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If I Had a Hammer, I'd Knock Down the Velvet Rope:
Integrated Music Venues and the Politics of Racial Inclusion in Civil Rights America

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Abstract

This thesis examines how integrated concerts and music venues in the 1950s-60s challenged segregationist policies, amplified the messages of the civil rights movement, and reshaped public attitudes toward racial mixing in the United States. Moving beyond institutional approaches in political science, it foregrounds cultural spaces as sites of political action. Focusing on case studies in the Northeast – New York, New Jersey, and Rhode Island – it analyzes venues including Café Society, the Apollo Theater, Springwood Avenue clubs in Asbury Park, and the Newport Jazz, Folk, and Rebels Festivals. Drawing on archival records, newspapers, promotional materials, and lyrical interpretation, these venues are shown to have brought Black performers and interracial audiences into shared spaces where racial hierarchy was actively renegotiated through everyday interaction. Performances communicated civil rights ideas by translating abstract demands into communal experiences beyond formal protest settings, while also revealing persistent tensions, including unequal power relations, commercial pressures, and public resistance. Throughout, Aldon D. Morris’ concept of “indigenous organization” is utilized to show how Black communities mobilized collective identity and autonomy within these performance spaces. Rather than viewing venues solely as sites of interracial contact, this framework captures how Black performers and audiences asserted control over meaning and social interaction, even in spaces that were not Black-owned. These environments enabled the outward projection of Black identity and the communication of political messages on their own terms. As such, integrated music venues functioned not only as points of racial contact, but as contested sites of Black agency that challenged the power hierarchy and contributed to broader processes of social change.

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forever be an unspoken language between us. I feel like the title of our playlist describes that best! Thank you for proving that the most memorable parts of life are the ones we share.

Lastly, I return to my family. To all of my grandparents, thank you for the stories you've shared with me over the years. In knowing you all, my understanding of history and belonging has shifted; where we come from is no longer just behind us, it's something we're still actively making sense of today. To my aunt, you've been a perfect reflection of everything I admire. Thank you for always keeping up with the times in your own style, free from fear of trying something new, even when the rest of us are still catching up. *Size olan sevgim kelimelerle tarif edilemez.*

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Dedication

During the course of my research, I consistently ran into the obstacle of archival gaps, often the result of destruction from fires or floods. It was especially difficult when I searched for musicians and venues that I knew had formerly been deeply alive, only to find how little remained of them. Therefore, I'd like to dedicate this thesis to my great-grandmother, Şerife Demirel. So much of her life also exists without record. The stories that shaped her live mostly in her memory, fragile and fleeting, and I often find myself wishing there were more to trace, more to know. Maybe that's what makes this moment matter all the more. I write her name here with specific intention, so that it will not be lost to absence and instead find a place to endure. This is a small act on my part, but a valuable one, like honoring a life that deserves to be remembered. In this work, she leaves a mark.

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Introduction

The civil rights movement did not simply knock on the doors of American power, it shook them to their foundations. Courtrooms became stages where the meaning of the Constitution was contested, legislatures became spaces where the boundaries of citizenship were argued, and streets filled with people insisting that injustice could no longer be ignored. Yet beneath this familiar story lay a quieter, more pervasive struggle, one that sought to reshape the everyday structures of life. The timeline begins not with a march or a speech but with *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 (Groves, 1951). That decision did more than uphold segregation. It gave legal legitimacy to a system that entrenched racial inequality throughout American society. This, then, established a basis for Jim Crow that permeated schools, parks, hospitals, transit, and the everyday experiences of Black Americans, shaping a life constrained by discrimination as well as exclusion (Halcoussis & Lowenberg, 1998). Nearly sixty years later, *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 tried to unravel that blueprint. The Court held that segregated public schools helped aid inequality and inflicted psychological harm (Gallagher, 2007). The decision signaled a shift in the federal government's stance on racial separation, but implementing it was often met with fierce resistance from those who viewed segregation as an established social norm. As a result, the struggle for equality could no longer be confined to corridors of power. It had to be lived, challenged, and remade in the spaces where segregation shaped everyday life. Whether that be classrooms, neighborhood streets, or even in the routines that defined ordinary existence.

