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## Mail Bag

I greatly admired your excursion on the subject of Yip Harburg. Yip was a fine lyricist (why can't you lyricists be called poets?) but a lousy historian. I read:

"The greatest romance in the life of a lyricist is when right words meet the right notes," Harburg said at the YMHA. "Maria Aeons, the celebrated soprano, was warned by her father, the great Garcia, for whom Mozart wrote the part of Don Juan, that you cannot sing a lie and stay on pitch. I almost believe this."

If there ever was a celebrated soprano named Maria Aeons, I have never heard of her, nor has any of the lexicographers who rest on my shelves. She was certainly not the daughter of the great Manuel Garcia. He had two daughters, the future Maria Malibran and Pauline Viardot, both celebrated singers, but both contraltos or mezzos. Nor did Mozart write the part of Don Juan (Giovanni) for Garcia, who was only twelve years old when *Don Giovanni* had its premiere in Prague in 1787. Garcia did sing it, one of only a few tenors to undertake it. Garcia was, however, Rossini's first Almaviva.

I continue to treasure the Jazzletter.

Henry Pleasants, London, England

Your article on Yip Harburg was enlightening. I sent the issue to my mother, who spent her life pondering and occasionally struggling with the problems of a world that heaps glory on composers and almost ignores lyricists and librettists. My parents had a long career as opera translators; you might know Ruth and Thomas Martin's work, if you are a fan of opera in English. Their translations are lately out of fashion in many places, thanks in part to snide critics and a latter generation of almost insane opera directors, but they knew more about opera than most people I have met since. Growing up as I did with opera characters who spoke (and sang) my language, I must have learned something myself.

Since my father was a conductor and a coach, and the son of an excellent baritone, he knew the human voice intimately. My parents set out to write the most singable translations they could. Singability is paramount, as you know; Edward Dent's *Fledermaus* reads as wonderfully witty verse, but it sounds clumsy when sung. Lines about life being riper when the Heidseick is Piper are best left on the printed page.

Opera librettists, of course, are as underrated as song lyricists. Where is our film about Da Ponte who, I am told, ended up bootlegging in New Jersey because Columbia University didn't pay him enough to live on? As for opera translators, their lot is probably the worst: my parents had to fight the IRS to prove that translation was an art, not a business. Ironically, one of their last translations before my father died was Salieri's

*Prima La Music*, which concerned the slights that librettists suffer.

All this is to say that I appreciate reading about songwriting from the lyricist's perspective for a change. And I'm looking forward to more issues of the Jazzletter.

Charles Martin, Hong Kong

I am writing to congratulate you on *Jazz Black and White*. In these days of thought police and politically-correct bullies, it takes real courage to write as you have. How refreshing it is to read an essay based on reasonable discourse.

I was reminded of an exchange (hardly a meeting of minds) with Stanley Dance in 1988 in the pages of the *Journal of the International Association of Jazz Record Collectors*. Dance had, in criticizing an article (not mine) which had suggested that jazz had benefitted from both black and white participation, dogmatically stated that white jazz musicians had contributed exactly zilch to jazz.

Norman P. Gentieu, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

It's a tragedy the way things have gone.

Terry Gibbs was the first one — at least fifteen years ago — to put me hip to the changes he saw happening around him. White jazz musicians traditionally, with no exceptions that I know of, have worshipped their black peers and I know there was real affection, on the part of many black musicians, for their talented white friends, in and out of the business.

Perhaps the worst thing about racism is its stupidity — blaming all the members of a particular social group for offenses committed by a minority, although the point is the same even if the offenders are in the majority.

Even if ninety percent of American whites were blamable, it would still be idiotic to attack the ten percent that were innocent. The point obviously applies at all 360 degrees of the moral compass. Anger should always be directed at specific targets.

Steve Allen, Sherman Oaks, California

Now that you've printed the events of that dreadful night at the New Morning in Paris (*l'affaire Wynton Marsalis*), I do wish to clarify.

The band was on a break. I left the band room and returned to hear Wynton say, "... and all those white cats like Phil Woods getting all the press!" I had heard Wynton at the North Sea Festival the previous year (1981, I believe) and at the Olympia Theatre in Paris prior to the New Morning gig. I was very impressed by his musical maturity, which, I assumed, carried over to his personal maturity. There was no musician that year who had received more press than Wynton.

I was raised in an exceptional family and didn't discover racism until I was ten or eleven, having grown up in a tolerant neighborhood on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. I thought

that jazz music was the one place where racism didn't exist. That night at the New Morning my faith was shattered. That's why I cried — not because Marsalis had maligned Phil Woods. It was a loss of innocence delivered by a wetting.

But, you know, the night had its rewards. The old father, Art Blakey, taught the whelp a lesson. And, hey baby, if you ain't got any soul — it doesn't matter if you're black or white.

