘n’ roll lyricism. While Berry’s subject matter was oft-imitated, his distinctive lyrical style was pitched at such a high level of originality—with “Cool-a-rotors,” “botheration,” and “motorvatin’”—that it has proved in many respects impossible to follow.

In short, not enough attention has been paid to the sheer brilliance of Berry’s lyrical wit and the deft, darting sound of those words in the air. In “Nadine (Is That You?),” behind a swaggering bassline and Johnson’s dancing piano, he tosses off lines befitting a modern-day Twain: “I saw her on the corner when she turned and doubled back / And started walking toward a coffee-colored Cadillac / I was pushing through the crowd trying to get to where she’s at / And I was campaign-shoutin’ like a southern diplomat.” At one point in the film, Bruce Springsteen commends Berry’s eye for detail, noting with a look of sincere amazement, “I’ve never seen a coffee-colored Cadillac,” but I know exactly what one looks like.

Repeatedly, Berry seized on the metaphor of the car as representative of the pure instinct for American freedom. “No Money Down” neatly captures the vast scope of postwar American optimism (and consumerism), as a man drives down to an auto dealership to trade in his Ford for a newer, slicker, faster, more luxurious ride: “Well Mister I want a yellow convertible / Four-door de Ville / With a Continental spare / And wire chrome wheels / I want power steering / And power brakes / I want a powerful motor / With a jet off-take / I want air conditioning / I want automatic heat / And I want a full Murphy bed / In my back seat.”

Though its been noted that Berry often censored himself for radio airplay (“Brown-Skinned Handsome Man” became “Brown-Eyed Handsome Man,” and Johnny B. Goode’s “colored boy” became a “country boy”), he probably deserves extra credit for getting a song played on the radio in which the protagonist—an African American no less—boasts of a foldout bed in the backseat of his car.

Even in an apparent one-off song like “Dear Dad”—in which the kvetching student imploring his father for a new set of wheels turns out in the last line to be Henry Ford’s son—Berry elevates the joke in a blizzard of idiomatic language and keenly wrought imagery:
“Last week when I was driving on my way to school / I almost got a ticket ’bout a freeway traffic rule / It’s now a violation driving under forty-five / But if I push to fifty this here Ford’ll nosedive / Dad I’m in grave danger, out here trying to drive / The way this Ford wiggles when I’m approaching forty-five / I have to nurse it ‘long like a little stubborn pup / The cars go whizzin’ by me, Dad, look like I’m backin’ up.”

There was nothing even remotely approaching the verve or complexity of these lyrics in rock ‘n’ roll at the time. But Berry possessed an arsenal of lyrical talents and didn’t always have to be verbose. In “School Day” there are twenty-four lines of sparsely constructed narrative, from “Up in the morning and out to school” through a typical morning of studies and drudgery, a bustling, hurried lunch, and an afternoon of more classes. The three o’clock bell sends the students out to the streets and to the nearest diner, where they put their money into the jukebox—all leading up to the one climactic, ringing anhemitic declaration of “Hail! Hail! Rock ‘n’ roll / Deliver me from the days of old….”

Certainly, Berry wasn’t the only gifted songwriter in the rock idioms at the time. But even among his celebrated contemporaries—Lieber and Stoller, Buddy Holly, Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman, Fats Domino and Dave Bartholomew—his lyrics stand apart. At a time when rock ‘n’ roll was being dismissed as little more than juvenile delinquency set to a backbeat, Berry instilled the music with heart, an understated complexity of its revolutionary spirit.

It wouldn’t last much longer. Rock ‘n’ roll hastened the demise of Jim Crow, through its rebellious mythos, the tremendous value it placed on personal freedom, and the inclusive nature of its revolutionary spirit.

Bo Diddley speaks in the full-length interviews on *Hail! Hail!* about the absurdity of playing some concerts in the ’50s in which a rope ran down the middle of the audience, separating blacks from whites. “Stupidest thing I’d ever seen,” he muttered. It wouldn’t last much longer. Rock ‘n’ roll hastened the demise of Jim Crow, through its rebellious mythos, the tremendous value it placed on personal freedom, and the inclusive nature of its revolutionary spirit.

But the racial reconciliation didn’t work fast enough for Berry. He returned to prison in the early ’60s after being convicted on a specious Mann Act charge for transporting a fourteen-year-old Mexican girl named Janice Escalanti across state lines, while he was operating Club Bandstand. He must have begun his second stint feeling a keen amount of despair for all that hadn’t changed. He earned his CPA degree this time around and came out of prison in 1964 vowing he wouldn’t be fooled again.

Upon his release, he put out a string of great rock ‘n’ roll songs—“Promised Land,” “Nadine (Come On),” “No Particular Place to Go,” “No Money Down,” “Dear Dad,” “Tulane”—that together suggested he had grown as an artist and could keep doing so indefinitely. But none of these songs approached the success of his earlier hits, and Berry soon tired of the studio process. While his work became the catalyst for a generation of British bands like the Beatles and the Stones (Richards speaks with wonder in both his eyes and his voice of “the total sound” of Berry’s songs when needle touched vinyl), it was a far different story domestically. People bemoan the Caucasian rapper Vanilla Ice as a poseur, which he was, but what the former Robbie Van

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*He was the first black performer to put a rock ‘n’ roll record on the pop charts — with “Maybellene” reaching the Top Ten*
Winkle did to Rick James’s “Superfreak” was no different at all than what Rock ‘n’ Roll Hall of Famers the Beach Boys, in “Surfin’ USA,” did with Berry’s “Sweet Little Sixteen.” After legal action, the band finally was forced to give Berry a co-songwriting credit on the song (for which, more than thirty years later, Johnson would sue Berry for co-songwriting credit.)

Today Berry, at eighty-one, is a hearty survivor, outliving his contemporary Elvis by more than thirty years and still playing a monthly gig at Blueberry Hill’s Duck Room in the St. Louis Loop. In the summer of 2007, he sat for a radio interview with Bob Costas, who asked the father of rock ‘n’ roll for the secret to his longevity. Berry, genial and polite, chalked it up to “cool water and long walks.”

In the end, there is something profoundly conflicted in Berry. His strict diction, formal dialect, and lyrical rectitude (asked to name the song he wished he’d written, he once cited the Everly Brothers’ “Wake Up, Little Susie”) make him sound, at times, almost prim. Yet this is countered by Berry’s alleged fondness for scatology, his reputation not merely as a philanderer but a dehumanizing one (who stooped to placing a secret camera in the women’s restroom at one of his restaurants), and his inordinate fascination with juvenile humor. It is one of the great ironies of music that the only song in Berry’s vast collection to reach No. 1 on the Billboard pop charts was the novelty ditty “My Ding-A-Ling.”

The song is viewed as a throwaway by most music historians, but it is revealing. Recorded in 1972 in London, at the height of hippie chic, the song at one point finds Berry, voice full of innuendo, remarking that he hears “two girls singing in harmony.” To which he offers a kind of leering encouragement: “It’s okay; do whatever you want to do!” During that period, he embraced hippie culture and began dressing in wide-flared pants and loud, huge-collared silk shirts, which he still favors today. During their interview this past summer, Berry mentioned to Costas that he was fascinated with the hippies but ultimately frustrated by them. “They were always trying to find out who they were,” said Berry. “And that mystified me. I always knew exactly who I was.”

Surely he did. But he’s had better luck than the rest of us. Berry remains opaque, unknowable. One thing is clear. In the long struggle to get to the Promised Land, something deep inside Chuck Berry was broken—maybe it was his heart, maybe it was his spirit, most probably it was his capacity for idealism—and the wound is perhaps too deep, even for the healing powers of rock ‘n’ roll. Which is a shame, because Berry’s music has sustained so many others. And his life itself has been a quintessentially American triumph.


2 Bo Diddley, born Ellas Otha Bates (McDaniel), also recorded for Chess Records. He and Chuck Berry made an album together in 1964 entitled Two Great Guitars.
Jazz, Literature, and What the Singer Sings

“All the Signs of Home”: Nancy Harrow, Singer, Poet, Composer

As I started to write this essay, I had just mailed a check for tickets to a concert by the newly arrived jazz singer Erin Bode. A native of Minneapolis and now transplanted in St. Louis, Bode is poised to take off from local gigs to a national career, having recorded two well-received albums for the St. Louis–based Max Jazz label. Bode must hope to shed the appellation “the new Norah Jones” soon, just as Jones was most likely eager to shed the appellation “the new Diana Krall” or “the new Jane Monheit.” Let’s not forget Tierney Sutton, Judy Niemack, Luciana Souza, Mary Stallings, Ann Hampton Callaway, René Marie, Karrin Allyson, or Claudia Acuña. If our ears are open, we are alive in the world of the female jazz singer in America.

Female instrumentalists in jazz, while their number has been increasing, lag behind the singers. Male singers in jazz—but for Mark Murphy, Kurt Elling, and Kevin Mahogany—are fewer and farther between. Among instrumentalists, one thinks right off of veteran pianists such as Marian McPartland, JoAnne Brackeen, Toshiko Akiyoshi, and Marilyn Crispell, on down age-wise to pianists Renee Rosnes, Eliane Elias, Lynne Arriale, and Hiromi. Trumpeter-flugelhornist Ingrid Jensen, soprano saxophonist Jane Ira Bloom, composer-arranger-bandleader Maria Schneider, and the late guitarist Emily Remler all have made prominent careers in jazz. But the female jazz singers of today may be saving jazz at a crucial time in its history. And, although after many years she is not yet a household name, the singer, lyricist, and composer Nancy Harrow should be regarded as one of the most valiant of jazz saviors, and survivors.

Too often, though, brilliant creations and innovations in jazz can go unnoticed, or perhaps in today’s parlance, unhyped—this has always been true in jazz. The ongoing series of small jazz operas, or “Song Cycles” as she calls them, based on classic American literary works, that Nancy Harrow has been creating and producing over the past fifteen years are a case in point. We must also note that Harrow brought to bear on this oeuvre a long career as an interpreter of the Great American Songbook in nine pristine recordings of standards with some of the most prestigious jazz musicians in New York as sidemen. Yet search the biographical encyclopedias, dictionaries, histories, and anthologies of CD reviews in jazz, and you will be hard-pressed to find her name. She appears in Leonard Feather and Ira Gitler’s *Biographical Encyclopedia of Jazz* and in early editions of *The Penguin Guide to Jazz*. Only the purveyors of the website AllMusic.com, who take its name literally and seriously, provide anything like a comprehensive overview of Harrow’s canon. I have mentioned her name to friends who are serious jazz fans and seen them shrug their shoulders. How does someone this gifted, prolific, and important fall between the cracks?

Jazz critics as prominent and distinguished as Whitney Balliett and Dan Morgenstern have praised Harrow highly. Balliett has said, “I don’t know all her literary CDs, but have liked her Willa Cather and her Scott Fitzgerald—certainly a unique and subtle song-and-lyric series. She is indeed a delight to be with—funny, laughing, smart, original.” Morgenstern prefers two other literary-jazz projects of Harrow’s: “I love her two fairy tales, *Maya the Bee* and *The Cat Who Went to Heaven*. She is a very special talent with a very special touch.” With endorsements like these, why don’t more jazz fans know about Nancy Harrow?

Nancy Harrow had the good fortune, or misfortune for a singer, of breaking into jazz during the 1950s and ’60s. By most estimates, these were the golden years of jazz, which still had a large audience and an extraordinary range of practitioners, from Louis Armstrong to Miles Davis. When she was enrolled at Bennington College, Nancy Harrow first was musically inclined toward dance and choreography, including jazz. Her major, though, was English, and she wrote a senior thesis on Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun* (1860), under Ben Belitt’s direction—only to return to the novel nearly forty-five years later in her album of the same name, subtitled *Jazz Variations on a Theme by Hawthorne*. Meanwhile, in college a friend had a Billie Holiday album and played it often, and the music “sank in, I became enamored,” Harrow recalls. It was after college that she began her immersion in singing jazz by returning to New York and hanging out at clubs. “I went to clubs all the time and heard Charles Mingus, Miles Davis, the ‘new’ jazz, modern jazz. Thelonious Monk, and everybody. I lived in New York and could do that. We lived in clubs. It was easy to meet musicians.” Harrow recalls being at Minton’s in Harlem in the audience and being nudged by a friend to ask the guitarist Kenny Burrell if she could sit in. She finally did ask and he said, “Sure,” so she sang with his quartet. “It was a wonderful experience,” she recalled, “because the audience kept talking...
back to me and making me tell the story.” Burrell was later to appear on Harrow’s first album and later played a duo gig with her at Café au Go Go—and in very distinguished company, I might add: opposite pianist Bill Evans and a comedian, Richard Pryor for the first week and George Carlin for the second.

However, the first jazz musician to have a personal impact on Harrow was the pianist Dick Katz, “the only person I knew before I got into jazz who was a jazz musician,” she has said. “He was the first person I went to when I decided I wanted to sing.” Katz then led Harrow to another jazz pianist, Bill Triglia, who encouraged her to listen only to instrumentals and then to memorize the solos, which she did. She listened to Lester Young this way, first on Billie Holiday’s records and also on his own; she listened to Ben Webster too.

Harrow listened to instrumentalists and to singers—among them Ella Fitzgerald, Mildred Bailey, and Lee Wiley—and to “what each learns from each. What the singer learns from the instrumentalist besides rhythm.” I asked Harrow if she meant phrasing, and she responded, “Rather than phrasing, it’s improvisation. And what the singer gives to the instrumentalist is the phrasing on the lyric, so that they’re breathing with you, they’re breathing when you breathe. I think Lester Young and Ben Webster both did that. You could hear it.”

Aside from records, Harrow feels she learned from actually starting to work with musicians, just sitting in. She credits her longtime friend, the late pianist John Lewis, with being “really a teacher.” Another nearly lifelong friend, the trombonist Bob Brookmeyer, recalled the many times Nancy sat in with the famous group he co-led with trumpeter Clark Terry at the Half-Note, a long-gone club in New York: “That’s a very hard thing to do, but she worked at learning a sense of stage presence and confidence, very important things for a singer.”

After marriage in her final year of college and graduation, Harrow worked in publishing, starting at the bottom at William Morrow and eventually working her way up to copy editor over five years. She recalls, “The woman I was working for was Erle Stanley Gardner’s editor. She started to give me manuscripts to read and check. I discovered I had this talent for finding out what was wrong with his plots. Eventually, he demanded that I be in on every one of his manuscripts. He wrote not just Perry Masons but others.” During the years at Morrow, Harrow was building up her repertoire as a jazz singer. She left the job and became a copy editor, which she could do on a freelance basis, including a stint for Simon and Schuster. Late one night in bed—her husband was trying to sleep—she was reading a book in galleys. “I was laughing hysterically to myself. I said to myself, ‘I can’t breathe when you breathe. I think Lester Young and Ben Webster both did that. You could hear it.’”