Political science has long recognized grassroots organizing as an important form of political activity, yet the discipline has often focused on arenas where political action is most visible (Li & Zhang, 2017). Political Science has traditionally centered on courts, legislatures, political parties, and interest groups, treating these institutions as the primary areas where change

occurs. As a result, the impact of other forms of activism has often been pushed to the background, even though these less formal efforts were crucial in reshaping public opinion. While institutional arenas provide valuable insights, they leave little room for understanding how political meaning is produced outside formal settings (Pinckney, Butcher, & Braithwaite, 2022). Cultural spaces that contain music, nightlife, and performance are often dismissed as symbolic, with “real” politics assumed to happen elsewhere (Eyerman, 2002). For example, scholarship on civil rights music showed that music itself was not a peripheral feature of the movement but a central organizing force that shaped collective identity. The biggest one is “*Civil Rights Music: The Soundtracks of the Civil Rights Movement*” by Reiland Rabaka which talks about how freedom songs translated abstract ideals of equality into shared resonant experiences that unified participants and strengthened activism (Rabaka, 2016). At the same time, this body of literature tends to focus on explicitly political spaces such as protests. As a result, while it establishes that music amplified the message of the movement, it leaves less explored how integrated music venues functioned as everyday sites where those ideals were enacted in practice before diverse audiences. Therefore, this overlooks how these environments actively shaped people’s experiences of race and belonging, demonstrating that spaces many consider insignificant were, in fact, central to political life.

This thesis asks the following question: How did integrated concerts and music venues in the 1950s and 1960s challenge segregationist policies, amplify the messages of the civil rights movement, and reshape public attitudes toward racial mixing in the United States? To answer this, the analysis focuses on the Northeast, specifically New York, New Jersey, and Rhode Island, regions that provide contrast to the legally codified segregation of the South. While these states did not enforce Jim Crow in the same formalized way, they still contained deeply

embedded patterns of racial separation, making them critical sites for examining how integration functioned in practice rather than in law. Within this regional framework, this thesis examines key venues and events where interracial audiences and performers converged. In New York, spaces such as Café Society and the Apollo Theater serve as early influential examples of integrated performance spaces that challenged social norms. In New Jersey, venues along Springwood Avenue in Asbury Park show how local music scenes fostered interracial interaction within everyday community life. Finally, in Rhode Island, large-scale events such as the Newport Folk Festival, Newport Jazz Festival, and Newport Rebels Festival highlight how integrated audiences and performers could reshape cultural expectations on a larger national stage. Together, these sites were selected because they capture different scales (intimate clubs, local scenes, and major festivals) through which music became a space where segregation was not only contested, but actively reconfigured.

Histories of youth activism further reinforce the centrality of music and its role in grassroots mobilization. “*Freedom Song Young Voices and the Struggle for Civil Rights*” by Mary Turck, for instance, shows how young activists used singing to build solidarity and a sense of collective purpose in high-risk environments (Turck, 2009). Music in this context operated as a political tool, making participation more accessible. However, this focus remains largely internal to the movement itself, centering on participants rather than broader publics. Consequently, while these accounts demonstrate how music strengthened activism, they do not fully address how integrated performance spaces extended these dynamics outward, shaping the perceptions and attitudes of interracial audiences. Reflections on the trajectory of the movement also underscore the earlier importance of music by noting its decline in later years. Works that invoke the idea that “the music has gone out of the movement” point to a shift away from

collective singing as a unifying force, implicitly emphasizing how vital music had been during the movement's peak (Carter, 2009). This retrospective perspective highlights the intensity that music once generated, reinforcing its significance as a political tool. Yet, by focusing on temporal change rather than spatial context, this line does little to examine where and how music operated in everyday settings, leaving underexplored the role of integrated venues as key sites of interaction and transformation.