All my best,

Kim Parker, Champmotteux, France

Your two installments of the *Jazz Black and White* piece are, if anything, maybe too good. You have been so thorough-going, with so many lucid examples, presented in so well thought-out a manner that many of the PC crowd and wyntonites will undoubtedly cry foul because there is no one in their camp who might effectively address many or most of the things you have written.

The matters you address are becoming increasingly serious and I see nasty little examples all the time in New York. When I first started Chiaroscuro a zillion years ago, the primary idea behind the company was to document mainstream musicians, usually black, who were being ignored by the majors and what few minors existed in 1970. It is now a few years later and Andy Sordoni and I are still doing this but at least half the things we have done over the past year or so have been devoted to outstanding young musicians who can't get arrested by a big company simply because they are white. It isn't in most cases PC for a major record company to have more than one or two young white jazz guys at any given time. Good for Chiaroscuro but bad for the artists and the listening public because no matter how well we may produce a record and how well the artists perform, with our distribution it will never be much more than a very high-priced demo in the real record world.

I could recount story after story but that doesn't solve anything. Unhappily, I can't really come up with any ideas as to what might solve the problems that continue to exist because of creeping wyntonitis.

Hank O'Neal, Chiaroscuro Records, New York City

I will not be renewing my subscription to Jazzletter. Your diatribe on Wynton Marsalis sickened me. I don't need Part II.

Sally Flood, Seattle, Washington

#### **An Open Letter to the Jazzletter.**

Two wrongs don't make a right. That rather obvious truism came to mind when I read the October and November issues. I was particularly interested in Gene's statement about Wynton Marsalis: "Nowhere, in ten years of interminable interviews and articles and pronouncements, does Marsalis make a single mention of a white jazz musician. Not one that I have been able to find, in any event. Bix Beiderbecke, Frank Trumbauer, Eddie

Sauter, Bill Challis, Bill Evans, Gil Evans, Gerry Mulligan, Scott LaFaro, Jim Hall, Jimmy Raney, Jack Teagarden, Benny Goodman (who, as clarinetist Walt Levinsky recently noted, revolutionized clarinet playing), Artie Shaw, Woody Herman, Joe Venuti, Eddie Lang, each in his way a major contributor to jazz, simply never existed."

Coincidentally, before reading Gene's piece, I had made up a somewhat similar list in a letter to the editor of Down Beat on the same subject. Some of the names on my list were Paul Desmond, Stan Getz, Zoot Sims, Lee Konitz, Bud Freeman, Lew Tabackin, Buddy De Franco, Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich, Red Norvo, Mildred Bailey, Lennie Tristano, Stan Kenton, Ad Rollini, Steve Lacy, Phil Woods, Joe Pass, Joe Zawinul.

Before dealing with the second wrong, let's look back at the first wrong — the exclusion or down-grading of great African American artists who suffered humiliation, denial of jobs, segregated musicians' unions, and innumerable other problems. The cause was very obvious: racism.

It infuriated me to see capable but hardly earth-shaking white musicians winning Down Beat and Metronome polls while the true giants were relegated to lower places. Big Sid Catlett never won a Down Beat or Metronome poll; neither did Jimmy Blanton. At a time when Billie Holiday was at her peak, the Down Beat winners for female vocalist were first Helen O'Connell, later Helen Forrest and Dinah Shore. True, some of the white musicians won deservedly: it was logical for Benny Goodman to earn first place, but it was frustrating to see Louis Armstrong all but ignored while the trumpet winner in 1937, '38, and '39 was Harry James. During the early 1950s, when Louis Armstrong was by no means past his peak, this honor went to Maynard Ferguson and then Chet Baker.

I fought this racism tooth and nail. In the belief that carefully selected experts would make more representative choices than magazine readers, I worked with Robert Goffin, the Belgian jazz critic, and Arnold Gingrich, then editor of Esquire, to assemble an interracial board of experts. This resulted in the magazine's publication of a series of poll victories in which twenty of twenty-six winning musicians were black. The winners were presented in a concert at the Metropolitan Opera House. The New York Amsterdam News, the Pittsburgh Courier, and other African American publications hailed this unprecedented acknowledgement of the true heroes of jazz.

Despite our efforts in Esquire, racial hostility did not die. In 1956, Stan Kenton fired off an angry telegram published in Down Beat complaining about the jazz critics' poll. "It's obvious," he wrote, "that there's a new minority group, white jazz musicians." He expressed "complete and total disgust" at the results of the poll.

In a long letter attacking Kenton, I pointed out the triumphs of black musicians, most of whom inspired the members of the Kenton band.

Meanwhile, however, the first wrong has given way to the second. Wynton Marsalis is not alone in his attitude. As a life member of the NAACP, I receive its *Crisis* magazine every month and was shocked to see in the February 1991 issue the laughably inaccurate article by Herb Boyd that turned the truth upside down: Bix Beiderbecke was acclaimed while Louis Armstrong was in eclipse, etc.