During her years in the publishing field, Harrow put in a concurrent period of sitting in and singing in clubs. In 1960 she recorded her first album and released it the next year on Candid. The prophetic title was *Wild Women Don’t Have the Blues*, and the venerable Nat Hentoff was the A and R man. Already on her first album, she was backed by top players, including trumpeter Buck Clayton (who also did the arrangements), tenor saxophonist Buddy Tate, trombonist Dickie Wells, and pianist Dick Wellstood. This was a highly acclaimed debut and readily led to a second album, *You Never Know*. John Lewis became important in this project, as he was in A and R for Atlantic Records at the time. Harrow and her husband had gone on vacation to Paris, where Lewis insisted she look up drummer Kenny Clarke. She did, and Clarke got her a job at the Mars Club there. During this engagement, Lewis told Harrow that he wanted to record her, and so it happened, in 1962, *You Never Know* was done and released the following year.

In 1962, Barbra Streisand landed her first role in a Broadway play, *I Can Get It for You Wholesale*, after doing what Nancy Harrow was doing then, singing in clubs in New York. Streisand’s first album for Columbia came out the next year, was a spectacular success, and she has never looked back. “At the time,” Harrow remembers, “I thought I would be like Barbra Streisand, though she hadn’t quite made it yet. I dreamt of having a big career as a performer.” Then her first child, Damon, was born in 1963. Perhaps Damon was destined to become the musician, poet, and publisher that he is. Harrow gradually withdrew from singing and performing. I asked Harrow if she felt she had a tough choice to make in doing so, and she seemed surprised by the question. She told me that with the arrival of the Beatles and the so-called British Invasion of rock in 1964, jazz jobs were already starting to get scarce. (Yet perhaps in a wry look back, Harrow released *The Beatles and Other Standards* in 1990.)

Before the arrival of her second son, Anton, a neuroscientist by profession but a talented singer in his own right (he appears on two of Harrow’s literary albums, *The Marble Faun* and *The Cat Who Went to Heaven*), she had the chance to go on tour with Benny Goodman. “I was once presented with a choice,” she recalls, “to tour with Goodman. I didn’t go because I didn’t want to leave Damon, and he was like two or three at the time—I just didn’t want to leave him for that time.” She also reflects now that women in jazz find it hard to have a home life. “Very few have children,” she told me. “It’s surprising, how few.” But at the time, in the mid ’60s, when faced with a dwindling jazz economy,
Harrow did decide to devote herself to her children for a while. Eventually, the opportunity arose in 1972–73 to edit a literary magazine, *American Journal*.

No doubt Harrow’s literary experience deepened with her work with this magazine. Although the magazine had a brief life of only eight issues, Harrow published such writers as Mark Harris, Seymour Krim, Cynthia Ozick, Alfred Kazin, John Williams, Nat Hentoff, George P. Elliott, Leslie Fiedler, Phyllis LaFarge, and Peter Steinfels. *American Journal* seems to have been a part of the New Journalism movement of the late ‘60s and ’70s. Harrow explains, “The writers wrote highly personal essays on subjects of importance to them.”

A chance remark by Nat Hentoff that “somebody should write a jazz opera based on *Invisible Man*” prompted Harrow to take up the challenge. She mentioned the idea to John Lewis, a very significant friend in her life and career, and he agreed that it was a worthwhile venture. Lewis knew someone who knew Ellison, and a dinner invitation with Lewis and Harrow was worked out. At dinner, they pitched the idea to Ellison, and he said they ought to try it. Harrow then wrote a whole script, and, she recalls, “I made songs up that I could imagine from the text, and I sent them to Ellison. And he called me up and said, ‘Full speed ahead. But I can’t give you permission until I hear some music.’”

Harrow and Lewis then applied to the Rockefeller Foundation to see if they could get a grant for Lewis to write the music. They were told a grant would be likely, but they first needed permission from Ellison, who would not give permission until he heard the music. Harrow says, “So it was Catch-22.” Because of the magnitude of the project and his duties as pianist and music director of the Modern Jazz Quartet, Lewis could not afford to take time off to work on a score of *Invisible Man*. So, the project fell through. Undaunted even now, Harrow recalls, “I was so thrilled that Ellison would like what I had done. I don’t know if it ever would have happened.” Yet the creative impact of having written lyrics and having thought musically on an operatic scale was to be fully felt by Harrow when, nearly twenty years later, she was ready to produce *Lost Lady*, the first of her literary jazz albums.

By the mid ’70s, Nancy Harrow sensed that mainstream jazz was ready for a comeback and that she was too. Regarding the latter, he told me recently, “It was something that was radically different for us, and ultimately a couple of the most radical things had to come out—it was still a commercial bomb!” Mention of Jack Wilkins on *Anything Goes* brings to mind the fact that the guitarist accompanied Harrow alone on one of her next albums as well, *Two's Company* (1984).

Of special note also is *The John Lewis Album for Nancy Harrow* (1981). The album is significant because Harrow contributed the lyrics for two of Lewis’s songs on it, “Distant Lover” and “As Long as It’s about Love.” The first is a ballad with a few surprising time changes; the second, a medium-tempo blues. Not surprising for a John Lewis project is its classical tinge, with violin and flute added to a jazz group of piano, guitar, bass, and drums. Perhaps this was a lesson not lost on Harrow in her literary albums, particularly *The Cat Who Went to Heaven*, with its very imaginative instrumental voicings.

These steady, lasting collaborations—such as those with John Lewis and later with pianist Sir Roland Hanna and drummersinger Grady Tate—are important to note. Several musicians, as well as singers on the latest recordings, appear regularly on Harrow’s albums, first-call players in a veritable repertory company under her direction. She remembers how “the feeling in the studio was so great when we made some of these [’80s] albums. It was such a teamwork thing, so warm and relaxed. And I was able to really express myself on them because I felt comfortable.”

The first time Harrow wrote the music of a song on one of her own albums was on the re-released CD version of *Anything Goes* (1990), for which she added four new tracks, one of these being her own “A Little Blue.” The story behind this song’s particular creation is significant. Having met and admired the poet Raymond Patterson, she was particularly attracted to his poetry because he had written a lot about the blues, and she wondered why he had not gotten someone to write music to it. With determination, she asked a number of musician friends, but nobody wanted to do it. With more determination, she decided, “Well, I’ll do it. It’s so easy to write a blues melody. I thought he had written a good lyric, so I just did it.”

The first time Harrow wrote the music and the lyrics on one of her own albums was on *Secrets* (1991), and the first song was “Sea Change” (there are four others she wrote). When I asked her what prompted her at this point to start writing songs, she told me, “It was not something I always wanted to do. I never even thought I could. But suddenly, because I had written the lyrics for two of John Lewis’s songs, I thought, Well, maybe I could write a song.” But another key impulse here is Harrow’s decision to go back and learn jazz harmony in order to be able to accompany herself. She had played the piano in childhood but had stopped after college. She studied then with Sanford Gold, and then Norman Gold. After awhile, she could accompany herself on about twenty songs. She adds, “So I guess it was during this time also that I starting thinking of writing songs, because I was fooling around with chords.”

With her literary experience and the experience of having written music for a blues poem by Raymond Patterson and the
music and lyrics for her own songs, by 1990 Nancy Harrow had come to a rich sense of the symbiotic relationship between American literature and jazz, a rich mine of study for academics these days. Several books, most recently David Yaffe’s Fascinating Rhythm: Reading Jazz in American Writing (2005), explore this relationship in detail. Another good book is Robert O’Meally’s voluminous anthology of essays, The Jazz Cadence in American Culture (1998), particularly the final section, “Writing the Blues, Writing Jazz.” Poets Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa published two volumes of The Jazz Poetry Anthology in the mid ’90s (1991, 1996). So Harrow seems to have been a bit ahead of the academic curve in the field of jazz studies.

Harrow told me that over the years she had not been impressed with “jazz and poetry” readings in which poets read their poems to jazz accompaniment. She thought that the balance usually was not right: Either the poetry was good and the jazz bad, or the jazz good and the poetry bad. The phenomena of such readings probably originated with recordings made by Langston Hughes, with a group led by Charles Mingus. Or with the Beat writers in San Francisco, such as in the scene in chapter 2 of Jack Kerouac’s The Dharma Bums (1958) at Gallery Six one night: “Alvah Goldbook was reading his, wailing his poem ‘Wail’ drunk with arms outspread everyone was yelling ‘Go! Go! Go!’ (like a jam session).” Like the jazz poetry performances of the Black Arts Movements of the ’60s and ’70s, many jazz “readings” were social as well as artistic happenings, put together on the fly.

Nancy Harrow is more interested in what she thinks of as the jazz spirit that permeates American literature. The usual suspects who tried to reveal this spirit in what they wrote are well known: Lindsay; Eliot; W. C. Williams; Fitzgerald, of course; Hemingway; Faulkner; Hughes Claude, McKay Jean, Toomer, and other Harlem Renaissance figures; Ellison; Richard Wright; Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and other Beats; Amiri Baraka; and Michael S. Harper. But Harrow has been interested in unusual suspects: Nathaniel Hawthorne, Willa Cather. The children’s writer Elizabeth Coatsworth. The German children’s writer Waldemar Bonsels. Harrow has been drawn to writers who portray dreamers, souls on the outside of things, and people trying to find their way against the odds—the adapters, the improvisers, the creators, “struggling against the tide,” as she put it to me.

Once Nancy Harrow returned to singing around 1975, she received some key advice from the late jazz club owner Barney Josephson, who told her. “You should study acting because you need to lose yourself, you know, in front of the audience more,” something Bob Brookmeyer also had encouraged earlier. And so she did, enrolling in classes at HB Studio. Harrow recalls exactly a quotation from Uta Hagen, who taught there: “I believe in the immortality of the theater. It is the most joyous hideaway for all those who have secretly put their childhood in their pocket and gone off and away with it to play on to the end of their days.” Harrow adds, “My childhood is completely vivid to me, and all the concerns I had as a child are still there, and I’m aware of them.” She told me that scenes and complications in Maya the Bee and The Cat Who Went to Heaven spoke deeply to her, stirring up childhood memories and anxieties, creative touchstones for her. Harrow spoke movingly about the song “Flying Home” in Maya, and these lines in particular (they occur as Maya is flying back to the hive to warn them): “Wonder if I’ll find / the lindens and the pines / Have I forgotten all the signs of home?”

By the way, writer Jerry Tallmer, in a reminiscence about Barney Josephson, noted that he owned the “anti-nightclub” Café Society, whose motto was “The right place for the wrong people. Or, The wrong place for the right people. Take your pick.” I think Nancy Harrow would be comfortable with either choice. The tension between them seems to run throughout all her literary jazz albums.

I asked Harrow why she was drawn to the particular historical and literary periods of her literary jazz albums, and her initial answer surprised me: “I think the period in which our parents were in their youth always holds a very special appeal. So, you find yourself gravitating toward that period. Which I think would explain the Fitzgerald era as a source for me. That’s when my parents would have been in their youth, in their twenties. They would have been around Fitzgerald’s age—I think my mother was born in the same year he was.”

Yet childhood and family history turn up as topics often in conversations with Harrow. She reflected recently on her attachment to Gilbert and Sullivan, a key early influence:

“There are some lyrics in Maya that remind me of them, like the song that Grady Tate sings as Peter the Rose Beetle, ‘Without a How Do You Do (or a By Your Leave).’” Although she had studied more prose than poetry in college, Harrow maintains that what she calls the “poetry part” of her songs comes from her childhood memories of listening to Gilbert and Sullivan, in addition to her recollections of all of the songs she listened to and learned later. She sums up her influences this way: “It was taking Gilbert and Sullivan and imposing it on Harold Arlen, Gershwin, and making a combination. But the structure of rhyming came from Gilbert and Sullivan; it was all in my head from childhood.”

Her follow-up answer to my question about literary and historical periods and their influence was perhaps more to be expected: “I just felt comfortable with the period of Cather. But I think the reason is really the subject matter.” Reflecting also on her choice of Hawthorne’s The Marble Faun, Harrow told me, “I was drawn to that era also, without even realizing it. I chose that book because it was about sin, the sin of murder, and at that time, I was very fascinated by that. I still am, actually.” So again we return to the preeminence of the outsider in American literature, one coming to terms with personal desires in a highly charged social context.

Harrow’s first literary jazz album, Lost Lady, was based on her interest in Willa Cather’s short novel of almost the same name, A Lost Lady (1923). This was about twenty years after the Ralph Ellison project with John Lewis that never came together. She first thought to do a jazz project on Madame Bovary because the story intrigued her. But because of her jazz instincts, Harrow felt more drawn to an American novel and chose the Cather,
which she had also long admired. She found it easy to write the songs: “Instead of pulling it out of yourself, the disparate things that happen to you, it was like a thread. You could just follow it and do it—it was easy for me to see where the songs should come in and I would just do it.” Still, she worked on the Cather album for two years.

Lost Lady was received so positively that Harrow felt encouraged to try again. She remembered Waldemar Bonsels’s 1912 story of Maya the Bee from her childhood—her mother, who loved it, had given her the book and told her to read this German classic. Harrow estimates that the book still outsells the Bible in Germany. Harrow had read it over and over again and loved it: “There was a female heroine, and this little bee meant a lot to me. Really, it’s about death, that story. The bees have such a brief life; it’s always on their minds, surviving the next day.” Having started writing songs based on the book in 1994, Harrow received encouragement from the eminent pianist Sir Roland Hanna, who was to prove to be still another important friend and collaborator to her. She recalls with great affection the earliest demo of Maya, done on the cheap in a little recording studio, downtown near Chinatown, with just Hanna on piano, Daryl Sherman, and Grady Tate and Harrow in the vocal parts. Tate seemed the perfect touch for the project: “Grady is an actor and has this voice, and of course the jazz sense.” The phrase “labor of love” turned up several times in my visits with Harrow, and she applied it to the humble beginnings of Maya.

Daryl Sherman, who sings the role of Maya on the CD, gave me an excellent synopsis of the at times ungainly processes in which Maya and Cat evolved as recordings. “Nancy’s projects are very layered,” she said several times with emphasis. She recalled the seminal importance of Harrow’s initial ideas of a story and how, through some research and the use of her imagination, lyrics and melody fragments emerge for her. Next, song form is developed, cooperatively, collaboratively, with a music director and some of the musicians. Sherman credited Hanna for enabling Harrow to flesh out a story line “color-wise, mood-wise—different rhythmic patterns, different feels.” Sherman spoke also of how, with the musicians, the singers found a balance (her word) in interpreting Harrow’s lyrics. Singers and musicians need to respond to one another’s interpretations. “Getting the groove for the songs was so important in developing the fragments. This process is all very interactive.”