The research in this thesis draws on several categories of primary sources. A central archive consists of the index cards and booking notes maintained by Frank Schiffman at the Apollo Theater (Smithsonian Institution, 2023). These records document performers, wages, billing order, and performance frequency, but they also contain descriptive language and evaluative commentary. There is an analysis not only of compensation patterns but also the terminology Schiffman used when referring to Black versus white performers. Differences in descriptors, tone, categorization, and informal commentary reveal how race operated within institutional decision-making. Assessment of how racial assumptions shaped artistic authority vs. opportunity within a Black-centered venue is included as well. This approach allows for an understanding of how even institutions that supported Black excellence were embedded within broader racialized systems of evaluation and social hierarchy.

Newspapers provide another critical window into these processes. Journalists made deliberate choices about what narratives to construct, and those choices reveal local attitudes, official anxieties, and societal perceptions of race. Coverage often described crowd size, policing, and audience behavior, while framing integrated events as potentially unstable or sensational and predominantly Black-centered events as culturally important and exemplary. Comparing these contrasting portrayals across venues allows me to trace how northern media

framed Black cultural authority vs. white support and how those narratives aligned with or resisted civil rights ideals. Newspapers thus function not only as historical records but as reflections of contested social attitudes, revealing anxieties about interracial contact and the negotiation of public norms.

Promotional posters and advertisements are treated as pre-performance political texts. Visual imagery and descriptive language reveal assumptions about audience composition, behavior, and social boundaries. Analysis of these materials demonstrates how organizers positioned Black performers, emphasized or downplayed integration, and invoked respectability, modernity, or authenticity. These artifacts show how venues shaped public representations of Black identity and signaled the political stakes of cultural participation in a segregated society. Since archival footage is not relied upon in this thesis, songs performed at these venues are analyzed through lyrical interpretation. Drawing on artists' reflections, there is an examination of how performances addressed racial violence, labor inequality, migration, and freedom, treating music as both artistic and political communication. Connecting lyrical meaning to venue context allows me to assess how audiences experienced civil rights consciousness in embodied, communal settings, and how performers intentionally conveyed political messages through their art.

Finally, these venues are situated within regional and national networks. Touring circuits and festival publicity connected local venues to broader cultural and political geographies, ensuring that ideas, aesthetic standards, and practices of Black authority circulated beyond individual cities. Tracing these networks (through press coverage, promotional material, and performer movement) reveals how venues contributed to a wider infrastructure of Black political and cultural development. By triangulating all of these aspects, this methodology sheds light on

both the symbolic and material contributions of performance spaces to the civil rights movement. Analysis of language and institutional practices reveals how racial meaning was constructed, while examining audience interactions, artistic authority, and the circulation of culture shows how Black communities negotiated autonomy and the ways in which they were constrained or exploited by venue owners and managers. In combination, these sources show that performance venues were not merely stages for entertainment; they were active sites in which racial hierarchy was contested, Black identity was reshaped, and the social foundations of civil rights were enacted.

All of these conceptualizations reveal how cultural events challenged segregation by creating environments in which racial boundaries were affected. Foregrounding race, gender, age, and class clarifies how these experiences reshaped public attitudes. Teenagers gained early experiences of interracial sociability, Black women performers challenged assumptions about authority and respectability, and audience interactions revealed the fragility and negotiation of social norms. Even policing and regulation pointed toward the contested nature of integration. Collectively, these experiences cultivated expectations for interracial interaction and demonstrated that segregation was socially enforced rather than natural.