Gene Lees has already dealt with the most egregious of Boyd's points, but I would like to add the following:

When Boyd said, "The media clamor over jazz is now focussed on Harry Connick, Jr., Geoff Keezer, Benny Green, and Joey DeFrancesco . . . while hundreds of black musicians hover in the shadows," he neglected to point out that the four musicians he cited owe much of their success to black mentors. Harry Connick, Jr., grew up in Louisiana as a student, friend, and frequent associate of the Marsalis family. Keezer and Green have been hired almost exclusively by black leaders, notably Art Blakey. As for Joey DeFrancesco, one wonders whether Herb Boyd thinks Miles Davis was "hovering in the shadows" while, as a leader, he toured with a group featuring Joey DeFrancesco as a sideman.

Mr. Boyd's ignorance was such that he included Lionel Hampton and Teddy Wilson as members of Benny Goodman's band. They were not. As anyone with a minimal knowledge of jazz history knows, Teddy Wilson played only with the Goodman trio and Hampton with the quartet. The first real mixed band was led not by Goodman but by Benny Carter, whose international, interracial orchestra was heard in Europe in 1937.

As for Wynton Marsalis, part of the problem has been the reluctance of the New York media to tackle the issue. I have seen in New York only brief passing mentions of the fact that, for example, in Marsalis' concert celebrating Thelonious Monk, he ignored those white musicians who had taken part in Monk's original concert and replaced them with non-whites.

Perhaps these critics are afraid of being branded racists, even though what they would be attacking can clearly be defined as racism in reverse. Fortunately, Gene Lees, with his admirable track record, is in no such danger. As for me, the day I am justifiably referred to as a racist, it will then be true that grits ain't groceries, eggs ain't poultry, and Mona Lisa was a man.

It saddens me to observe what Wynton Marsalis is doing to destroy the image of jazz as a truly democratic music.

Leonard Feather, Sherman Oaks, California

*Leonard Feather's opposition to racism of any kind has been unwavering throughout his life. Taking note of anti-white racism as far back as the 1940s, when he and Barry Ulanov ran Metro-nome magazine, he or Ulanov — he can no longer remember — coined the term Crow Jim to describe it. The following letter casts further light on the subject.*

GL

It's a difficult, multi-layered subject. Each layer of veneer stripped off reveals another beneath, like faded wallpaper in an English rooming-house. Probably the chief consideration — and in some ways a *sine qua non* to understanding the entire matter — is the degree to which whites have been and remain complicit in the creation of the current lopsided state of affairs. Locked into the white American liberal sensibility there appears to be a powerful machinery, guilt-driven, which inhibits — nay, prohibits — resistance to anything from the black side that can be interpreted, however marginally, as fostering redress.

A great many whites seem to feel, at some *ur*-fundamental level, that they deserve punishment, that anything blacks feel like saying or doing, however egregious, finds its justification in history. Have a look at *Reverse Racism, or How the Pot got to Call the Kettle Black*, by Duke University Professor Stanley Fish, in the November *Atlantic*.

His basic hypothesis is that there cannot be an equality of weight and meaning, or any sort of "level playing field" in the matter of racism, because of history; we can't remove white treatment of blacks from its historical context, he says — meaning, as I understand him, that every black transgression of taste or justice, regardless how flagrant, can be defended, or at least understood, by citation of historical precedent.

Fish's very hypothesis produces some interesting results when applied to objective examination of the history of jazz, and the white role in that history. For example, if we truly can't divorce ourselves from the realities of history, doesn't that also mean that the seminal role played by whites from the start cannot be disavowed?

But leave that. I'd rather return to the matter of white complicity. It shows up everywhere in jazz writing across the board. I remember an article by Tom Piazza in the Sunday New York Times magazine a couple of years back. Its ostensible subject was the renewal and revitalization of jazz brought about by a brand new generation of young musicians. Whom did he cite? Hargrove, Antonio Hart, Marcus Roberts, Wes Anderson, Todd Williams, Wycliffe Gordon, Marlon Jordan, Mark Whitfield, others. Ofays? Well, Joey DeFrancesco, Geoff Keezer, Christopher Holyday. Period. Of Barrett, Sandke, Chirillo, Vignola, Alden, Peplowski, Schoenberg, Gordon, Goldsby, Potter, nary a trace. Not even such members of a slightly older generation as Vache, Hamilton, and their coevals.

Then, too, there's the reluctance of the white musicians, especially those adversely affected by these and other imbalances, to speak out. Too much to lose, they'll say; my position is perilous enough. And, too, they're most of them products of the kind of liberal upbringing that makes it very, very difficult, even in such circumstances, to speak ill of blacks.