At that time, little did Harrow know that Maya would be fruitful and multiply. Beyond the successful CD itself, the project ultimately emerged in another art form, puppet theater. She initially thought that Maya had potential as an animated film, so she sent it to a lawyer in Hollywood who sent it around to the studios. But then Ants came out, and then A Bug’s Life did too, and she gave up on the idea. A period of six years, 1994–2000, elapsed before Maya appeared in CD form, delayed at least in part by the “bug” phenomenon. During this period, Harrow came up with the idea of doing Maya as a puppet-show performance. She has been at the center of every aspect of production ever since.

This first meant getting puppets made. After trying several puppet makers in New York, Harrow eventually hit on the idea of going to Poland to get the puppets for Maya made. She and her husband were planning to travel to Poland, his birthland, anyway, and Harrow knew that the art form of puppetry is taken very seriously in eastern Europe. She had been given the name of an authority on puppetry in Poland and played him the demo of Maya, which he liked. He introduced her to a man who ran Teatr Baj, a puppet theater, and he showed her five different sets of puppets, from five different designers, that had been built and used in shows. She immediately asked if puppets could be made there and sent over to the States and was told yes, absolutely. Zofia Czechlewska, the chosen designer, had even known the story of Maya the Bee and she made the puppets, shipping eighteen puppets and sets over in eight crates.

The show went through some trials and errors in its first performances in 1998, and emerged eventually in 2000 in a form in which the puppeteers were invisible and the puppets were redone to be manipulated better. Harrow came up with the idea of staging the show on Saturday morning—the kids would be up, and they could see this instead of watching cartoons. And so the run at the Culture Project, 45 Bleeker Theatre, began, and it still continues, now in its seventh year (although it has moved to a new venue, at 55 Mercer Street). Nancy claims to have seen it at least a hundred times: “I don’t go every week. I go to keep the actors on their toes. If you don’t, they might just run away with their ad-libs.” Through such a long run, she has been amazed at how many girls named Maya have come to see the show, and she adds, “They all buy the t-shirt; it’s very cute.” (There is also a Maya doll!)

A similar series of creative endeavors has resulted in the evolution of Elizabeth Coatsworth’s The Cat Who Went to Heaven (1930). Although Harrow composed and produced The Marble Faun and Winter Dreams after Maya, she was touched in a way similar to Maya by the Cat story. It was one of a number of titles suggested to her by a friend who was a fan of Maya, and again Harrow simply liked the story a lot and decided to do it. But by this time, Sir Roland Hanna—who had worked with Harrow on
Faun and Dreams in addition to Maya—had died. She reflected, “I had to find three people to replace Roland. Roland used to work on the original songs with me, and then he would play and arrange the music for the albums.” For Cat, pianist Kenny Werner did the original songs with Harrow, trumpeter Michael Mossman did the arranging, and pianist Kenny Barron played on the recording—“like having Art Tatum on your record,” Nancy said about Barron.

The Cat Who Went to Heaven: A Story in Jazz for Children and Adults is yet another Harrow project produced by John Snyder. Snyder states that he has every second of the sessions on tape, on video, on five cameras: “It’s probably a hundred DVD tapes; it’s huge,” he told me. Like Winter Dreams, it appeared on the Artists House label, and it is another labor of love. It involves a jazz piano trio, a string quartet, Clark Terry on trumpet, Frank Wess on tenor sax and flute, two Japanese musicians playing indigenous instruments, four singers, and a narrator. It was produced as an enhanced CD, and it includes a video interview with Nancy Harrow on the project in which she talks about her attraction to the story and her appreciation of the contributions made by the various musicians and singers to the project. Particularly noteworthy are her comments on how Grady Tate, an actor as well as singer and master drummer, adapts to nuances in the lyrics and music throughout the production, while not being familiar with the story (none of the musicians was). I had the chance to ask Tate what it was like to work with Nancy Harrow, and he responded this way: “She’s nuts! Unbelievably crazy, and just right on the money with everything that she goes for. All her stuff is very new, you haven’t heard it yet, you haven’t heard it before.”

In the text section of the CD, the narration, script, and lyrics are presented, as are all the piano music and the scores of all the musical parts. The project is aimed in large part at students in music schools, as Artists House is an educational, charitable institution. It should not be long before school productions of Cat are possible. This CD was chosen by Rob Lester in his “Talkin’ Broadway” feature as one of his top ten cast albums of 2006. Lester commented, “With elements of mystery and melancholy (an animal dies as a main event), plus Buddhism, this is far from just a ‘kiddie’ event. It’s a loving story, and very good, low-key jazz music.” (I should add here that Artists House has just reissued Winter Dreams, which first came out on Harbinger.)

The Cat Who Went to Heaven will soon be presented in puppet theater too, and again, Harrow has been involved in every facet of its presentation. The puppets, Bunraku puppets to be specific, are this time being made by two of the puppeteers who have been doing Maya for the past seven years. Joe Silovsky is building the set for the Cat puppet show, and puppets and set are meeting Harrow’s high standards and those of Will Pomerantz, who plays the narrator on the CD of Cat and who will stage the puppet production. She told me that there is no real script for this, as the story is told in lyrics with narration in places that need it.

Regarding text, the same is true of the animated film of Cat, and Harrow’s role in working with the animator, who happens to be Polish, has been choosing which songs are essential for the story, effectively cutting down the running time from sixty-seven to thirty-eight minutes. She did the editing with Randy Funke, the recording engineer on the CD, and perhaps her early employment in editing has come to serve her well once again.

Another current project is a musical based on Winter Dreams, with a script written by Derek Goldman, head of the theater department at Georgetown University, a veteran of adapting novels and other literary works for the theater. Even before Goldman and Harrow met, she had performed a few of the songs from the album in an evening reading of letters of Fitzgerald and Hemingway. And so, as Goldman puts it, “It was not a long stretch from there to realize the possibilities of a jazz musical in Winter Dreams.” Like other collaborators of Harrow who are also friends of hers, Goldman spoke appreciatively of the give-and-take between them, over a period of about two years as several drafts of a script emerged. The script is, at this writing, soon to head into its second workshop reading in New York.

The fall of 2006 took Harrow to Japan to perform, a first for her. Because of her commitments to her literary jazz albums and associated activities, she had been too busy to perform for several years. But, as with everything I have heard her tell me about, she plunged into the trip with gusto and was rewarded and refreshed by the experience. She found the audience at the club, like most Japanese jazz audiences, well informed and hip. In a scenario that is often repeated by jazz musicians visiting Japan, Harrow found that her audience knew who she was and what albums she had recorded—in fact, some fans brought their forty-year-old LPs of hers for her to sign. So successful was her visit that four of her CDs were reissued there.

Less than twenty-four hours after we met for several hours of conversation over two days in June 2006, Harrow sent me some excerpts from her journal. Finding them again, I was struck by how accurately and acutely they assess her life and work. When I interviewed her, she joked with me about how she lived “a very examined life,” and I did not think much of that. But now I do. I offer these paragraphs not only as a summary of my own observations and perceptions of Nancy and her place in the pantheon of jazz but also as a promise that the best of life and work is yet to come. She writes:

I started out as a singer singing about love, desire, loss, betrayal, and memory, things that preoccupied me then. And as the years went by, the songs have changed some and have become about self-affirmation, independence, dreams, introspection. Then in a third stage the songs were about mortality, secrets, loss, and finally making a name, being remembered, recognition, longing and aspiration, jadedness, going on in spite of obstacles, changing, and looking back.

This evolution came about because I have sung longer than my adolescent preoccupations stayed with me. Or if they are still there, they are disguised now. The five literary albums have allowed me to get out of my own skin and express what someone else felt, like an actor does. Now I am using what I am moved by in literature as well as what I am moved by in music. Writing I admire, musicians I admire, and I put my own oar in with the lyrics and the melodies.

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The Real American Choreographer

Review of


No surging overture. The curtain rises on a silent stage and restlessly tense groups of adolescents in jeans and T-shirts. One finger snap builds to unison clicks affirming collective determination and energy. The Jets and Sharks face off in *West Side Story*, frequently staged as a high school musical, an important ritual for many American youth. Jerome Robbins’s adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* and his *Fiddler on the Roof* are the two works that most often identify him as an innovative director and choreographer of American musical theater.

In actuality, Robbins had a long, prolific career not only in musicals, television, and film but also in the dance world as performer and choreographer for the American Ballet Theater, New York City Ballet, and his own company, Ballets: U.S.A. Since his death in 1998, two biographies topping six hundred pages have examined his artistic development and his charismatic, complex, often abrasive personality: Deborah Jowitt’s *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance* (2004), and Amanda Vaill’s *Somewhere: The Life of Jerome Robbins* (2006). Jowitt writes from a dance background as performer, choreographer, historian, principal critic for the *Village Voice* since 1967, and author of the prizewinning *Time and the Dancing Image* (1988). Vaill has been an editor and publisher for more than twenty years and has written, in addition to an acclaimed biography of Gerald and Sara Murphy, many articles for publications such as *Architectural Digest*, *New York*, and *Esquire*. Both writers draw heavily from journals, correspondence, and other papers in the extensive Robbins archive at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, as well as from interviews with family, friends, and theatrical associates. (An equally long study by Greg Lawrence, published in 2001, was written without access to the Robbins archive.)

Jerome Wilson Rabinowitz was born in 1918 at Madison and 97th, a largely Jewish neighborhood in that era. By the time he entered school, the family had moved to New Jersey, and Jerry mostly grew up in a succession of apartments and houses in Weehawken. His parents, Herschel (“Harry”) and Lena, were Russian Jewish immigrants. With his family’s support, Harry made a stealthy exit from the shtetl of Rozhanka to avoid conscription into the Russian army (an unhealthy career for a Jew) and to join two older brothers already in America. Harry, his brothers, and Lena demonstrated the kind of work ethic that brought immigrants success in their new country. When Jerry was born, Harry had risen from deli employee to owner of the small-scale Comfort Corset Factory. Lena was a self-confident matron well-known in local society. With the Depression she, unhappily, also worked in the factory, and family finances became much more restricted.

Nevertheless, Jerry and his older sister, Sonia, continued the violin and piano lessons provided from an early age. Jerry began music lessons at three and played his first recital around the age of five. At six he received a rave review in a Jersey City newspaper for his performance in a piano recital, including two of his own compositions that “showed a comprehension of music far beyond that of even most adults.” If Jerry was a musical prodigy—and many, including Leonard Bernstein, later saw him as acutely sensitive to music—Sonia was recognized as a gifted dancer while still a child. Watching Sonia’s Duncanesque dance lessons was Jerry’s introduction to movement training and to the joys of improvisation and choreography. However, Harry and Lena provided these music and dance lessons because they saw access to culture as part of the American dream, not because they expected their children to pursue theatrical careers.

Robbins’s memories emphasized two less-sanguine aspects of his childhood: the high-voltage, emotionally rending fights between parents and children and the complicated import of his Jewish heritage. Lena was demanding and manipulative, even threatening to send her children to an orphanage or to kill herself when Sonia or Jerry was recalcitrant. Shouting, threats, and tears would eventually subside, but Jerry, six and a half years younger than his sister, really thought he might be abandoned. Both children remembered Harry as an emotionally remote father who was primarily interested in their effort and productivity. Although Jerry felt that he struggled for years to live up to their expectations, his parents changed their own name to Robbins when he achieved success.
In 1924 Lena took the children to Rozhanka (in Poland after World War I) to meet their grandfather. Life remained primitive in the village—one road, no electricity or running water, dirt floors in the cottages—but Jerry remembered this visit as an idyllic time. He loved his grandfather, who would hold him on his lap and teach him Jewish songs, and the sense of community that he found there. Back in Weehawken, his bar mitzvah was a miserable occasion, his training mocked by Gentile schoolmates and his own performance marred by a breaking voice and tears. He refused to attend services for many years afterward. Like many immigrant children, Jerry wanted to be “American,” and he felt that his Jewish identity made him an outsider, particularly given the anti-Semitism of the time.

After high school Jerry spent two academically unsuccessful semesters at New York University, clearly not focused on his studies. At seventeen he rejected “boss-in-training” status at the family factory, and his parents offered $5 a week for a year while he found a way to support himself. Puppetry was his first career choice, one that foreshadowed his work as choreographer and director in its demand for a vision encompassing performers, setting, narrative, and other media. But his efforts to apprentice himself to a leading puppeteer, Tony Sarg, came to nothing. His sister, as Sonia Robyns, had been performing in New York with a company at the Dance Center, run by Gluck Sandor and his wife, Felicia Sorrel. She arranged for an audition for Jerry. It was Sandor who insisted that Jerry begin studying ballet. After initial resistance, Jerry committed himself to multiple classes daily at a studio where he got free instruction in exchange for janitorial work. At the same time he received a scholarship enabling him to study modern dance at the New Dance Group, including classes with Bessie Schonberg, a legendary teacher of modern dance choreography. Sandor also introduced him to Stanislavskian acting methods through company classes taught by directors and actors recruited from the Group, an ensemble company founded by Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg, and Cheryl Crawford. At Sandor’s suggestion, Jerry changed his name, trying out several variations before arriving at Jerome Robbins.

By 1938, Jerry had become a summer dancer and occasional choreographer at a resort, Camp Tamiment, in the Poconos. There he became a fast learner, adept at many styles, in weekly review shows offering dance numbers and serious as well as comic scenes. He also came in contact with many performers that he would work with later, including Imogene Coca and Danny Kaye. Beginning in 1937 he had begun to audition for Broadway shows, and he made it into a few. Great Lady (1938) was a flop, but in it he learned dances by George Balanchine and made an impression on him.

In 1939 Robbins debuted in the corps of the new Ballet Theatre (later, the American Ballet Theatre). While its founders, Lucia Chase and Richard Pleasant, envisioned the company as a kind of museum that would perform a variety of work, including classical ballets, the thematic material and movement vocabulary of the repertoire included much that was not traditional.

Like many immigrant children, Jerry wanted to be “American,” and he felt that his Jewish identity made him an outsider, particularly given the anti-Semitism of the time.

Robbins, now a proficient dancer, appeared in ballets by many choreographers: Russian immigrants Michael Fokine and Leonide Massine, American-born Agnes de Mille and Eugene Loring, and recent British immigrant Antony Tudor, known for stretching classical technique to express psychological insights. The new company was American in its eclectic repertoire, with a culturally diverse cast and staff. De Mille used African American dancers in Black Ritual, and Jose Fernandez created Goyescas for Spanish dancers. Robbins quickly achieved recognition for his comedic skill and his compelling performance in dramatic roles, such as the title role in Fokine’s Petrochka.

However, Robbins wanted to choreograph American ballets and submitted numerous lengthy scenarios to the directors of the company. In 1944, Ballet Theatre finally produced his Fancy Free, a concise and timely concept: three sailors on leave, looking for a good time, encounter two girls, resulting in flirtation and competition. Robbins created individual characterizations for each dancer using a combination of classical technique, contemporary gestures, and colloquial movement ranging from cartwheels to popular dance steps. Leonard Bernstein wrote a jazzy score following Robbins’s scenario, even adding measures here and there at the choreographer’s request. Flexible sets by Oliver Smith evoked a New York street or a bar, as needed. The dance, still a delight to contemporary audiences, was a hit that grew into the musical On the Town.