In the middle decades of the twentieth century, challenges to Jim Crow were not just legal battles but a sustained reshaping of political possibility. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 marked important victories, but they were the culmination of decades of patient organizing in which ordinary people built networks of trust and mutual support (Aiken et al., 2013). As author, Taylor Branch, emphasizes in his book *“Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-1963,”* the movement’s power arose from these human connections, formed in churches, workplaces, and homes, where a shared sense of collective vision was cultivated

(Branch, 1988). These networks enabled communities to develop and sustain creative strategies that could withstand surveillance, arrests, and violence. The legislation that eventually emerged was inseparable from this social infrastructure. It was the work of everyday people connecting purpose with action, and turning local commitment into national change. In Branch's account, the civil rights movement was less a sudden eruption of moral clarity and more the patient weaving of relationships capable of transforming individual courage into a force that reshaped public opinion, and in turn, law (Branch, 1988).

By situating cultural experience alongside legal developments, a fuller picture of the civil rights movement becomes visible. The movement did not only unfold on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Beyond that, the struggle for equality also came to play in the social spaces of performance and gathering, where music, audiences, and itinerant tours became vehicles for challenging segregation. Broader studies of cultural activism situate the civil rights movement within a longer tradition of artistic political expression. T. V. Reed argues that cultural forms such as music are not merely reflective of political struggle but actively shape it, serving as vehicles for social change across movements (Reed, 2005). This framework is crucial for understanding music as political action rather than accompaniment. Clubs, auditoriums, and touring circuits that contained music transformed into arenas in which performers and audiences alike navigated local restrictions. These spaces helped create the social texture within which legal decisions and legislative victories could be felt as real transformations rather than abstract pronouncements. Integration was not simply enacted through court orders, but it was experienced through culture long before it became a formal policy of the United States (US). To follow that point, segregation in the United States operated not only through law but also through everyday social practices. According to C. Vann Woodward, Jim Crow maintained its power not only

through law but through habitual practices and public expectations that governed daily conduct and defined the boundaries of racial interaction (Woodward, 2002, p. 33).

The everyday geography of segregation regulated racial contact in ways that shaped how people imagined one another and themselves. Rules of segregation were felt not as abstractions but as routine expectations that governed ordinary life. The struggle for civil rights was, therefore, not only an effort to change laws, but an effort to alter the social practices through which racial hierarchies were reproduced. Cultural venues, in particular, created situations where this hierarchy had to be continually accommodated, negotiated and/or resisted. Touring musicians, in both the Black press and the mainstream press, reported on the shifting race lines of their audiences (Knopper, 2020). Those charged with maintaining local order often debated whether an upcoming concert would promote forms of interracial socializing that might destabilize the social hierarchy. These, however, were not peripheral experiences. They defined the social context in which interracial encounters took place, influencing both norms and perceptions of risk or possibility. Cultural spaces provided resources that shaped political expectations long before legal institutions validated them. They prepared communities to understand integration as a lived transformation, one that demanded immediate attention and adjustment. Research on popular music further demonstrates how music carried political messages into mainstream culture (Freeland, 2009). By examining commercially successful artists and genres, it shows how civil rights themes reached audiences beyond activist circles, contributing to broader shifts in public consciousness. In doing so, it suggests that music played a role in reshaping attitudes toward race by normalizing interracial collaboration. Yet, while it highlights audience reach, it often treats dissemination in abstract terms, without fully considering the physical environments, where these encounters occurred and where

segregationist boundaries were materially contested. Without understanding these environments, it is difficult to grasp how ideas about integration were formed or why certain visions of racial coexistence gained traction while others faltered.