On the *Tony Brown's Journal* TV show, Marsalis delivered himself of the view that the reason blacks have been held back for so many years has to do with the control exercised over the

music business by "people who read the Torah and stuff." Lest anyone misunderstand him, he continued:

"Every idiom of black music, be it jazz, rhythm-and-blues or whatever, has declined in its negroidery and purpose. It became more whitified. It's not the white people's fault. The white people, they do what they do to support the misconceptions that they started when they brought the brothers and sisters over here as slaves. We are, in effect, in a state of war . . . ."

"The documents of this country, which are noble, (have been) misrepresented and compromised to the point of absurdity by so-called white people who were Europeans, people who functioned as Negroes in European society. They came over here and said, 'We're not the lower class of European society now, because we have these black Americans that we can dog and mess over.'"

You should have heard the applause from the all-black audience.

Yet who has kept Wynton Marsalis at the pinnacle of his popularity, has made it possible for him to have an ongoing forum for such intellectually bankrupt utterances? Spend a protracted time reading the New York Times every day. It doesn't take long to realize the degree to which whites invite and morally underwrite black racism.

Richard M. Sudhalter, Southold, New York

*Pianist Joe Zawinul, in a 1992 interview with Jazz Forum, was asked, "Do you agree that, as some black musicians say, only black musicians can play jazz?"*

*He replied, "You ask Miles Davis. He always says I'm the only one." Miles may have been shining him on. Farther along in the interview, Zawinul said: "The Jewish people took away a lot of the black music and made it sound like itself. The black musician was supposed to be working in the kitchen, cleaning the dirt. That's the Jewish system. That's the way it is."*

*In view of Joe Glaser's relationship with Louis Armstrong, Martha Glaser's with Erroll Garner, Artie Shaw's with Roy Eldridge and Billie Holiday, Benny Goodman's with Teddy Wilson, Lionel Hampton, and Charlie Christian, that of Norman Granz with Ella Fitzgerald, Oscar Peterson, Count Basie, and more, not to mention the inestimable labors of such writers as Leonard Feather, Nat Hentoff, and Barry Ulanov on behalf of black artists, the remark rings a strange note. Zawinul was born in Vienna. It is famed as a capital of anti-Semitism. GL*

My father was Rex Stewart. I understand you are familiar with his work.

It's been a dream for quite some time of me and my brother Rex (the III no less) to produce a video or film about our father's contribution to jazz. Rex has been in the motion picture and television business for more than twenty-two years and I have been working and producing television projects for the last

seven years. As we learned more about our father we realized how important he was not only because he played a horn but for the writings and observations of the people who created jazz. Both of us have his last book and copies of many of his articles.

I would like to meet — I can fly to California any time it's convenient for you — to discuss the project we are producing and ask for your advice and, frankly, pick your brains about jazz, my father, and the importance of both.

Regina Stewart Fraser, Lake Zurich, Illinois

*I remember standing close to the bandstand, in awe of the Ellington band, in Niagara Falls, Ontario, when I was twelve. I was astonished above all by the brass section and two particularly witty and impish soloists who, I realized later, were Ray Nance and Rex Stewart.*

*That experience helped determine my lasting love of jazz and respect for its makers. I always loved Rex Stewart's playing, especially for its lyrical quality.*

*I ask anyone with information on Rex Stewart to get in touch with me, so that I may pass it along to Mrs. Fraser.*

## Jazz Black and White Part III

*Miles Davis: The Autobiography* is a disturbed, and disturbing book, absolutely harrowing in places.

Miles was born into a wealthy and educated family, his father an East St. Louis dentist and horse breeder. Miles lived a comparatively sheltered life in a manse on a ranch, riding horses for a hobby. The loss of innocence in being beaten by a racist cop outside Birdland in New York must have been shattering.

Miles projected a tough-guy image, and he was tough. There were affectations about it, however. I once heard him say to a girl making a pass at him in the Sutherland Lounge in Chicago, "I ain't got no free fucks to give away." But it was a rehearsed line, a lick he had worked out to enhance his image as a bad-ass: I heard of him using the self-same line on a girl in New York. I think that Miles was a frightened man, always aware that because of his color he could be beaten and, in some parts of the United States, killed with impunity. The tough image was armor, a *persona* carefully created to intimidate whites and hold them at a safe distance.

There was a great sensitivity in Miles. I do not know how it could have been otherwise. Those gorgeous melodic ideas, that rich and individual tone, did not come from nowhere. I once was hanging out with him in a now-vanished club called the Cloister in the basement of the Maryland Hotel in the Rush Street area of Chicago. Business that week was not good. In the office, the club owner or manager was paying Miles. Miles always insisted on cash. He counted the money carefully, peeled

off a number of bills, and handed them back to the man, saying, "You didn't make any money with us this week." That's not hearsay; I was there. The club operator was white.