Robbins was now in demand as a choreographer for both ballets and musical theater. He wrote to a cousin: “Yesterday I was a schnook from Weehawken, and if I went to a producer’s office, I couldn’t get by the secretary; and this morning twelve producers called me and asked me to do their next show.” Robbins always had more projects in mind, whether work offers or his own conceptions, than he was able to realize. Yet between 1945 and 1949, he choreographed two more enduring ballets, Interplay and Facsimile, for Ballet Theatre and choreographed several Broadway shows, including Billion Dollar Baby and High Button Shoes. He also failed in his first attempt to direct a musical, That’s the Ticket! Long an ardent admirer of George Balanchine, he offered his services to the New York City Ballet, which emerged in 1948 from an earlier Lincoln Kirstein and Balanchine company. He joined NYCB as associate artistic director in 1949.

Until 1955 Robbins continued a pattern of choreographing one or two ballets and a musical comedy each year. He enjoyed working in both the ballet and Broadway worlds, stimulated by their varied demands and rewards and by the different working processes involved. Broadway work certainly paid better but involved more collaboration, more compromises. He had more autonomy in ballet choreography, and sometimes material from these dances appeared in his musicals, or vice versa. In contrast to the typical dispersion of cast and staff at the end of a show, Robbins enjoyed the stability and community of a ballet company—the opportunity to work repeatedly with performers whose capacities he knew, the ritual of daily class as well as rehearsal, the literally embodied aesthetics of classical ballet. At the same time, his own choreography tended to push at the traditional norms of
ballet expression and to lean more on dramatic narrative than Balanchine’s neoclassical works. In *The Cage* (1951), a tribe of insectlike women trained a novice to destroy any male interlopers. Pointe shoes, traditionally used to create an illusion of ethereal and idealized femininity, became weapons that threatened and impaled. Angular and percussive movements challenged classical lyricism and flowing lines.

In its nonnarrative and formalist aspects, Balanchine’s work arguably was more modernist, more abstract in conception than modern dance until the emergence of choreographers like Merce Cunningham and Alwin Nikolais in the 1950s. But Robbins’s approach to choreography was modernist, like that of contemporaneous modern dance choreographers such as Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey, in allowing the motivating idea to shape the form and movement vocabulary of a dance. In general, Balanchine’s deviations from classical steps in his choreography (in response to a particular theme or musical choice) were clearly based on traditional ballet technique.

Certainly, Robbins’s background in acting and modern dance facilitated the expression of character and dramatic tension in movement that typified his work in musical theater. Balanchine also choreographed dances for some Broadway shows. But Robbins, whenever he had the authority, emphasized close integration of choreography with the entire development of narrative and character, going beyond de Mille’s dream ballet in *Oklahoma* (1943), in which dance first functioned to advance the plot. Robbins also insisted that individual cast members, chorus as well as leads, prepare like Stanislavskian actors by creating history and personality for their roles beyond what was written in the script.

It’s hard to imagine Balanchine creating the dramatically driven work essential to musicals like *Call Me Madam* (1950), *West Side Story* (1957), *Gypsy* (1959), and *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964). Robbins also enjoyed researching the lifestyles as well as dances for shows like *High Button Shoes* (1947) or *The King and I* (1951) set in another era or culture. To enhance emotional verisimilitude, he created exercises or gave background appropriate to each show: those playing Jets and Sharks in *West Side Story* were to treat the other gang’s members with consistent animosity throughout the entire rehearsal period, and all in the cast read articles that Robbins posted on Puerto Rican gang conflicts; the *Fiddler* cast, largely Gentile, went to Jewish services and weddings.

All was not happy during Robbins’s years of growing accomplishments and recognition. He quickly established a reputation for verbal and emotional abuse of cast members and collaborators, both in ballet and musical theater—hard to take, although many recognized that his arrogance masked insecurity. Even when he was outwardly gregarious and self-assured, he confided to his journals his intense ambition, his loneliness, his desire to be accepted socially and professionally coupled with doubts about his talent and personal attractiveness. Jowitt comments: “Reading the journals, one is torn—admiring him, aching for him, and wanting to mutter ‘Snap out of it!’” Vaill reiterates that his temper and insecurities stem from his early family circumstances and suggests he mistreated the people that he worked with in proportion to earlier intimacy. Undoubtedly, former lovers and longtime friends sometimes were treated with particular harshness. Years of therapy did not seem to improve his interpersonal skills in his professional work or his private life. While he was outwardly secure and, with theater colleagues, quite open about his bisexual identity, his journal entries include ardent desires not to be homosexual. His first psychoanalyst, Dr. Frances Arkin, believed that homosexuality was curable. Robbins was formally engaged to ballerina Nora Kaye and proposed marriage to Natalie Wood and Lee Becker. His private life was almost constantly full of liaisons with men or women, sometimes both simultaneously, and he often had transient affairs while supposedly deeply in love with a live-in partner. Yet he repeatedly wrote of feeling “betrayed” when a lover departed. In his favor, both Jowitt and Vaill note efforts toward improving his treatment of others during his senior years and his financial generosity to family, close friends, and various charities and institutions. Moreover, as with some other major creative artists, many of those who endured abrasive treatment also said that the excitement of working with him was worth the stress and humiliation.

In the early ’50s, politics increased Robbins’s insecurities. He had joined the Communist Party in late 1943, motivated, he said, by his impression that it advanced the cause of minorities and his own painful experiences of prejudice. Later he swore that he ended his party affiliation in 1947 because he was disillusioned by Soviet censorship of artists and by the discovery that they were less committed to supporting minorities than he expected. That same year Congress began investigating Communists in the
Enthusiastically received abroad, the company sometimes startled foreign audiences with new images of dance. In the context of the Cold War, the young Robbins, under the auspices of the State Department, for this was the era of exportations of American art as a weapon. His own company, Ballets: U.S.A., was a result of Robbins's fear of losing his successful career than choreography for New York City Ballet: musical theater, experiments in alternative theater techniques, and his own company, Ballets: U.S.A. The company embarked on theatrical research, some of it similar to methods and concepts already being investigated by groups like Joseph Chaikin's Open Theatre and Judson Dance Theater. Given a $300,000 grant by the newly founded National Endowment of America audience members still unready to see romantic duets between black and white dancers.

Robbins's two best-known musicals, West Side Story (1957) and Fiddler on the Roof (1964), bookended his work with Ballets: U.S.A. After several years of brainstorming among collaborators—Bernstein (music), Stephen Sondheim (lyrics), Arthur Laurents (book), and Robbins (director-choreographer), after struggles to find producers, after considerable out-of-town tinkering, the West Side Story finally opened in New York to largely universal acclaim. Its recognition as an extraordinary theatrical event led to a 1961 movie version that won ten Oscars. Although Robbins received two, as choreographer and as one of the directors, he had been fired during the filming process. His insistence on repeating shots until they coincided perfectly with his vision strained relationships with his codirector and the cast and severely overtaxed the production schedule and budget.

As for Fiddler, Robbins had made a vain attempt to revisit Rozhanka when Ballets: U.S.A. performed in Poland. There was nothing left of the village. While not autobiographical in any literal sense, Fiddler evokes both the warm community and the limitations of the village life that Robbins fondly remembered. He wrote later that Fiddler was "a celebration of and for" his father, Harry. He and his collaborators, Joseph Stein (book), Jerry Bock (music), and Sheldon Harnick (music), agreed, however, that the central theme of the musical was tradition and its erosion. The breadth of this theme made it important to an audience much larger than one interested in Jewish culture. Moreover, the patriarch, Tevye, his wife, and their three daughters embodied a typical conflict between parental expectations and children's determination to follow their own dreams. Yet I found it difficult, after reading two biographies of Robbins, to avoid seeing reflections of his life in both theme and characters. If erosion of tradition might imply not just loss and insecurity but loosening of constraints—the possibility of exploring new options—then the theme becomes a capsule description of Robbins's commitment to both traditional ballet and theatrical innovation, to both working within and defying genre conventions. Likewise, the three daughters reflect aspects of Robbins's struggle with his Jewish identity: Tzeitel, his attraction to the stability and community of Jewish heritage; Hodel, his sense that Jewish identification must be defended politically; Chava, his inability to live in a world that was not both Jewish and Gentile. And, of course, the musical ends with the entire village forced to migrate, a situation that in real life brought many to America and its challenge to retain loved elements of the old world while reckoning with new opportunities. Perhaps Robbins never completed an autobiography or, despite repeated efforts, a projected work about his father, The Poppa Piece, because he already had dealt obliquely with some of the most important issues in Fiddler.

In contrast to his accessible and commercially viable work, Robbins enthusiastically took on the direction of plays like Brecht's Mother Courage and Arthur Kopit's Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad. He also embarked on theatrical research, some of it similar to methods and concepts already being investigated by groups like Joseph Chaikin's Open Theatre and Judson Dance Theater.

From 1957 to 1968 Robbins focused most on projects other than choreography for New York City Ballet: musical theater, direction of serious plays, experiments in alternative theater techniques, and his own company, Ballets: U.S.A. The company toured at home and abroad 1958–62, occasionally under the auspices of the State Department, for this was the era of exporting American art as a weapon in the cold war. The young, interracial cast and Robbins's eclectic, sometimes jazzy choreography presented new images of dance to foreign audiences. Enthusiastically received abroad, the company sometimes startled
the Arts, Robbins set up the American Lyric Theatre Workshop to explore fusions of music, dance, and drama different from commercial precedents. For two years (1966–68) Robbins daily rehearsed the workshop dancers, singers, and actors in exploratory vocal and movement exercises, some aimed at stripping the performers of all artifice and some exploring stylized techniques of expression.

Robbins had discovered in Japanese Noh theater a genre that created, through long established conventions, an organic unity of music, dance, poetry, and action. This interest in Noh inspired workshop exercises with masks, slow motion, and alternative approaches to enactment of plot and character. While the workshop ended without producing any public events or new fusion methods, Robbins’s fascination with Noh came to controversial fruition in Watermill, choreographed for NYCB in 1972. Detractors saw highly trained dancers confined in a beautiful but plodding series of images that provided no outlet for traditional balletic virtuosity. Others saw a profound meditation on the seasons of nature and human life reflecting Asian influence in its modes of symbolic expression. Robbins had created something that did not satisfy the conventions of performance or choreography familiar to typical ballet fans. But like a modernist painting, Watermill could appeal to those who connected with the idiosyncratic style and conventions of the specific work.

In 1968, now fifty years old, Robbins returned to New York City Ballet and devoted most of his time and energy to creating ballets until his death in 1998. (A major exception was Jerome Robbins’ Broadway [1989], a collection of the best scenes from many of his musicals.) Among his many dances, recognized masterworks continuing in company repertoire include Dances at a Gathering (1969), Glass Pieces (1983), and Brandenburg (1997). These ballets foreground ballet technique, yet Robbins continued to resist certain conventions: for instance, he demanded that turns and lifts appear to evolve spontaneously from the flow of the choreography, with none of the typical preparatory movements. This process and the inclusion of painstakingly rehearsed gestures emphasized the humanity and individuality of the dancers even when he insisted that there were no “stories” in the ballets.

Lincoln Kirstein informally suggested that Robbins would take over direction of NYCB after Balanchine’s death, but Peter Martins succeeded to that role in 1984. Robbins, hurt, stayed on only after both Martins and he received the title “ballet master in chief,” with Kirstein named “general director.” Robbins never achieved the close, personal friendship with Balanchine that he had hoped for, nor did he ever consider that his accomplishments as a choreographer equaled those of the Russian immigrant. Yet on Robbins’s return in 1968, Balanchine told one of his leading ballerinas: “You know why Jerry is here? Because he’s good.” To another ballerina, Violette Verdy, he confided: “You know, Violette, the real American choreographer at the New York City Ballet is Jerry, not me. He’s the one who can capture the fashions, the trends, the relaxed character of American dancers, their lack of a past or a style, but an ability to do all they’re asked to do without discussion or preconception.”

Balanchine spoke without irony or condescension. Despite the modernist aspects of his choreography and his later forays into Broadway and film work, Balanchine’s first goal when he arrived in America was to found a school—to replicate the institutionalized training that had shaped his own fundamental assumptions about technique and choreography so that American dancers could absorb the tradition and style of classical ballet. To have a ballet company, one must first establish a school. Robbins loved ballet and, especially in later works, based much of his choreography on its vocabulary, but his syntax was sometimes deliberately unconventional. Quite apart from the issue of his personal treatment of cast members, Robbins found dancers within NYCB who could perform his work and others who could not. He knew the feeling of being an outsider, of wondering where he fit in, and expressed this theme in both dance and Broadway theater. Knowing where one fits can be harder in America, especially as an immigrant or a member of a minority, and one’s place may have to be individually defined. Certainly, the two musicals for which Robbins is best known argue for his status as a “real American choreographer” in their thematic elements presented with “outside the box” modes of expression.

For convincing support of Balanchine’s assessment of Robbins, Jowitt’s concrete, vivid, but nontechnical descriptions of Robbins’s choreography and working process make her biography the one to read. Not only a dance historian and longtime critic, Jowitt was a dancer and choreographer. She writes with deeper understanding and more detail of Robbins’s experiments in the ’60s because she was part of the milieu. Vaill, however, treats in greater depth Robbins’s Broadway musicals, including more reviews and backstage gossip. She tends to interpret autobiographically all of his work and unrealized projects, proposing connections with his private life that sometimes seem forced. She evokes his life leaning heavily on Robbins’s journals and correspondence, material that (as Jowitt notes) contains a great deal about what he felt, dreamed, and read but little about his work. Ultimately, I appreciated Vaill’s exhaustive research but wearied of Robbins’s reiterated personal anxieties, altercations with collaborators, and stormy liaisons. That said, both biographies offer the incisive analysis that Robbins’s life and career deserve and demonstrate his unique contributions to American theater and dance.

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A Practice Room with a View


I am a musician. I mean by this that when I was about seventeen I made the decision to dedicate my life to music. I perform regularly and have spent countless hours practicing. Though my scholarly endeavors leave me with little time to devote to my instrument, music continues to define both what I do and who I am. Thus I cannot read a book about music without evaluating it against my own experience. I mention this since I don’t think that Glenn Kurtz wrote *Practicing: A Musician’s Return to Music* for people like me. Rather, the book addresses music enthusiasts who desire to learn more about the experience of being a musician. Therefore, it is not surprising that I found many things in Kurtz’s memoir that paralleled my own experience or that I found the way he wrote about them to be by turns exhilarating and exasperating.