The main argument is that the observed music venues functioned as fields of power in which racial hierarchy was not merely symbolically contested but materially renegotiated. By bringing Black performers and interracial audiences into shared physical space, concerts transformed integration from a legal abstraction into an embodied social practice. At the same time, they provided Black artists with powerful public platforms through which to communicate the realities of racial violence, inequality, and resistance. Through lyrics, stage commentary, and media coverage, performances circulated civil rights ideas beyond formal protest settings, helping to spread awareness of ongoing struggles while normalizing interracial cooperation in everyday life. Within these sites, several consistent dynamics emerge. Integration appears not as a single legal breakthrough but as a social process that had to be made into a routine. These venues functioned as political spaces in their own right, where norms of racial interaction were actively reshaped through lived experience. At the same time, this process unfolded differently across locations. In New York, integrated venues were marked by tensions between ownership and authority, as proprietors controlled the space while Black performers and audiences defined its meaning in practice. In New Jersey, integration took on a more community-based form, rooted in local networks and reinforced through everyday interaction. In Rhode Island, major festivals made music a more explicit vehicle for political expression, even as tensions persisted between Black artists, festival organizers, and law enforcement.

Andrea L. Dennis applies resource mobilization theory to Black musical activism, arguing that music can be used to build networks and attract participants by doing so (Dennis,

2016). This perspective is significant because it brings music into formal theories of collective action, recognizing it as an important component of political strategy. Even so, this work primarily conceptualizes music in terms of its functional value to movements, rather than analyzing how integrated musical spaces themselves operated as sites of political intervention and social change. Studies such as “*Language in Action: Funk Music as the Critical Voice of a Post–Civil Rights Movement Counterculture*” argue that specific genres (in this case, funk) articulated new critiques of systemic inequality and expressed evolving forms of Black identity and resistance (Morant, 2011). This reinforces the idea that music remains a medium for consciousness formation. Across all of the cases in the thesis, a recurring tension surfaces between formal control and lived experience: although many of these spaces were not Black-owned, Black performers and integrated audiences played a central role in shaping them into sites of community influence. Ultimately, these environments show that integration was as much a sensory and emotional experience, shaped by proximity and shared feeling, as it was a matter of policy. At the same time, its effects varied by location and sometimes remained limited by the unequal power structures in which these spaces operated.

Racial hierarchy in the US was not only mandated by law but inscribed into physical space itself, where public venues were engineered to enforce racial separation. In Atlanta, for example, the Albany Theatre required Black consumers to enter through a side door and sit exclusively in the balcony, which shows a brief glimpse into southern public culture (Georgia Department of Natural Resources, 2001). In many southern restaurants, segregation was enforced not only by seating charts but by literal curtains, such as those described in sociologist John Dollard’s fieldwork, where Black people were separated from white patrons in establishments by floor-to-ceiling screens (Dollard, 1937, p. 367). Amusement parks likewise codified racial

hierarchy. Gwynn Oak Park in Baltimore admitted Black visitors only on one designated day a year, until civil rights protests forced its integration in 1963 (Wolcott, 2018). Even elite cultural venues replicated this geography of exclusion. Even as Black performers graced their stages, many venues upheld ‘white-only’ ticketing practices that relegated Black people to either no entrance or worse seating (Absher, 2014). At these events, artists such as Nat King Cole endured overtly racist abuse, including both verbal assaults and physical threats from white supremacist audience members (Absher, 2014).

Segregation, therefore, was not simply a legal regime but a spatial and behavioral system. These boundaries “taught” people where they could walk, sit, eat, watch, celebrate, or gather, and they regulated bodily movement and emotional comportment as thoroughly as they organized physical space. As a result, integration demanded more than repealing statutes; it required dismantling a cultural outlook in which segregation had become so normalized that it shaped etiquette and the felt experience of moving through public space. In this context, music venues emerged as key sites where such unlearning, however conflictual, first became possible. Music occupied a unique place in this system because it circulated across racial lines even when bodies could not. Scholars such as Brian Ward in his book *“Just My Soul Responding”* demonstrate how Black musical forms shaped American sound long before white Americans could legally share public space with Black performers (Ward, 1998). Yet the political implications of this phenomenon have rarely been integrated into broader civil rights scholarship. As Karl Hagstrom Miller argues, cultural events were political because they exposed the contradictions of racial control, revealing how much white anxieties centered on Black bodily presence rather than law alone (Miller, 2010, p. 7-8). Music thus provided a medium through which this could be explored.