The autobiography reveals the inner conflict with which Miles lived because of race. This is evident in contradictions in the book, sometimes on the same page. On page 58, he (or his collaborator Quincy Troupe) says of his studies at Juilliard, "The shit they were teaching was too white for me." On page 74 he says, "I took some lessons in symphonic trumpet playing. Trumpet players from the New York Philharmonic gave the lessons, so I learned some things from them." On page 60, he says "They weren't teaching me nothing and didn't know nothing to teach me because they were so prejudiced against all black music." Only two paragraphs later, he says, "Another thing I found strange after living and playing in New York was that a lot of black musicians didn't know anything about music theory . . . A lot of the old guys thought that if you went to school it would make you play like you were white. Or, if you learned something from theory, then they would lose the feeling in your playing. I couldn't believe that all them guys like Bird, Prez, Bean, all them cats wouldn't go to museums or libraries so they could borrow those musical scores so they could check out what was happening. I would go to the library and borrow scores by all those great composers, like Stravinsky, Alban Berg, Prokofiev. I wanted to see what was going on in all of music. Knowledge is freedom and ignorance is slavery, and I just couldn't believe someone could be that close to freedom and not take advantage of it. I have never understood why black people didn't take advantage of all the shit that they can. It's like a ghetto mentality telling people that they aren't supposed to do certain things, that those things are only reserved for white people." (Later in the book he tells us that Bill Evans turned him onto Khatchaturian.)

There is something wrong with this passage. Since Miles admired Prokofiev, it is inconceivable that he did not know that Charlie Parker did too; in at least one instance Parker was listening to the *Scythian Suite* in Gil Evans' apartment during that the period when Miles was constantly there. Parker wanted to study with Edgard Varese. Coleman Hawkins had a great taste for classical music and was known to haunt museums, particularly art galleries, and many of the founding pianists in jazz, including Willie the Lion Smith, James P. Johnson, Fats Waller, Earl Hines, and particularly Teddy Wilson, had considerable knowledge of the classical piano literature. Sidney Bechet was a great lover of Beethoven. Don Redman had two conservatory degrees. I have previously documented the extent to which many significant founding figures in jazz had solid academic credentials, including Jimmie Lunceford, who had a bachelor's degree in music and taught the subject.

Marc Crawford, a black journalist from the *Ebony* staff who wrote an article for me about Miles at *Down Beat*, described

Miles listening with fervent admiration to the Italian pianist Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli. And finally, I recall my own conversations with Miles about classical music. Indeed, during a period when he lived three or four blocks from me in the West 70s in New York, he learned that I owned a complete set of the contemporary music commissions of the Louisville Orchestra. He pressed me to lend them to him, which I did. (I never got them back!)

Miles attests to the anti-white racism in jazz on page 231 of the book: "Some of the things that caused Bill (Evans) to leave the band hurt me, like that shit some black people put on him about being a white boy in our band. Now, I don't go for that kind of shit; I have always just wanted the best players in my group and I don't care about whether they're black, white, blue, red, or yellow. As long as they can play what I want that's it. But I know this stuff got under Bill's skin and made him feel bad. Bill was a very sensitive person . . ."

Then on the next page, 232, he says, "It's a strange thing about a lot of white players — not all, just most — that after they make it in a black group they always go and play with all white guys no matter how good the black guys treated them. Bill did that, and I'm not saying he could have gotten any black guys any better than Scott (LaFaro) and Paul (Motian), I'm just telling what I've seen happen over and over again."

But that's nonsense. All of it. Bill did not come to prominence with the Miles Davis group: he was first discovered in Louisiana by Mundell Lowe and Red Mitchell, and worked with them. He began to cause a stir in New York with Tony Scott's group, and then he electrified the jazz world with solos on two George Russell compositions, *Concerto for Billy the Kid* and *All About Rosie*. He made his first album as a trio leader in 1956, two years before joining Miles. His next trio album was made not with white musicians but with Sam Jones and Philly Joe Jones. The latter remained Bill's close friend, and was part of the road group at various times. Jack DeJohnette was also with Bill for a time and recorded with him — and left only to join Miles. So Miles knew. Over the years, Bill recorded with Cannonball Adderley, Percy Heath, Connie Kay, Freddie Hubbard, Harold Land, Kenny Burrell, and Ray Brown.

Only about a month ago, I was talking to Eddie Gomez, Bill's long-time bassist and probably the first Puerto Rican to emerge as a major jazz musician. Eddie told me that once, when Miles was without a bass player, he called Bill to ask if he could borrow Eddie. Since the trio was on a two-week layoff, Bill said of course he could. Eddie recalled driving with Miles to a job. All the way, Miles talked of his love for Bill and admiration for his musicianship. They passed a big billboard. Miles said, "Bill could read even that."