Kurtz grew up in Long Island in a family for whom music had been little more than a hobby. When his mother picked up the guitar in the late ’60s, young Kurtz followed her to the Guitar Workshop, where he received his early musical training. There, he was exposed to an eclectic mix of music, from folk to blues, from jazz to classical. Kurtz quickly established himself as one of the school’s most gifted students. His talent was such that he joined the Guitar Workshop’s teaching staff and performed with its jazz workshop’s teaching staff and performed with its most gifted students. His talent was such that he joined the Guitar Workshop’s teaching staff and performed with jazz great Dizzy Gillespie on the Merv Griffin Show before he even graduated high school. This mix of precocious talent and teenage passion led Kurtz to wholeheartedly embrace the romantic myth of the artist as hero: a solitary, often misunderstood yet ultimately transcendent figure.

Apparently, this philosophy—if we can call it that—had a pervasive influence on Kurtz’s life. It led to his enrollment at the New England School of Music, where he majored in classical guitar performance. Chasing his dream further, he decided to relocate to Vienna after graduation. The city of Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert seemed like a perfect place to launch his career as a concert soloist. The same philosophy informs his practice regimen. The very act of practicing is heroic: a disciplined daily ritual through which musicians celebrate their transcendental powers to overcome limitations. There is also something absurd about this process, in which an individual, Sisyphus-like, stubbornly pushes for an unattainable (and ultimately unimportant?) goal. Although Kurtz never quite puts it in these terms, this contradiction, combined with the obvious material difficulties of an artist’s life, eventually led him to abandon his dreams. He left Vienna and, upon returning in the United States, put his guitar in a closet. It would take a decade before he would gather enough courage to pick up the instrument again. In the meantime, Kurtz completed a Ph.D. in comparative literature and German studies at Stanford University. He developed an interest in art and digital media, did a short stint with an Internet company, and taught at several universities. By the time Kurtz decided to start practicing again, his relationship to the guitar had completely changed, giving him a special perspective from which he can now safely reflect on and write about his past experiences.

*Practicing* is more than a memoir capturing Kurtz’s journey on and off his musical path. Kurtz is an academic who intends for his writing to be somewhat didactic. He brilliantly intertwines his biographical narrative with a description of one morning’s practice session, often conjuring vivid analogies in order to share his experience with nonmusicians. He also peppers the book with discussion of the guitar’s history, from its origins in central Asia to its belated acceptance as an instrument worthy of the world’s best concert stages.

The exact early genesis of the modern guitar is complicated and disputed. It is therefore understandable that this particular part of Kurtz’s account is somewhat confusing, jumping as it does from the Greek *kithara* and *lyre* to the Middle Eastern *oud* to the Renaissance *viola* and the Spanish *vihuela*. It is easier to establish a clear lineage starting with the emergence of the Renaissance guitar in the sixteenth century. This instrument was much smaller than the modern guitar but already featured its typical shape and frets. Instead of a sound hole, the Renaissance guitar used an intricately carved rose. It was strung with a total of seven strings grouped into four courses. This early guitar also shared with its modern descendant an association with social protest as well as subversive and lewd behavior. As Kurtz points out, rock guitarists of the late sixties would have probably enjoyed the company of their sixteenth-century predecessors.

The Renaissance also saw the advent of a five-course guitar. Although its production was centered in northern Italy and it was used throughout Europe, this instrument came to be known as the Spanish guitar. It benefited from a series of innovations throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and eventually became the modern classical six-string guitar. Unfortunately, just as the instrument seemed poised to emerge onto the European concert stage, it was eclipsed by the invention of the pianoforte. During the nineteenth century, the guitar was unable to compete with piano and violin virtuosos for the hearts and ears of concertgoers. Through this difficult time, a handful of composers such as Fernando Sor, virtuosos such as Zani di Ferranti, and luthiers such as Antonio Torres struggled to take the guitar out of the salon and onto the stage. This feat was finally accomplished by Andrés Segovia in the early part of the twentieth century. Starting in 1909, Segovia took the guitar to the world’s most prestigious stages in a
long string of solo recitals. He expanded his instrument’s repertoire through a series of editions and transcriptions while also inspiring contemporary composers to write new pieces. Segovia set the standard for generations of guitar players who, like Kurtz, have attempted to follow in his footsteps.

Along with the history of the guitar, Kurtz highlights a few important figures in the history of Western art music. For example, the rivalry between the established Viennese composer Antonio Salieri and the younger Mozart serves to illustrate the difficulty for any artist to evaluate his own work in comparison to that of his contemporaries. An anecdote about Frédéric Chopin’s performance anxiety introduces a longer discussion of the challenges presented by public performance. It almost goes without saying that the specter of Beethoven looms large throughout the book, represented symbolically by his massive statue inside the New England Conservatory’s Jordan Hall. Furthermore, as Kurtz gets ready to practice various pieces of music, he takes that opportunity to introduce them and their composers to his readers. In this manner, we are treated to tidbits of information about J. S. Bach, Manuel de Falla, Joaquin Rodrigo, Sir Michael Tippett, and a few others.

The book even dabbles in the intellectual history of music. What are the origins of music? What is its significance? Through Kurtz’s own struggles with these questions, we gain a sense of the historical debates surrounding them.

Yet it is a mistake to think that Kurtz simply wants to educate his readers. He is an advocate convinced that the guitar—read, the classical guitar—is in his words “a most misunderstood instrument.” All these historical lessons, along with his careful descriptions of the discipline and subtleties that go into guitar performance, serve to assert the instrument’s place alongside the violin and piano in Western art music. Having established this canon, the author can claim his own place within a greater lineage of musicians and intellectuals. Clearly, this is a mixed blessing. This heritage gives him legitimacy and highlights—possibly even inflates—the importance of his personal endeavor. At the same time, it creates an incredibly high set of expectations. In the book, we see Kurtz the performer struggle with this issue. How can a young guitarist grow in the overwhelming shadow of Segovia? How can a budding artist do justice to the compositions of such monumental figures as Beethoven or Bach? Kurtz the intellectual does not appear to have such qualms. He seems convinced that this story, his story, is worth sharing and that he is the best person for the job.

It is hard to fault him on that last point. Practicing is a very pleasant and engaging book. The writing is elegant, intelligent without being gratuitously witty. He is able to weave the different strains of his story almost seamlessly. Kurtz is well aware of the difficulty of writing about music. He tackles that challenge by truly embracing it. While many people limit music to its auditory, emotional, and sometimes intellectual impact, Kurtz describes a whole gamut of sensations, from the effect of seeing his guitar resting on a chair to the subtle sensation of the instrument’s body vibrating against his own. He honestly balances the great joys of a good performance with the constant doubts and frustrations that accompany every practice session. Kurtz seems to get so much enjoyment out of practicing that it was hard for me not to put down the book and pick up my own instrument. Though not a guitarist, I was still elated to find many passages that resonated so strongly with my experience as a musician. His description of life at the New England Conservatory—

the friendly competition among students, the daily hunt for a good practice room, the buildup of anxiety while you wait outside your teacher’s door before a lesson—rung especially true and brought back many memories.

However, the very visceral qualities of Kurtz’s descriptions bothered me. Practicing is an utterly private experience. It is the time when a musician works on his or her craft, free to make mistakes, away from the eyes and ears of an audience. There is comfort in the seclusion of a practice room. Music students often cover the windows of their practice rooms with flyers or coats in order to block outside gazes. The disembodied sounds coming from practice rooms mix with one another and give each musician total anonymity and immunity. Therefore I tended to find Kurtz’s writing somewhat obscene and exhibitionist. I read about what he was doing in his living room and felt as if I was peeking into his bedroom. Worse, when he decided to share his own shortcomings, Kurtz unwittingly revealed my own.

Let’s face it: it is a luxury to be able to dedicate four hours a day to playing music. It is true that one’s fingers feel good after a long practice session, a strange combination of being both taut and flexible. I too have experienced joy and frustration in trying to figure out the best interpretation for a piece of music. Most musicians have felt a twinge of self-doubt or even jealousy upon hearing another instrumentalist who seems to have a better technique than their own. Faced with this anxiety, musicians commonly seek comfort in declaring their own superior musical and expressive abilities. Kurtz captures all of these emotions accurately, but in doing so he often comes across as slightly arrogant, self-centered, and indulgent. He attempts to give his story greater significance by finding parallels with other activities. Yet, in the end, he is only writing about music, not surgery or diplomacy. It is hard not to find his quest for the perfect musical expression rather vain.

I do not know Dr. Kurtz but I sincerely doubt that he is indeed a self-absorbed or vain person. Part of the problem arises from the simple fact that he has chosen to focus on a solitary praxis. He writes about practicing and the difficulties in having a career as a soloist. There is precious little in his book about the pleasure of playing in an orchestra, of making music with other people, of communicating with other musicians and with an audience. Glenn Kurtz’s experience in that respect is rather atypical and would have been totally different had he played violin or bass guitar. Unlike the classical guitar, these instruments are rarely heard on their own. Whether they are featured soloists in a concerto or members of a chamber ensemble or an orchestra, most musicians perform in a communal context. I wish that Kurtz had addressed this important aspect of music making more thoroughly. This shortcoming was all the more disappointing since I found the chapter dealing with aspects of music performance to be his most successful. As Kurtz so aptly declares, music only comes alive when it is shared with an audience. Likewise, his writing is at its most touching when it relates the communion between artist and listeners.

Practicing offers an intelligent and candid look into the psyche of one musician. The aficionado will welcome this chance to peek behind the curtain and witness the emotions and the work that drive music performances. On the other hand, the musician may be left feeling exposed and wishing that Kurtz had chosen to focus on the more public aspects of music. Both may have been better served by a book entitled Performing.

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Miles Davis played an "eggshell trumpet." John Coltrane's furious runs on the saxophone created "sheets of sound." Jazz itself is "the sound of surprise." The music has its important, almost mythic figures and is itself wrapped in a self-conscious mystique oddly inviting to those who consider themselves outsiders but forbidding to the uninitiated. That mystique is in large part the creation of a chorus, a loosely affiliated group of writers who have been its real-time chroniclers and first-draft historians. Writing in trade magazines such as Down Beat and Metronome, in liner notes for albums, and in the occasional book, their quotable generalizations—such as those (by Barry Ulanov, Ira Gitler, and Whitney Balliett) recalled above—have given verbal character to the sounds and sustained the myths. They have also had important influences on the careers and lives of their subjects, jazz musicians. Whether this chorus has been good for jazz—a music starting as it did as a marginal and morally suspect element in American culture—is open to debate, but as John Gennari’s new book makes clear, the story of jazz cannot be told without it.

In Gennari’s study of these men, their writings, and their place in the history of jazz, a well-chosen photograph may actually say more than the words of the critics. Fronting a chapter on the innovative Music Inn at Lenox, Massachusetts, is a 1952 Clemens Kalischer photograph of John Lee Hooker. Hooker musically defined the blues as well as anyone, but Kalischer captures him not on the bandstand with a guitar but leaning forward at a seminar table, hand on forehead, as he peers toward an unseen speaker: Chaucer scholar and jazz proselytizer Marshall Stearns. The burden of Stearns’s remarks may be found on the board to a final destination at the blackboard’s delta, the (jazz) “Main Stream,” underlined twice for emphasis. Whether Hooker is amazed at Stearns’s audacity or acumen, curious about or overwhelmed by the welter of information, or thinks the whole exercise a humbug is difficult to judge. He does look tired. The photograph encapsulates a major element of jazz culture. African American musicians have listened, and not always patiently, while white intellectuals have criticized, historicized, and judged their music. While jazz critics have consistently stated that they are doing a service to jazz, it has not always seemed so to those whose work is being analyzed in print. The fact that many jazz writers have worked for record companies as producers or liner-note writers while also functioning as freelance writers and reviewers complicates their role even more. Friend or foe, ally or adversary, jazz writers have been present while the music has been performed or recorded and have often had, if not the last, at least a lasting word on the music's worth.

All this and more is traced in Gennari’s study, which takes as its starting point English critic Leonard Feather’s first visit to New York in 1935. He meets John Hammond, a fellow jazz enthusiast (and a fellow Jew, not incidentally), and the two venture north to Harlem, where the real thing may be heard. In a punchy set piece, Gennari asks his readers to behold these “two young white men without dates” who are finding their role in life, indeed finding its meaning, by adopting the stance of the critic, while the Savoy Ballroom’s big bands blare and lindy hoppers whirl around them. They “position themselves between the musicians and audience,” Gennari writes, “poised on the seam between artistic creation and popular consumption, close to but also crucially distinct from the dancing mass body, caught up in an imagined sense of privileged intellectual and emotional communion with the music.”

Is it okay to tap one’s foot or dance? What’s the proper stance for those who not only enjoy the music but have developed a self-identity through their expertise in evaluating it? Blowin’ Hot and Cool is full of such stories and analyses, of young and not-so-young intellectuals drawn to the emotion, color, and supposed political nonconformity of the music while resisting the prerogative to judge its worth and chart the lines of its artistic development. Gennari’s story is a tour of twentieth-century intellectual and cultural currents that defines jazz discourse as a distinct field while situating it in relation to others, including anthropology, critical race studies, ethnomusicology, and literary theory. Through it all, the narrative stays light on its feet, touching on almost everyone who has written substantively on the music since Hammond.
Gennari works from the Feather–Hammond encounter through key developments in jazz critical discourse, including analyses of 1930s record collecting that functioned as a kind of seedbed of intellectual activity for future jazz writers and record producers; the first attempts to write the history of jazz and the relationships of those histories to literary and artistic modernisms; the “New Jazz Criticism” of the 1950s; the racially turbulent 1960s; and a chapter on the jazz wars of the 1980s and beyond. Along the way, Gennari stops off at Lenox Inn and the early years of the Newport Jazz Festival—jazz rubbing shoulders with patrician society—and chases the winding trail of Ross Russell in his construction of the mythologized Charlie Parker. Throughout, I am struck by the sense that the majority of these writers were intellectual drifters for whom jazz provided a mooring, a kind of haven where they could safely—if not always profitably—harbor their alienation from mainstream society. Some, such as Marshall Stearns, set about reforming that society, educating it about jazz’s worth through seminars and his Institute of Jazz Studies. Others, such as Ross Russell and his frequent correspondent, Albert Goldman, seemed unable to disentangle their private sexual neuroses and racialist projections from the presentation of their subjects. Some wrote with scholarly detachment; more often jazz writing involved insider access to musicians to lend the judgments greater weight. One characteristic of the jazz writers seems to be a mildly self-righteous contempt for academics who haven’t taken the trouble, or shown the dedication, to actually get to know the people of whom they write.

And a surprising number of the jazz writers, Gennari reveals, have had (often broken) ties to academe. Most of the writers who came of age in the 1930s, such as Hammond and Stearns, were Ivy-educated. Some, such as Stearns and Ulanov, became well-known for their moonlighting in jazz journalism while pursuing academic careers in traditional humanities disciplines. Goldman was an ex-literature professor. Nat Hentoff left the graduate program in American civilization at Harvard when his efforts to study jazz seriously as a quintessentially American cultural phenomenon were met with disdain.