The guiding conceptual framework draws on Aldon D. Morris's notion of "indigenous organization" that he developed while analyzing the critical sites of the Civil Rights Movement and the role that the local organizations played in building the movement (Morris, 1984). The movement relied on preexisting Black institutional networks such as churches, colleges, and voluntary associations that transformed ordinary people into political actors. Aldon Morris emphasizes that these institutions provided a base for collective action. Importantly, he extends this concept beyond formal organizations, noting that "such a base also encompasses cultural elements – music, oratory, and so on – of a dominated group that play a direct role in the organization and mobilization of protest" (Morris, 1984, p. xii). While Morris does not explicitly discuss concert spaces, his framework opens the door for this analysis. If cultural forms like music can function as part of a movement's organizational base, then the spaces in which that music is performed can also be understood as politically significant.

Building on this insight, approaching the civil rights movement from the bottom up shifts attention away from formal institutions and toward the everyday spaces where people actually encounter one another. Rather than locating political change only in court decisions or federal legislation, this perspective emphasizes how it was built through ordinary, repeated interactions at the local level. From this vantage point, integrated concerts can be understood as "indigenous cultural institutions" that advance change not through petitions or lobbying, but by bringing people into shared space and experience. In doing so, they challenged segregation not only as a legal system, but as a set of lived social expectations, gradually reshaping them from within. Therefore, live music performances created temporary worlds in which racial boundaries were both violated and renegotiated. These worlds were precarious, often short-lived, sometimes violently disrupted; but they were nonetheless real experiments in democratic coexistence.

Although the Northeast is often portrayed as existing “beyond Jim Crow,” the chapters that follow show that racism and segregation were deeply embedded in northern life as well, even in the absence of the formal laws that defined the South. Housing, schooling, and public accommodations in states like New York, New Jersey, and Rhode Island were shaped by discriminatory practices that functioned as a northern counterpart to Jim Crow. Northern communities, as documented by legal scholar Davison Douglas in “*Jim Crow Moves North*,” routinely enforced racial boundaries through school zoning, neighborhood segregation, and exclusionary local policies, preserving separate Black and white spaces despite ostensibly “liberal” state laws. Although Douglas focuses primarily on education, his findings reveal that northern racism was neither softer nor incidental; it was systemic, deliberately sustained by local institutions and community practices (Douglas, 2005).

This reality complicates the popular narrative of a racially progressive Northeast. It shows that the region was not an exception to Jim Crow but a crucial site where racial segregation operated through different, yet equally powerful, mechanisms. In a setting where legal rights did not always translate into social inclusion, cultural spaces became a telling measure of how racial boundaries were enforced, negotiated, and occasionally unsettled. Venues such as the Café Society in Greenwich Village, the Apollo Theater in Harlem, the Newport Jazz and Folk Festivals in Rhode Island, Asbury Park venues in New Jersey, and more, were structured by racial tensions even outside the legally segregated South. These venues show how integration could be imagined and resisted simultaneously, providing laboratories where audiences rehearsed the social skills necessary for interracial democracy.

Sites of Study

Founded in 1938 in Greenwich Village, Café Society is widely recognized as one of the first racially integrated nightclubs in the United States (Motto, 2024). At a time when most clubs either formally or informally segregated patrons, Café Society deliberately welcomed both Black and white performers and audiences, making integration central to its institutional identity rather than incidental. Its intimate layout and curated programming fostered close social proximity, encouraging audiences to witness interracial collaboration within a controlled yet emotionally charged environment. The political resonance of performances such as Billie Holiday's debut of "Strange Fruit" in 1939 further solidified the venue's role as a cultural intervention into racial violence and public conscience (Margolick, 2000, p. 20). By positioning racial mixing as sophisticated and modern rather than transgressive, the club modeled an alternative social order that challenged prevailing norms in northern leisure culture (Margolick, 2000, p. 40). As such, Café Society provides an early example of how a privately organized cultural space could stage democratic experimentation and reshape expectations about public life.