So. I simply cannot understand that passage about Bill in the book. I do understand that the book is a potent contribution to the mythology of jazz, the more effective for being a strangely

moving (to me at least) chronicle of the torture of a brilliantly gifted American. And its inaccuracies and lies will be repeated.

But of all the myths used to justify and reinforce reverse racism in jazz, none has been as effective and ubiquitous as the story that Bessie Smith died of loss of blood outside a white hospital that would not admit her after an automobile accident. Though it has been completely discredited, the story keeps turning up in books and even formed the basis of the Edward Albee play *The Death of Bessie Smith*.

The story that she expired outside a white hospital that would not admit her was perpetrated by John Hammond.

It is helpful to understand something of Hammond's character. Hammond was born to wealth. He was a Vanderbilt on his mother's side. He early manifested a staunch racial liberalism, but it was not wedded to a concern for facts. Indeed, *Down Beat*, one of the publications for which he wrote, was itself at that time somewhat cavalier with facts and Hammond was by no means a scrupulous journalist.

A month after Bessie Smith's death, he wrote an article published in *Down Beat* under the headline:

**Did Bessie Smith Bleed to Death While Waiting for Medical Aid?** The piece read in part:

"A particularly disagreeable story as to the details of her death has just been received from members of Chick Webb's orchestra, who were in Memphis soon after the disaster. It seems that Bessie was riding in a car which crashed into a truck parked along the side of the road. One of her arms was nearly severed, but aside from that there was no other serious injury, according to these informants. Some time elapsed before a doctor was summoned to the scene, but finally she was picked up by a medico and driven to the leading Memphis hospital. On the way this car was involved in some minor mishap, which further delayed medical attention. When finally she did arrive at the hospital she was refused treatment because of her color and bled to death while waiting for attention.

"Realizing that such tales can be magnified in the telling, I would like to get confirmation from some Memphis citizens who were on the spot at the time. If the story is true it is but another example of disgraceful conditions in a certain section of our country already responsible for the killing and maiming of legitimate union organizers. Of the particular city of Memphis I am prepared to believe almost anything, since its mayor and chief of police publicly urged the use of violence against organizers of the CIO a few weeks ago."

It was hardly a piece of solid reporting. The hospital where she died wasn't even in Memphis. *Down Beat* later printed a story saying that the singer had been taken to a black hospital but it was too late: the myth had been launched.

The facts of the case were thoroughly investigated by Chris Albertson for his biography of the singer.

After the car in which she was riding struck the truck, a

physician named Hugh Smith, on his way to some early-morning fishing with a friend, Henry Broughton, came across a car lying on its side on the highway. The truck it had hit was gone. In his headlights the doctor saw Bessie Smith. The driver of her car, Richard Morgan, was unhurt. Dr. Smith found that her forearm had been almost torn from the upper arm. The doctor and his friend moved her to the grassy shoulder of the road, and the doctor asked Broughton to go to a farm house and call an ambulance. By the time he returned — about ten minutes later — the singer was in shock. When no ambulance arrived, Dr. Smith decided to drive the woman (he had no idea who she was) to Clarksdale, Mississippi. When he and Broughton were moving their fishing tackle from the car's back seat to the trunk, to make room for her, they heard a car approaching at high speed. The doctor stood on the left running board of the car and reached into it to blink its headlights. At the last minute he jumped free and the car smashed into his, wrecking both vehicles. The young couple in the other car were badly injured. Dr. Smith now had three patients on his hands and no car to drive them anywhere. Just then two ambulances arrived; one had been summoned by the driver of the truck that had caused the first accident.

Years later, when the myth had taken hold, Dr. Smith — a past president of the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons — was asked whether the singer had been refused admittance to a white hospital. He answered:

"The Bessie Smith ambulance would *not* have gone to a white hospital, you can forget that. Down in the Deep South cotton country, no colored ambulance driver, or white driver, would even have thought of putting a colored person off in a hospital for white folks. In Clarksdale, in 1937, a town of twelve to fifteen thousand people, there were two hospitals — one white and one colored — and they weren't half a mile apart. I suspect the driver drove just as straight as he could to the colored hospital."

The driver of that ambulance, Willie George Miller, later affirmed that he had driven directly to the G.T. Thomas Hospital, the town's black hospital. There was no such thing as blood plasma in those days, nor were there blood banks. Dr. Smith later observed that in that era, it took an hour to draw a pint of blood from a donor. And of course a donor with matching blood type had to be found.

Bessie Smith expired, according to the death certificate, which is reproduced in Albertson's book, at 11:30 a.m., September 26, 1937, in Ward I of the Afro-American Hospital in Clarksdale, Mississippi, of shock and possible internal injuries.

Twenty years after the accident, the late George Hoefer noted in *Down Beat* that the truth about the accident still was being ignored by writers.