The “new jazz studies,” of which Gennari’s work is a single example, is getting around to doing the kind of work that Hentoff, perhaps, would have done had he been given the chance. Instead, he and the other writers profiled in Blowin’ Hot and Cool learned quickly to see academe as part of an establishment to fight against in a battle for jazz’s cultural legitimacy. It was just one of several dragons—American business culture, racial segregation, “longhair” (classical) music snobbery, and philistine cultural tastes were others—with which to joust on behalf of a music they insisted should be treated seriously as a folk art that represented American culture at its best. And as sharp as they could be when taking on the unenlightened, they often saved their harshest criticism, in the true American spirit of the jeremiad, for jazz itself. If all this had the effect of draining some of the fun and compromising the music’s chances of sustaining its popularity in the years after World War II, that hardly seemed the worst possible outcome.

Unless you were a working musician, of course. One of the book’s strengths is the way it describes the increasing participation of the musicians themselves in the critical process, from actually writing reviews (in venues such as Hentoff’s Jazz Review) to holding a cheeky “press conference in reverse,” hosted by Miles Davis in 1961, in which musicians put such questions as “What qualifications does a jazz critic need?” to Davis’s literary guests. (“The standards are very low,” Hentoff admitted.) Similarly, the injection of criticism based on black cultural theory rather than the easy colorblindness of war-era racial liberalism gave the early 1960s a bristling critical edge. Expressed most vividly in LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka’s early essays but also in published contributions by avant-garde musicians such as Archie Shepp, this new rhetoric proved unsettling to the jazz critical class and put long-standing champions of the music, such as Feather, on the defensive. It seemed to augment a growing crisis of confidence in the jazz world as the shifting culture and economics of the 1960s began to leave the music behind.

In earlier years, mainstream jazz writers showed remarkable brio, even audacity. During the swing era, for example, John Hammond strongly suggested in print that Duke Ellington could better help the political/artistic cause by both hiring white musicians (after all, Hammond had convinced Benny Goodman to hire black ones) and by performing simpler, less pretentious music that hewed more closely to folk-based forms. A few years later, Barry Ulanov confidently declared Dixieland music an early and outmoded stage of development in jazz as an art form, thereby igniting the “moldy figs v. moderns” jazz wars. By the early 1950s, Ulanov declared his own recent enthusiasm, bebop, to be passe due to jazz’s constant need for innovation. “Exactly where jazz was headed,” writes Gennari, “why it kept moving forward, what its final destination was, and how we would know it had arrived there were questions Ulanov did not engage in a systematic manner.”

These critical stances had serious implications. Ellington felt compelled to fight back in print in a series of Down Beat articles. In his 1979 autobiography, Dizzy Gillespie maintained that the press had helped kill bebop.1 Hammond worked as a producer at Columbia Records (and although he disavowed his social status, he retained his trust fund), and Ulanov, as a professor night-shifting as Metronome editor—privileged positions from which they made their pronouncements. Both socialized with musicians and considered themselves racial liberals and friends of the music. These are the complex political and racial seas Gennari navigates.

Written in an accessible style that is neither loose nor, thankfully, self-consciously hip, Gennari delivers a book that, in chronicling nearly a century of debates within jazz, links those debates to wider discourses in society. If the book may have benefited from a fuller discussion of pre-1930s jazz discourse, and if the chapter on recent critical trends is a bit tentative, these are minor points. This is a strong opening statement on a subject ripe for fresh analysis, confidently argued, with which anyone interested in jazz, its history, and its fluctuating but significant place in American culture will want to engage.

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1 Gennari, Blowin’ Hot and Cool, 23
2 Ibid., 140
3 “The bebop fad ended because the press could kill anything it created,” the trumpeter wrote. Dizzy Gillespie with Al Fraser, To BE, or not…to BOP: Memoirs (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 358.
How I Spent My Summer Vacation, or Harlem When It Sizzled

Review of Walter Dean Myers, *Harlem Summer* (New York: Scholastic, 2007), 165 pages with photos

There may be periods in African American cultural and political history that have been understudied, but almost assuredly the Harlem or New Negro Renaissance, the era of black life between the World Wars, is not one of them. For instance, I learned from being around schoolteachers that the Renaissance is second only to Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement (or Martin Luther King as the civil rights movement) as a subject of study in schools. And there have been no shortage of academic books about the period: David Levering Lewis’s *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, published in 1981, is the most popular, with its gossipy edge and narrative of glamour, and Nathan Huggins’s *Harlem Renaissance*, published in 1971, is perhaps the most despairing or critical—how could so many have done so little of value when given so much? There are also books like *The Harlem Renaissance: A Historical Dictionary of the Era*, edited by Bruce Kellner (1984). Biographies and studies of some of its major figures abound as well, Langston Hughes being the most widely written about person of the Renaissance, but even lesser known or, frankly, lesser figures like Nella Larsen and George Schuyler have been getting their share of academic attention in recent years. There are book-length studies of dancer Florence Mills (*Florence Mills: Harlem Jazz Queen* by Bill Egan, published 2004) and such a peripheral figure as the first black middleweight boxing champion, Tiger Flowers, who won the title from Harry Greb in 1926 (*The Pussycat of Prizefighting: Tiger Flowers and the Politics of Black Celebrity* by Andrew M. Kaye, published 2004). Admittedly, the fact that there is no major biography of Countee Cullen or no new definitive biography of James Weldon Johnson is neglect that borders on the criminal, but I suspect this will be remedied soon, as writing about the Renaissance or anything connected to it is not only academically trendy but downright popular with the nonacademic reading public.

It is easy to understand why the Renaissance is so agreeable a subject for so many people: 1. It is about urban life, an attractive subject, particularly in relation to race, in its examination of the migration of blacks to large cities and the creation of a black urban culture.

2. It is intimately tied to the rise of popular culture in the United States, especially in connection to professional sports and to jazz, one of the most influential art movements of the first half of the twentieth century. This, in turn, connects the Renaissance to celebrity, glamour, larger-than-life figures—to the entire mythology of mass entertainment.

3. It signaled the rise of modern black politics: Pan Africanism (DuBois held his Pan African conferences during the 1920s; Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association or Back to Africa Movement reached its height after World War I); socialism and labor organizing (A. Philip Randolph); and Marxism (Claude McKay, James W. Ford, Paul Robeson, Richard Wright, et al.). The discourse had turned away from the nineteenth-century rhetoric of Victorian virtue and Christian millennialism. This was a major transformation for black people around the world.

Most people, especially young people, would rather study blacks and the entire race question when it resembles more closely the way we understand it today. And it was certainly a great deal closer in 1920 to what we have today in many respects in northern big cities than it was, say, in 1820, or even 1880. In short, the New Negro Renaissance, to borrow a term from the 1960s, is relevant in the limited way that people conceive of some historical period being relevant: one can easily glide from it to talking about now. Most people, unfortunately, think this the most interesting subject in the world to discuss: themselves in the present. See how much hip hop is like Langston Hughes’s poetry or how much Florence Mills is like Beyoncé—or some such thinking as that, which, while somewhat useful, suggests no historical life is worth respecting on its own terms. History, in this regard, has no particular importance except in its power of prophesying the present.

Speaking of young people, for whom this approach to historical study is apparently a pedagogical necessity, there have been several books for children and adolescents (the latter constituting what is referred to in the book trade as the “young adult [YA] market”) dealing with the Renaissance, among the most recent being Walter Dean Myers’s novel *Harlem Summer*. Mr. Myers emerged along with fellow black children’s writers Virginia Hamilton, Rosa Guy, Mildred Taylor, and Sharon Bell Mathis in the late 1960s and early 1970s, after the 1965 establishment of the Council on Interracial Books for Children. Myers has published one unques-
tionably great YA book, *Fallen Angels* (1988), about the Vietnam War, and several good ones. He is a staple on school reading lists.

*Harlem Summer* is a comic novel about one summer in the life of our narrator, sixteen-year-old Mark Purvis, a saxophonist who wants to play jazz and who winds up stumbling into a bootlegging operation that involves him with legendary white gangster Dutch Schultz, black gangster Bumpy Johnson, and bootlegger and numbers queen Stephanie St. Clair, also known as Madame Queen. (My great-aunt nicknamed my sister Madame Queen when my sister was a little girl, saying she looked like the famous Harlem policy writer. I didn’t think so and my sister sure didn’t like the name.) In books like these, the gangsters are never as psychotic as they are in real life, and traversing the city landscape is never as profound an ordeal in surviving the wrath of the pathological and the sloth of the cynical. Jazz pianist, singer, and songwriter Fats Waller has something of a co-starring role in this as Mark’s trickster friend. And as the book takes place in 1925, the same year that Howard University English professor Alain Locke published his famous anthology, *The New Negro*, all sorts of noted Renaissance figures make cameos here: Jessie Fauset; W. E. B. DuBois; the Adam Clayton Powells, père et fils; Ethel Waters; Langston Hughes; Wallace Thurman; Countee Cullen; and A’Leila Walker, along with a host of others.

This superficial panorama is meant to introduce the young reader not simply to a historical period but to a world, a network of personages as wide-ranging as his or her own. As Mark says at one point:

Miss Fauset was always talking about the New Negro, but I was seeing that there were a whole lot of different kinds of people in the world. The thing was they were all so different. There were people like Miss Fauset and Dr. DuBois and Miss Newsome, dealing with the magazine *The Crisis*, the organ of the NAACP] and stories and poems; then there were people like Dutch and Bumpy and Queenie, who were doing a whole different kind of thing and liking what they were doing. Then there were my parents and Old Man Mills, who were just pushing from day to day and hoping for a better life down the line. And there was Fats, having a good old time every day and not minding what kind of trouble he got into, and Langston Hughes, who probably never got into trouble and was having a good time writing his poems. With so many kinds of people around I don’t know how anyone could make a decision as to which one they wanted to be. The thing was, there might even be people somewhere living in a way that I would like even better, and I just hadn’t met them yet.

This seems an appropriate message of openness and fluidity of identity that would not only be necessary to preach to the young morally—as they must learn the world before they can learn properly to judge it—but would be appealing as well, making the discovery of life something like an adventure, a standard formula for children’s books.

This frothy book, unreal and historical only in the most insubstantial sense, carries its young reader along on the bounce of its bubbles. It seems designed to accompany the “unit” that the average schoolteacher would present, probably during Black History Month, on the Harlem Renaissance. Doubtless, a book like Langston Hughes’s autobiography *The Big Sea* (1940), accessible and appealing to adolescents, would be more useful in providing a richer sense of what the Renaissance was. But Myers’s book, far from his best, nonetheless possesses a sense of delight with the past and with black city life—its places, its streets, its mobility, the sheer exuberance of innocent charm and hope—that is meant perhaps, in a way, to compensate for the distinct lack of communal pleasure or cohesion that black urban life frequently displays today.

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Audaciousness

Review of Shelby Steele, *A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited about Obama and Why He Can't Win* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 134 pages, with index, no photos

Approaching Shelby Steele’s recent book *A Bound Man,* I was tempted to think that Barack Obama might be an appealing example of Steele’s well-known demand that black Americans uplift themselves by “rely[ing] on…individuality and self commitment to excellence.” After all, Obama managed to overcome the desertion of his Kenyan African father when he was two, a wrenching absence made more so when he learned of his father’s career failures and tragic death. Obama also adjusted to the subsequent remarriage of his white, Kansas-born mother (the daughter of working-class parents) to an Indonesian, Lolo Soetoro, who transported the family from Hawaii, Obama’s birthplace, to Indonesia. Obama lived in Jakarta for four years until his mother—whom he credits with teaching him the values of “honesty, straight talk, discipline, and independent judgment,”—sent him back to Hawaii for post-elementary schooling and to live with his maternal grandparents. There he was admitted to a prestigious private preparatory academy through the intervention of his grandfather’s employer, an alumnus of the school. “My first experience with affirmative action, it seems,” Obama wrote, “had little to do with race.” The steep tuition was largely paid by his grandparents, who were of modest means.

One of only three black students enrolled at Punahou Academy, where more than 90 percent of his senior class was white (the rest were Asian), Barack was considered “a sharp kid, a good student but one who failed to reach his vast potential.” It was also during this time, Obama has written, that he struggled with his black identity, an identity he preferred over that of his biracial origins. Gaining easy admission and a full scholarship to Occidental College in suburban Los Angeles (one of several schools that accepted him) following his high school graduation, Obama chose “my friends [there] carefully. The more politically active black students. The foreign students. The Chicanos.”

Transferring to Columbia University in New York City in 1981—a decision Obama said he made because he would “at least be in the heart of a true city, with black neighborhoods in close proximity”—the self-admitted “restless” student completed his last two years of college, graduating in 1983. He then resolved, Obama wrote, to become a community organizer, accepting a modest paying job in the low-income black neighborhood of Roseland in Chicago and later in the Algeld Gardens public housing development on the city’s south side.

His decision to work as a community organizer was influenced by the modern civil rights movement and the “direct action politics” initiated by radical activist Saul Alinsky among Chicago’s immigrant workers during the Great Depression. Obama reflected on his own notions of organizing a community, “in which membership was earned” and “which I imagined was still in the making, built on the promise that the larger American community, black, white, and brown, could somehow redefine itself,” while “I [also] believed that it might, over time, admit the uniqueness of my own life. That was my idea of organizing,” Obama declared. “It was a promise of redemption.”

His three-year stay in Chicago was, according to Obama, a defining experience of his young adult life. It was in Chicago that he matured and solidified his political ideas, refined his organizing skills, and articulated his idealized vision of American society. Most important of all, he confirmed his self-confident identity as an American black. Chicago was also the place where he embraced Christianity, joining a traditional black congregation, Trinity United Church of Christ, whose clergyman, Jeremiah Wright (now retired), greatly impressed the young activist. Described as a maverick preacher, Wright was “one of the most influential” pastors on Chicago’s south side, former Chicago Tribune reporter David Mendell, has written. Though “bombastic, rebellious, Afro-centric,” and “given to occasional incendiary, emotionally charged accusations of white perfidies,” Mendell observed, Wright “will question Scripture when he feels it for-sakes common sense, is an ardent foe of mandatory school prayer, and a staunch advocate for homosexual rights.” His ministry, Mendell noted, “attracted a broad section of Chicago’s black community.” By the time Obama began work in Chicago, Wright had increased Trinity’s membership from a few hundred to four thousand (currently, nearly eight thousand) congregants and had transformed his sermonic abilities into a bully pulpit on behalf of social justice for blacks. Wright’s influence in the black community and his confrontation posture about issues that mattered to Obama created a bond between the two men.