The Apollo Theater in Harlem represents a different but equally significant configuration of cultural power. Founded in 1914 as Hurtig & Seamon's New Burlesque Theater and later transformed into the Apollo, it became central to Harlem's entertainment circuit (New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1983). Operating primarily as a Black-centered venue, it consolidated Black cultural authority by centering Black audiences as arbiters of taste and legitimacy (Querol, 2023). Its Amateur Nights cultivated communal judgment and artistic development, training performers and reinforcing shared social standards (Givhan, 2024). As part of the broader Chitlin' Circuit, the Apollo was embedded within a national network of Black performance venues that facilitated cultural exchange during segregation (Beebe, 2019). When

white patrons attended, they entered a space governed by Black norms, temporarily inverting dominant racial hierarchies and exposing them to alternative forms of authority (Gold, 2022). In this way, the Apollo functioned not only as a performance stage but as a site of embodied social learning.

Founded in 1954 and led by George Wein, the Newport Jazz Festival expanded the politics of performance onto a national stage (Wein & Chinen, 2003, p. 114). As one of the first large-scale racially integrated music festivals in the United States, it intentionally brought Black and white musicians together before mixed audiences, framing jazz as a serious American art form. Performances such as this demonstrated the electrifying power of interracial collaboration while also elevating Black artistic authority (Wein & Chinen, 2003, p. 206). At the same time, some musicians criticized the festival for commercialization, low pay, and the whitening of jazz's cultural identity (Laver, 2014). Municipal tensions and public controversy further revealed that northern integration was never uncontested (Abrams, 2021). Media coverage extended the festival's symbolic impact nationwide, circulating images of integrated performance far beyond Rhode Island.

In 1960, the Newport Rebels Festival emerged as a pointed response to the Newport Jazz Festival. Organized by Charles Mingus and Max Roach, the Rebels Festival reflected frustration with commercial sponsorship, limited artistic control, and inequitable compensation (Laver, 2014). Unlike the city-backed Jazz Festival, the Rebels event emphasized musician autonomy and collective governance, seeking to reclaim authority over performance conditions and economic structure. Though smaller in scale, it foregrounded labor politics within cultural production, demonstrating that racial justice in music required structural equity as well as

integrated audiences. The Rebels Festival thus complicates northern liberalism by showing more internal critiques of institutional power within the jazz community itself.

Established in 1959, the Newport Folk Festival evolved into a major platform for politically engaged music as the civil rights movement intensified (Gillis, 2009). While not initially conceived as an overt political project, it increasingly hosted artists tied to grassroots activism and social justice organizing (Wein & Chinen, 2003, p. 334). Educational workshops framed African American musical traditions as foundational to American culture, positioning the festival as a site of public pedagogy as well as entertainment. The presence of the Freedom Singers, associated with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, brought songs rooted in Southern organizing directly to northern audiences (SNCC Digital Gateway, 2024). In doing so, the festival translated localized activism into national consciousness, cultivating solidarity through performance. Media coverage and recordings extended the reach of these events beyond their immediate audiences, suggesting that images of interracial collaboration and political expression circulated more widely within the public sphere (Wein & Chinen, 2003, p. 369). Studies of folk music add another dimension by emphasizing its political and interracial qualities. “*Reds Whites and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States*” argues that mid-20th-century folk traditions and their revival were deeply intertwined with progressive politics, fostering connections across racial and class lines (Roy, 2010). Interracial collaboration among musicians and audiences is presented as both culturally and politically significant, challenging dominant narratives of division. This perspective supports the idea that music could model alternative social arrangements. However, like much of the existing literature, it focuses more on ideology and musical content than on the specific spatial dynamics

of integrated performances, leaving the political significance of venues themselves less examined. That absence is what this thesis aims to explore.