Even Hammond later recanted. Chris Albertson wrote:

"Thirty-four years later John Hammond admits with some

embarrassment that his article was based entirely on hearsay and that a few phone calls, made at the time, might have curbed the circulating rumors. Once the article appeared, however, it was too late to change the story; people refused to accept any other version."

Why?

When you wish to foment hate, you must dehumanize the object of it. The Bessie Smith legend is a bloody shirt to be waved to that end. It doesn't matter whether it is true.

Throughout history the use of charged vocabulary has served the purpose of demonizing the stranger. The word *barbarous*, for example, descends from a Greek word, *barbaros*, meaning non-Greek and therefore rude. This condescension finds its echo in a statement by composer Gerald Wilson that a certain orchestra was "one of the better non-black bands." It also resounds in the term "un-American," which is insulting to persons of other nationalities. The word *goy* derives from a Hebrew word meaning enemy: anyone who is not a Jew. I have always found it amusing that English terms of condescension toward the French find their exact inversions in French. Going AWOL is taking French leave in English but English leave in French; syphilis was once known as the French disease in England but the English disease in France; and so on.

During World War II the Japanese were referred to as Japs and Nips, even in newspaper headlines. In the post-war years, these terms fell into disuse and then were placed on the prohibited list. So too such terms as krauts and huns for Germans. They were replaced, as the United States found new enemies, with such terms as gooks and slopes. It might be hard to machine-gun a sensitive young woman; it is not so hard to kill a slope. Slopes, after all, are subhuman.

At one time in the United States it was seriously postulated that Africans had thicker skulls and could not feel blows to the head the way whites could. An inversion of this is implicit in common black attitudes toward jazz by white musicians, an attitude curiously present in the work of a good many white writers on the subject. It is curious that whites who would object passionately to the use of the term *nigger* have accepted with equanimity black terms of insult for whites. Down Beat at one time commonly used the term *ofay* to mean white, though it is pig Latin for foe. It even turned up in headlines. Its use, of course, connoted that the magazine and its writers were hip, in the know, on the inside of the black world. *Ofay* is by now an almost vanished term, replaced by *honky*. No one much took exception to it, perhaps because white Americans felt secure in power. Nor has anyone bothered to remember that Jesse Jackson once referred to New York City as hymietown, and the reference by Wynton Marsalis to "people who read the Torah and stuff" has escaped general notice. So have his references to blacks as "the brothers and sisters" — terms of exclusion.

One of the words most freighted with meaning is *soul*. It is heavy with what actors call under-text, for its use as applied to blacks carries the unmistakable implication that whites do not have souls. Within the world of jazz, its use as a quality that blacks supposedly have but whites do not leaves, cumulatively, the impression of whites as subhuman. The attitude, and it is there in comments of Amiri Baraka, Archie Shepp, Wynton Marsalis, and others, is that whites have no feelings of sorrow, joy, reverence, beauty, compassion, laughter, exuberance, and all the other qualities that are the essential materials of art. This is the exact mirror inversion of the white racism that holds that blacks do not feel pain as whites do.

What is peculiar is that Miles Davis and Wynton Marsalis, expressing respect for the major European composers, do not explain how the white man lost the ability to make music when he came to America. Miles at least made exceptions. Aside from his respect for Bill Evans, Gil Evans, Paul Motian, Scott LaFaro, and all the white musicians he hired, he refers in the autobiography to Red Rodney as a "bad motherfucker," the ultimate compliment. (They were in fact friends.) But these very inconsistencies are the signs of Miles' inner conflict.

Marsalis would perhaps argue that whites can't get the hang of jazz because they didn't invent it. Indeed he has said that black new Orleans musicians "invented" improvisation. This would come as a shock to the shades of Chopin, Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, the violin and piano virtuosos who were expected to improvise the cadenzas in concerti, the great castrati (who were thoroughly schooled in improvisation), church organists, flamenco guitar players, and gypsy violinists. And, as one musician put it, "It would make anyone who has played baroque figured bass choke with laughter."

Through much of European musical history, improvisation was the norm. The evolution of our notational system took time, and the gradual hardening into a written tradition of music dominated by composers in the nineteenth century is in a sense the aberration.

But there is yet another fatal flaw in the thinking that goes into reverse racism. And Art Farmer touched on it in a dinner conversation I had with him recently in New York.

Art, I should make clear, is one of my oldest and most treasured friends in the music world, not only for the brilliance and beauty of his playing, but for the quiet warmth of his nature.

Art said, "This whole racial thing is a lot of shit, from all the way down all the way to the top. And the closer you get to the top, the more it disappears. But I used to think that way too."