Obama left his position in Chicago to attend Harvard Law School in 1988. In 1990 he was elected the first African American president of the *Harvard Law Review,* capturing the post in a competitive contest in which numerous ballots were cast, eliminating the lowest vote getter until a winner was chosen. Brad Berenson, a leader of the conservative group originally opposing the liberally credentialed Obama, said the newly elected president “was a more mature and more reasonable and more open-minded person. We had the sense, and I think it was borne out by the experience of his presidency, that he genuinely cared what the conservatives had to say and what they thought and that he would listen to their ideas with an open mind.” Graduating magna cum laude in 1991, Barack Obama returned to Chicago to practice civil rights law with a top Chicago law firm. His advocacy work then led him to seek elected office.

By almost any measure, Obama’s political trajectory has been remarkable. Elected to the Illinois State Senate in 1996 at age thirty-five, the ambitious politician was reelected twice more and ran for an open seat in the United States Senate in 2004. Defeating two better known opponents in the primary contest, the Illinois Democratic legislator easily fought off his religious fundamentalist Republican challenger—carpetbagger Alan Keyes, originally from Maryland, who had established legal residence in
Illinois less than three months before voters went to the polls. The victorious Obama received 70 percent of the vote, the largest electoral margin in Illinois history, and became only the third African American to sit in the U.S. Senate since Reconstruction.10

On February 10, 2007, just two years into his senatorial career, Barack Obama announced his candidacy for president of the United States. Speaking in the shadow of the Old State Capitol Building in Springfield, Illinois, where in 1858 Abraham Lincoln delivered his “house divided” speech, Obama urged Americans to bridge racial and cultural divides and come together in a communal discourse about major issues of the day. The freshman senator offered himself as a leader of the country’s future, a nation in which “common hopes and dreams still live.”11

Hardly a novel image or the first presidential candidate to utter such sentiments, Obama’s message had first resonated in the nation’s political conversation and psyche when he gave the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. The theme of hope and an appeal to “the better angels of our nature” have been the central underpinnings of his political campaign speeches.12

Shelby Steele, however, wants nothing to do with Barack Obama’s self-portrait of a unifying presidential candidate for all races and causes. Moreover, the well-known conservative scholar doubts Obama’s rejection of “a politics that is based solely on racial identity, gender identity, sexual orientation, or victimhood”—words the Illinois senator wrote in the introduction to his presidential promotion volume, The Audacity of Hope.15

Acknowledging that Obama’s run for presidency “has already achieved historical significance,” Steele nonetheless accuses Obama of wearing the racial mask of a bargainer, one who forgoes confrontations with whites in favor of a pretentious claim of black–white harmony, an arrangement Steele argues offers the theological equivalent of racial “absolution for whites and redemption for blacks” (87).14 But at the same time, Steele insists, because of Obama’s efforts to legitimate his black identity among blacks, while yet needing to convince whites that he is more than his black identity, Barack Obama is trapped in a quintessential Promethean struggle, a battle Steele insists Obama can neither avoid nor win. He is “a bound Man” (55).

Both in his book and in a recent Wall Street Journal guest editorial piece (March 18, 2008), Steele reiterates his long-held view about black–white relations in America and why Barack Obama is a politician driven not by conviction but by his willingness to employ race to advance his personal political career. As he has previously written in concise, tightly argued books and essays, Steele portrays bargaining as a deliberative psychological strategy by which blacks offer whites atonement for their historical racism if whites promise not to employ race against them. By playing on white racial guilt, Steele has written, blacks have abdicated responsibility for their own self-improvement while shifting the racial burden to whites, who in turn need “responsibility for our [black] problems in order to gain their own moral authority and legitimacy.”15

Condemning such a posture as an exercise in victimology, Steele has criticized government-sponsored, quota-based, affirmative-action initiatives and institutional diversity programs as delusory, symbolic gestures that are racially stigmatizing and degrading for those who allegedly benefit from them and are wholly dependent on white discretion, thus relieving blacks from undertaking individual efforts on their own behalf.

In recast form, Steele declared in his most recent writing, “[white] American institutions do not want our [black] humanity. They want our race today because it helps them build the ‘diversity’ that fends off the perception that they are racist…. Whites love this bargain,” Steele contends, “because it gives them racial innocence in a society where whites live under constant threat of being stigmatized as racists…. In contrast, Steele argues, are the challengers, latter-day apostles of black power who make racial demands of whites “they presume to be guilty of racism the same way that bargainers presume them to be innocent.” Challengers “tell American institutions,” for example, “that they must practice affirmative action and diversity or have their legitimacy destroyed by stigmatization.” Institutions comply “not because [diversity] achieves anything, but because it fends off
stigma. It keeps the challengers at bay.” Challengers like Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, and Jeremiah Wright, however, “will never have widespread mainstream acceptance in America” (77, 80, 85).

Bargainers can and do succeed, Steele claims, in appearing to transcend the racial divide—and none more so than the iconic Negro, “someone who dispels the sense of ‘otherness’ with a feeling of warmth, human familiarity, and racial goodwill.” Listing Sidney Poitier, Oprah Winfrey, Bill Cosby, and Colin Powell as prime exemplars of the iconic Negro, Steele believes they really do nothing to actually solve the nation’s racial problems, but, he says, they provide their white and black audiences psychological deliverance from racial shame and bad memories of past race relations (89, 81, 85, 88, 95).

“Barack Obama,” Steele proclaims, “is nothing if not an iconic Negro.” He is, Steele affirms, “the first black to bargain his way to national political [author’s italics] importance,” but, Steele also warns, Obama “is far more threatening to today’s black identity than other iconic Negroes” (98, 123).

And why is that? Steele answers that attempts to define himself as a black notwithstanding, it is Obama’s interracial background that makes it very difficult for him to be a challenger, while at the same time his professed black identity puts him at risk as the black candidate, alienating potential white supporters. In other words, Steele states, “Obama is today a man who cannot serve the aspirations of one race without betraying those of the other” (124, 126–27).

Steele’s short book (fewer than 125 pages of text) was published before the presidential primaries and caucuses began in earnest. Steele nonetheless repeated his critique of Obama’s candidacy in even more strident language in the mid-March 2008 opinion piece he wrote for the Wall Street Journal. Calling Obama “something of a mediocrity,” Steele charged that “Mr. Obama’s run at the presidency is based more on the manipulation of white guilt than substance”; that Obama’s continued affiliation with the church whose former pastor Jeremiah Wright and, by extension, whose congregants espouse “hate-filled, anti-American black nationalism” is the result of “a need to be black despite his biracial background”; and that Obama’s “public persona thrives on a manipulation of whites (bargaining), and his private sense of racial identity which demands both self-betrayal and duplicity.”17

This is quite an indictment by the very angry Steele. By his reckoning, Obama’s presidential aspirations constitute a mission impossible, doomed to failure on the shoals of the very identity politics the Illinois senator has tried to overcome but will not succeed in transcending. A somber judgment indeed. And yet Steele’s anger betrays a struggle he admits concerning his own personal roots. A Bound Man, like all of Steele’s works, contains numerous forays into his biracial biography. He resents and seems also afraid of the possibility that America might “allow a black—of whatever pedigree—to become the most powerful human being on earth, the commander of the greatest military in history” (surely expressions of American arrogance) (9). It is telling that in this phrase Steele yields to white ownership the U.S. presidency.

Steele also contradicts his flawed depiction of Obama, conceding that beginning with his presidency of the Harvard Law Review—a position he obtained “through the suspension of competition” (i.e., through affirmative action)—Obama “has separated himself from the deadly stigmas of black inferiority and white paternalism. He is seen as untainted by the former,” Steele writes, “and in no need of the latter.” As a consequence, Steele concludes, people “can consider [Obama’s] candidacy without feeling guilted, intimidated, or otherwise manipulated by his race” (15).

Yet so consumed by apparent ambiguity regarding his own racial identity, Steele seems to dismiss the possibility that someone is capable of functioning outside of a duplicitous role. He confesses that while an organizer in the East St. Louis black community, he pursued “authenticity” as a black “through pretense…a blackness I did not really believe in so as to gain the acceptance I could claim as authenticity.” Steele uses his pained, personal account to furiously warn that mixed-race blacks who do not “choose to distance themselves from [a] black identity” will be compelled to “accommodate more blatant contradictions—acceptance of the racial categories in identity politics, when one is in fact of two races. For the mixed race black, today’s highly politicized black identity is reachable only through a degree of self betrayal” (30–31). Seldom does one encounter such absolutist convictions.

That Steele defines the mixed-race identity of African American–Caucasian persons as “mixed-race black” reveals not only his view that such individuals perceive of themselves and are seen by others as black; it is also how he sees himself, apparently, one might surmise, regrettably so. Quite logically, then, Steele avows that only by doing what he claims most blacks have not done—assuming responsibility individually for their own improved status in the mode of Booker T. Washington’s self-help philosophy and “disengaging” from the idea that whites are crucial to black uplift”—will blacks and whites liberate themselves from an otherwise endless, inauthentic cycle of convoluted racial roles that Steele maintains characterizes racial relations in the United States (112–13).

Steele is likewise irritated, at times seemingly unnerved, that Barack Obama “is a man who truly wants to be a black man.” He seems as well to be bothered that Obama searched and resolved
his racial identity to his own satisfaction. He is also more than perturbed by Obama’s repeated affirmations that his black racial identity “is not all that I am.” Steele dismisses his own admission that Obama “is quite good at articulating black responsibility,” the real continuing motive of which is, however, “to keep alive the idea of masking itself as a black strategy for advancement” (51, 71).

Steele’s resentment of Obama in many respects, therefore, is a mirror of the author’s own insecure status as a biracial man, particularly when he writes that “children of interracial unions often have their own identities questioned the instant they are discovered to have a white parent” (28).

And so they well might be. It is nonetheless interesting that despite Steele’s remark that Obama is regarded “by both blacks and whites” (Steele does not say precisely by whom) as “kind of phony, a pretender to blackness,” Barack Obama (whose wife and children are black—Steele’s wife and children are biracial) now enjoys overwhelming endorsement from the black electorate, black politicians, and black community leaders. While the person Steele says cannot win the presidency has yet to demonstrate that he can gain a majority of older white or Hispanic Democratic voters, Obama has received significant support from both groups. Whether he receives the presidential nomination of his party or whether, if he is the nominee, he will be elected president, is an open question. That Obama has an acute sense of self and that he has strongly held beliefs, whether one agrees with them or not, seems, however, to refute Shelby Steele’s accusations that Barack Obama lacks “visibility as an individual” and is “an iconic figure who [has] neglected to become himself” (28, 134). A Bound Man is, on balance, more about Shelby Steele’s racial ideology than about the identity and unbounded politics of Barack Obama.

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How an African American Killed a White Cop and Was Acquitted:
A Startling Tale of Law Enforcement in Black St. Louis

It may be hard to believe, but in 1923, a white St. Louis judge freed an African-American ex-con who confessed to killing a city police officer. The judge accepted his plea of self-defense. St. Louis, a border-state city with segregated schools, where restaurants and hotels routinely excluded African Americans, also had an extraordinary black middle class that figured in the resolution of the case.

The shooter was Joseph Kyle, forty-eight, who served seven years of a seventeen-year sentence for second-degree murder in the penitentiary in Chester, Illinois, but whose brother was a prosperous real estate agent. His brother's money may have paid for two first-rate African American criminal lawyers: Noah Parden, sometimes called the “Negro Clarence Darrow,” and Silas E. Garner. The arresting officers were “Negro specials,” African Americans who were not allowed to wear uniforms and were assigned to catch black criminals. They may have prevented the wrong man from being charged.

The facts were not in dispute: Two white officers shot at Kyle in the dark at night without identifying themselves, and Kyle shot back. From an early twenty-first century perspective, it is just as incredible that the surviving police officer was not disciplined, and if there was any soul-searching among the law enforcement community after the tragedy and the trial, there is no evidence of it in the public record.

At about 11:45 p.m. on Friday, May 26, 1922, an African American woman, Mable Smith, sat alone in her second-floor apartment at 1421 Papin Street, just south of the railroad yards west of downtown St. Louis. That city block and many nearby, like most African-American neighborhoods in St. Louis from that era, have since been leveled. The area now serves mostly as parking for AmerenUE’s nearby headquarters.

Mable Smith worked in what passed in the prohibition era as a saloon, or a soft-drink parlor, famous for its “mule.” The man she called her common-law husband, Joseph Kyle, owned the bar and paid for her rent but maintained his own apartment upstairs from the saloon.

That night she took a taxi home and was undressing and about to go to bed when she heard someone on her back porch. She started toward her kitchen door and heard someone going down the steps. Returning to her room, Smith said,

[I] turned the light up and took the screens out and let the window down and fastened it, and then I peeped through the shutters and I went back in the front room and looked out and I didn’t see anything at all, the lights was out on the street, and I came back and then I went back to the front window again, and I saw the officers coming up the street, and I called to them and asked them to come over there and they flashed the light in my face, and I told them to come up the steps, and they came up, and I explained what had happened, and one of them said, “How do you get out the back way?” and I showed them, and he opened the door and stepped out and flashed the light and said, “There he is now,” and commenced shooting.

The two white patrolmen, Patrick “Bud” Stapleton and Michael J. Leary, were, like most policemen in those days, walking a beat. Police officers didn’t carry radios but periodically went to call boxes to make reports and get instructions. When someone needed help, call boxes would light up, and policemen knew to pick up the call box’s phone to find out what was going on.

As Leary told a newspaper the next day:

We opened the kitchen door leading out on the second floor back porch and stepped out. I turned my flashlight on the porch, but nobody was there. I then turned it on the rear yard and saw a man slinking away in a narrow passageway between two sheds.

From what I saw, the Negro appeared to be heavy-built, dark-skinned and wearing a blue shirt. I cried, “There he is,” and Buddy fired one shot as the fellow ran into the alley.

We both drew our guns and ran downstairs. Stapleton reached the alley first. I heard two shots right close. I don’t know who fired first, but I think it was Stapleton. Then I heard four or five more shots, and he fell into my arms saying, “He’s got me, Mike.” I carried him back about six feet to get out of the firing, laid him down and ran into the alley again. I fired six times, emptying my gun at the flashes west of me. Then I ran to get Stapleton’s gun and emptied it. This time there was no answers. I searched the yards and sheds, but nobody was there. When I came back to my partner, he was unconscious and gasping.

Leary then ran to a nearby call box, and twenty-one police officers quickly arrived as an ambulance took Stapleton’s body away. The police made what one newspaper account called “a general round-up of Negroes who could not or did not satisfactorily account for their whereabouts at the time of the shooting.” The police raided two nearby apartments and arrested ten men there, according to the police report on the killing, while the Police Journal, the official publication of the St. Louis Police Department, said police rounded up and held thirty-nine suspects. I found no reports that the shots fired into the dark night in a black neighborhood hit anyone.

Shortly after 11:15 that same night, plainclothes patrolmen Ira Cooper and W. W. Crockett, and Artice Carter, a uniformed African American probationary officer, went by Joseph Kyle’s saloon in the Chestnut Valley entertainment district as part of their normal rounds.
The trio noticed that Kyle’s soft-drink parlor, which was normally open until midnight, was closed and later saw its owner, Joseph Kyle, walking on Market Street, a block south of the tavern. They knew that Kyle claimed Mable Smith as his common-law wife, employed her at the saloon, and that he was jealous of any man that paid too much attention to her. They may have known that in 1903 he killed a man in East St. Louis in a pool-room fight and served seven years for second-degree murder.

Kyle and Smith had been going together off and on for nearly four years. He had proposed marriage, but she was married to and separated from another man, Solomon Moore, who lived at Creve Coeur Lake, twenty miles away in semirural St. Louis County. Moore and Smith lived together for three or four months in 1914 or 1915. Kyle proposed to Smith, and she told him she would marry him after her divorce came through, but Moore never served her with divorce papers. On the evening of the shooting, Smith asked Kyle to take a child to a picture show. Kyle later told police that he refused because he believed the request was a ruse to keep him occupied that evening.

At about eleven that night, Kyle overheard one of his patrons say that he “was going to take a walk down by Fourteenth and Papin.” Kyle then left his bar armed with a nickel-plated gun with a black handle. Smith brought the gun to the saloon after Kyle pawned his. An hour later, Kyle came back home, and as he climbed the steps to his apartment above his business, he saw two friends and called down to them, telling them that if anyone asked what time he closed the saloon, to say one o’clock. When one of them, Augustus Cox, asked why, Kyle told him he had shot someone. Police soon came, roused him out of bed, and arrested him. Kyle told officers at the station that he had never left the saloon. When an officer asked if he had been to Papin Street, he said, “No, the woman had went home in a taxicab.”

Cox and Kyle stuck to their story and were released. Kyle implicated William Turner, a man who Kyle feared was after his woman. Kyle told police that Turner threatened to kill him if he did not stay away from Smith. Mable Smith told the coroner’s inquest that Turner sometimes visited her apartment, but she would not let him in and even asked Kyle to tell Turner to let her alone.

Police released Kyle, then raided Turner’s apartment and roused him out of bed. Turner claimed he had been home since 5 p.m., but a woman who had been attending his sick wife until 8 p.m. told police he was not there when she left. Police said they found a blue shirt, similar to the one Leary said the man he shot at was wearing, next to Turner’s bed, and a hat with a moist sweatband, indicating that he had been out recently. They arrested him.

But Cooper, Crockett, and Carter believed police arrested the wrong man. On Sunday morning at the beginning of the day shift, the three patrolmen approached their supervisor, Sgt. M. J. Callahan, and told him they believed that Kyle was the guilty man. Callahan told them to arrest him again.

Callahan supervised the Negro specials, officers first hired in 1901 to catch African-American criminals. The police board hired Cooper and Crockett in 1906 at a time when Gov. Joseph Folk was purging the police department of the influence of the Jefferson Club, a political machine run by future congressman and former president of the Board of Police Commissioners, Harry Hawes. The Negro specials were officially detectives. Carter was a uniformed patrolman, one of fifteen hired in 1921 as part of a political deal with Gov. Arthur M. Hyde. The Citizens Liberty League, led by J. E. Mitchell, editor of the Argus, the leading African-American newspaper in St. Louis at the time, exacted some promises from Hyde in return for the group’s support in the 1920 election. Another group, the Missouri Negro Republican League Club, worked with Hyde and members of the police board to make sure the governor kept his promise.

When Cooper and Crockett brought Kyle in, Callahan questioned him in the presence of Cooper, Crockett, and I. Joel Wilson, an assistant prosecuting attorney. The sergeant asked Kyle what time he closed the saloon. Kyle said midnight. “That can’t be true,” Callahan said, “because you were seen about a quarter after eleven by Officers Cooper, Crockett, and Carter, coming east on Market Street. What have you got to say to that?”

“Well, if that is the case, I must have been on the way to the barbecue stand to get something to eat.”

“What barbecue stand did you go to?”

There were three barbecue stands operating in what was then a thriving black neighborhood. Kyle wouldn’t say which stand he went to. Callahan pressed Kyle until he broke down. Referring to another detective who questioned him after his first arrest, Kyle said, “I guess he thinks I’m a pretty good liar now.”

Kyle told them how he went to the yard behind Smith’s apartment, climbed up the back steps, and tried unsuccessfully to see through the blinds. He continued:

I went down the steps and was standing in the back yard and the door opened and somebody put a flashlight down on me, and I couldn’t see who it was, and about that time I heard a man say, “There is the son of a bitch now,” and there was a pistol shot fired at me and I backed out of the yard into an areaway, and had I known the way out I would have continued out to Singleton Street, but I got in a blind alley and there was another shot fired as I got in the alley, and I seen that I was cornered and figured there was nothing for me to do but shoot it out.

Kyle said he climbed over a shed and a fence and made his way to Eighteenth Street, where a viaduct crosses the railroad yards. In the middle of the bridge, he threw his gun away. He returned to the saloon, climbed the steps to his apartment, and went to bed. He stayed home until several police officers came to arrest him.

After arresting Kyle for the second time, Chief of Detectives Elias Hoagland took Kyle to the scene of the shooting and walked him through the events of that night. Police found a witness, Lila Saines—who lived on Singleton, the next street north of the
shooting—who said she saw a man running down the street after she heard shots and said he stopped to wipe his forehead under a lamp post. Hoagland told Kyle to stop under the lamppost and wipe his forehead.

“You are right,” Kyle said. “That’s just what I did.”

Mable Smith said Kyle later told her that “the police treated him as a perfect gentleman, and he said the worse thing was said to him was, ‘You are a damn liar.'”

At the time, police interrogation methods were under fire, and at least two juries had acquitted defendants because the jurors believed that the confessions made to police were the result of beatings and torture. In February 1923, Circuit Judge Hugo Grimm convened a grand jury in St. Louis to investigate those claims.

By the time of the coroner’s inquest five days after the shooting, Kyle had a lawyer, Noah Parden. The coroner called Joseph Kyle as a witness. After giving his name, Deputy Coroner William Dever asked his address.

“I got two, one at 2360 Chestnut, and the other one at 1421-B Papin Street.”

“What is your occupation?”

“Proprietor of a soft drink parlor.”

“Mr. Kyle, it is your privilege at this time to make a statement or not to make one, just as your counsel has advised you.”

“He don’t care to make any, your honor,” Parden said, according to the transcript of the inquest.

It is hard to believe those were Parden’s exact words.

Parden, the son of a former slave and an orphan at age six, graduated at the top of his class from the law school at Central Tennessee College, where he gave the class oration in German. He was an accomplished writer whose works frequently appeared in the Negro press. His grammar was better than that.

Parden practiced law in Chattanooga for thirteen years but had to flee for his life in 1906 after he successfully petitioned the Supreme Court to hold the sheriff and others in contempt of court. After touring the country as a lecturer and founding a newspaper in Oklahoma, Parden settled first in East St. Louis, then St. Louis with a law office in East St. Louis. During the riots in East St. Louis, Parden was an assistant prosecutor in St. Clair County. Ten years after the resolution of Kyle’s case, Parden became the first African-American prosecutor in the St. Louis Circuit Attorney’s office. By then, he had defended 231 persons charged with murder, only one of whom was executed.

Parden came to the coroner’s inquest to question witnesses. He used his skills to establish and reinforce in the record that Kyle did not know he was firing at the police and that he was defending himself. When Mable Smith was on the stand, Parden asked her about the lighting in the apartment. She told him that at the time of the shooting, the only illumination came from a single gaslight in her bedroom, which was separated from the back porch by her kitchen. In response to Parden’s questions, Smith told the coroner’s inquest that had she known it was Kyle at the window, she would not have called the police.

The Police Journal praised Hoagland, Callahan, Cooper, and Crockett, but curiously not Carter, for their work in solving the case. “It shows more than anything else that it pays officers to pay particular attention to small occurrences happening on their daily round of duties,” the Journal instructed. It also failed to cite three other African-American officers. According to affidavits filed in the case, Patrolmen Ferdinand Waller, Charles E. Johnson, and Isaiah Woods heard that Kyle told the regulars at his club to lie if anyone asked what time he closed it that night. Without the black officers’ efforts and knowledge of their community, Turner may not have gone free. When the police board promoted Cooper as the department’s first African-American sergeant on February 27, 1923, the Police Journal cited his arrest of Kyle as one of four examples of his good police work.

At no time during the coroner’s inquest did anyone question the propriety of a police officer firing before identifying himself or without knowing at whom he was firing. Everyone who testified told the same story: police officer sees suspicious man and fires at him with no warning. At the May 21 meeting of the Board of Police Commissioners, the minutes show no evidence that anyone questioned Stapleton’s behavior. The board did pass a resolution granting a widow’s pension to Stapleton’s second wife because Patrolman Stapleton “lost his life in the extraordinary and exceptional discharge of police duties.”

The local press sympathized with Stapleton. This passage from the St. Louis Star is typical:

Stapleton had a foreboding of his death. Only a few days ago, he remarked to his brother-in-law Charles Shelton with whom he resided at 4437 Maffitt Avenue, “I don’t know when I’m going to be bumped off, but I hope I’m in the harness when it comes.”

…And as he left home for his last roll call and as his wife kissed him with her usual “Good-bye, honey,” he protested, half in earnest, “Don’t say good-bye. That sounds like that might mean forever.”
On August 15, the board appointed the widow, Josephine Stapleton, to the police force as a probationary matron, as they called policewomen in those days. A grand jury indicted Kyle for second-degree murder. He remained in jail, unable to make bond, for months. He was arraigned October 3. Judge Victor Falkenhainer set the trial date for November 25, then accepted the prosecution’s monthly motions for continuances. Parden and his co-counsel, S. E. Garner, vigorously pressed for the court to release him from custody, but Kyle remained in the city jail until his trial on March 5, 1923.

The trial was brief. Leary told his story. Cooper, promoted as the force’s first African-American sergeant a week earlier, testified that when he arrested Kyle, the prisoner said he did not know he was shooting at a police officer. The prosecution rested and Garner and Parden filed a motion for a demurrer, meaning that they believed that the facts as presented by the state did not warrant a conviction.

Judge Falkenhainer called the attorneys into his chambers. When he called court back into session, he ordered the jury to return a verdict of acquittal. “This is one of those unfortunate cases, a case of the old common law,” Falkenhainer said, “when the defendant couldn’t recede any farther, and it was a clear case of self-defense on his part.” The prosecutor, Assistant Circuit Attorney John Bowcock, told a reporter that the state had no case, and the evidence did not warrant the grand jury indictment.

And so, in 1923 in a segregated city, an African-American man with a previous murder conviction admitted to shooting a white police officer to death and got off.

The Argus gave the incident scant coverage. In its three-paragraph article on the acquittal, it did note that Kyle’s two attorneys were “colored.” The local NAACP chapter, which later in the decade would build a movement against police brutality in St. Louis, was dormant, largely limiting its activities to raising enough money to keep the skeleton of an organization alive.

Garner, although largely forgotten today, was often in the public eye in 1923. In September, he sued Max Starkloff, the St. Louis health commissioner, for his policy of forcibly vaccinating every African-American passenger entering St. Louis at Union Station on a train from the South. In November, Garner prevented the extradition of an African-American fugitive to his home state of Mississippi. Garner became an assistant state attorney general in the early 1940s. In 1935, Circuit Attorney James Finnegan appointed Parden an assistant circuit attorney. Both were firsts for African Americans.

Sergeant Ira Cooper would become the undisputed leader of African-American police officers, and after solving some famous cases—notably two kidnappings and a bank embezzlement—he would become the first black lieutenant in the St. Louis Police Department in 1931. He was so highly respected in the black community in St. Louis that fugitives would turn themselves in to his house rather than a police station.

Benjamin Israel is a former reporter with the Columbia (Mo.) Daily Tribune and the Southeast Missourian, among other newspapers. Benjamin Israel just completed a master’s thesis on early African-American police officers. He is working on a biography of Ira Cooper.

1 One reference to Parden as the “Negro Clarence Darrow” is in Herbert Monk, “Only One of Noah W. Parden’s 224 Murder Clients Has Been Put to Death,” St. Louis Globe-Democrat Sunday Magazine, February 26, 1928, p. 3, 12.
2 “Inquest on Body of Patrick Stapleton Held in the Coroner’s Office in the City of St. Louis at 9 o’clock A.M. May 31, 1922,” available at the St. Louis Medical Examiner’s Office. The all quotes and information in this article is from the inquest unless otherwise noted. All the documents in the inquest’s files and most of the newspaper reports refer to Smith as “Mable” rather than the more common spelling of “Mabel.”
4 “35 Negroes Are Held in Murder of Patrolman,” St. Louis Star, May 27, 1922, p. 3.
6 The soft-drink parlor’s address was 2760 Chestnut.
7 “Jury Scores Police; Folk Wants Shake-Up,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, December 2, 1905, p. 1–2; “Negroes Appointed to Do Patrol Duty,” St. Louis Star-Chronicl., last edition, June 18, 1906, p. 10; “Interview with Lieutenant Cooper of St. Louis Police,” Washington University Library Special Collections, Urban League Papers, Miscellaneous Notes, Box 8, Series 1. I’d like to thank Prof. Priscilla Dowden of the University of Missouri–St. Louis for the latter citation.
8 “Negroes Made Policemen,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, March 29, 1901, p. 3.
9 “Citizens Liberty League Approved by the Party Leaders in Conference,” St. Louis Argus, February 6, 1920, p. 1; J. W. McIntyre and E. T. Summey, “The Missouri Negro Republican League Club,” St. Louis Argus, July 29, 1921, p. 7. Then as now, the governor of Missouri appointed four of the five members of the St. Louis Police Board, while the fifth was the mayor.
10 Allegations of police brutality were common in those days. See for example, “Two Youths Assert They Were Beaten by Police Men,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, May 28, 1922. The allegations periodically resulted in grand jury investigations, as in 1923. See “Third Degree Probe Asked of Grand Jury by Judge Grimm,” St. Louis Times, February 5, 1923, p. 3.
11 “Career of Negro Lawyer Chosen Prosecutor’s Aid,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, January 8, 1935, from the St. Louis Globe-Democrat morgue in the St. Louis Mercantile Library, N 605/165.
13 Ibid.
17 The affidavits are included in the report from the coroner’s inquest.
20 Minutes of the Board of Police Commissioners of St. Louis, 1921–22, p. 279.
21 “Negro Slayer of Policeman Freed at Court’s Order,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, March 5, 1923, p. 1.
29 “Inquest held October 30, 1937, on the body of Worthy Williams, Col. by Alfred J. Perry and a Jury,” available at the St. Louis Medical Examiner’s office.
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