"After Miles made that nonet record for Capitol, the Birth of the Cool, he came out to Los Angeles. I'd known him for years. That was a great record, with Gerry Mulligan and Lee Konitz and the others. I said to Miles, 'Man, why have you got those white guys on your gig?' Miles said, 'I don't care what color they are. As long as they can play the music the way it's



supposed to be played, that's what it's all about.'

"It made me re-examine my thinking.

"Where I grew up, Arizona and California, you were damned sure that white people couldn't play jazz. The situation was so divided. Your ears would be closed right from the beginning. You just wouldn't listen to some white person playing jazz, just wouldn't give a damn. It went on and on and on and on and on. White people playing jazz, it didn't make any sense to me at all.

"I don't apologize for my ignorance; I was a young kid. But, man, look, if you were a black kid coming up in L.A. and went through all the shit out there, I didn't want to hear about no white people playing jazz. You'd go out and play in a club that drew a mixed audience, and the police would come in and close it down. That kind of thing closed my ears, man. I couldn't give credit where credit was due, because of the social scene.

"After I got away from that, and was able to be more objective about it, then I could hear what people were doing. And then it seemed to me the most stupid thing on earth to think that just because somebody is white they can't play, and vice versa — that just because somebody is black, they can play.

"Years ago, Dizzy was on the Mike Wallace television show. Mike said something like, 'Is it true that only black people can play jazz?'

"And Dizzy said, 'No, it's not true. And if you accept that premise, well then what you're saying is black people can *only* play jazz. And black people, like anyone else, can be anything they want to be.'

Dizzy, as was his wont, had gone to the heart of the issue.

So, a few years ago, did Isaiah Thomas, the Detroit Pistons basketball star. It was not long after the Pistons lost a game to the Boston Celtics in a last minute play by Larry Bird. Sports writers had commonly remarked on how hard Larry Bird worked on basketball, implying that he had to do so because he was not the natural talent black players were. This eventually riled Thomas, and in a statement that I believe was widely misunderstood, he said he was tired of seeing black athletes discussed as if they were lions or tigers — animals, in other words, of natural ability. He said that he and his colleagues also worked hard at basketball, just as hard as Larry Bird. In the game in question, he said, at the last minute Larry Bird made his move "and with his God-given gift," as Thomas put it, took the game away from Detroit.

I thought it was a sane statement for human dignity.

And its implications are clear.

If we suppose the genetic predisposition of talent by race, then its inverse must be invoked: a congenital lack of talent is also possible. If it is true that blacks have some sort of preternatural talent for jazz and basketball, then one is forced to entertain the possibility that they have less or no talent for opera, journalism, medicine, engineering, law, banking, literature, or anything else except stoop labor. And there is no scientific

— or experiential — evidence whatsoever to support such a conclusion. We would have come full circle to an image of those happy singin'-and-dancin' folk with natchal rhythm, who could be viewed, as a ghastly 1920s song lyric had it, as being "just as happy as a cow chewin' on a cud when the darkies beat their feet in the Mississippi mud." Blacks were furious, and rightly so, when a member of the Los Angeles Dodgers staff suggested that they were not suited to managerial positions in baseball: they got him fired. There was a similar furor when a Marine Corps general said minorities were inferior at marksmanship and compass reading. But you can't have it both ways.

To be sure, the number of great black athletes, particularly in basketball, is inordinately high. But the reason for that is as certainly as much social as physical. Throughout American history, whichever ethnic group was currently at the bottom of the social pile gave the country disproportionate numbers of criminals, policemen, athletes, and entertainers: these professions, which held no attraction to the members of the upper strata of society, offered ways out of the ghetto. As each social group escaped its social prison, their prominence in these fields declined, for they were no able to enter other fields. Boxing, for example, hasn't much appeal to the Italians, Jews, and Irish in contemporary America; there was a time when it did. Until blacks have full access to the professions, sports will continue to be especially appealing to a black youth with ambition.

And since successful professional athletes now earn enormous incomes, sports have, and will continue to hold high status among blacks, focussing youthful ambition toward them. But to suggest a genetic predisposition to basketball is to open the way to the most vicious kind of racism, the very thing so many persons have worked so hard for so long to relegate to history's dustbin.

Dizzy Gillespie said once, with sadness in his eyes, "You can't know what it means to be black in the United States — in any field." He was right of course. Whites can only try to imagine what a life of constant insult, abuse, rejection, and danger must be. But some do try, and in part succeed, particularly those who like or play jazz.

Norman Granz put it this way: "This can be a very dogmatic statement, but I stand by it. I don't think anyone gets into jazz, — not as players, I'm talking about the public — and understands what it is about, and understands what the musicians are about, without understanding racism."

But sometimes it seems that certain elements in the black world are actively hostile to even the idea of white efforts to understand. This is encountered in objections by some blacks to *Porgy and Bess* and even the music therefrom, to *Show Boat*, and particularly to William Styron's novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.

We'll consider this matter in the next issue.

**To be continued**