Finally, in New Jersey, the Springwood Avenue clubs of Asbury Park formed one of the most important centers of Black cultural life in the urban Northeast (Bogues, 2018). During the 1940s through the 1960s, venues along the corridor supported touring musicians and served predominantly Black audiences (Asbury Park African-American Music Project, 2024). Although New Jersey lacked formal Jim Crow statutes, segregation operated through housing discrimination, policing practices, and restricted access to public amenities (Wright, 1989). Within this context, Springwood Avenue provided autonomy, safety, and cultural authority. White musicians who entered these clubs did so on Black terms, adapting to established aesthetic standards (Asbury Park African-American Music Project, 2024). These venues also served as informal hubs of political communication, circulating news of protests and organizing efforts across regional networks. Their eventual destruction during the 1970 unrest underscores the depth of racial inequality in the city (Bogues, 2018). Yet their history demonstrates how Black communities constructed durable institutions of resilience that linked performance, politics, and local governance.

Reconstructing the racial dynamics of performance spaces requires treating cultural events as political encounters rather than as background entertainment. To answer the central research question, this thesis uses a qualitative historical methodology grounded in archival research, discourse analysis, and institutional study. Music venues are approached as political and cultural institutions that structured opportunity, representation, and racial meaning. Rather than focusing solely on formal protest campaigns, I examine how cultural spaces produced authority, circulated political ideas, and shaped the lived experiences of Black performers and

audiences. Music scenes and the spaces that sustained them produced experiences of movement, proximity, discipline, and improvisation that helped ordinary people navigate questions of racial interaction; understanding these processes requires attention to the institutional, performative, and social dimensions of the venues themselves.

The civil rights movement and mobilizations for racial equality broadly was brought to life in these performance spaces in ways that were not possible in formal institutions settings. Although music brought people together, the rooms themselves altered the experience by bringing strangers closer to one another, teaching them to sense each other's presence, and creating intriguing possibilities for connection. The venues created a common rhythm between performers and spectators that allowed for the dismantling of hierarchies and the covert formation of alliances. Every performance turned into a practice for social change, a place where the common pulse of sound and everyday body motions turned what was before unthinkable into something conceivable. Not only were civil rights demanded, but they were also experienced and felt in every note, every statement, and every expression that was made throughout the space.

Chapter 1: New York

1.1 Foundations of Segregation and Integration

From an outsider perspective, New York presents itself as a civic ideal made visible. It is often imagined as a crossroads of the world, a place where people of different races and languages converge and learn to share the same crowded streets. The city's venues, particularly music venues, are often portrayed in scholarship as relatively open, communal environments, what is commonly conceptualized as "third places" where strangers gather and social life unfolds outside of formal institutions like home and work (Oldenburg, 1989, p. xviii). In this telling, New York is not simply large; it is open, defined by circulation. Public life is its signature, and access to that public world seems almost synonymous with belonging. New York did not pioneer the concept of civil rights legislation, but it became an important area where the promises of earlier Reconstruction-era ideals were tested in the realities of modern life. The New York Civil Rights Act of 1895 promised Black citizens (and all citizens, for the matter) equal access to public accommodations, explicitly including "theaters and places of amusement" (Friss, 2005). However, the statute's reliance on private civil enforcement meant that city agencies possessed no independent authority to regulate discriminatory behavior. Plaintiffs bore the burden of bringing suit; venue owners could defend exclusionary policies by invoking concerns about order. In many cases, judges were divided. Some frequently sided with proprietors, accepting their claims that Black patrons were excluded not on the basis of race but for vague or arbitrary reasons presented by the establishments themselves. Others questioned the validity of such justifications (Boston Evening, 1880).

Historically, Black theatergoers in New York City faced persistent discrimination. The case of Dr. and Mrs. Roberts in 1911 is an example of this pattern. After purchasing orchestra

seats at the New York Theatre, the couple expected to sit where their tickets entitled them to be (Lopez, 2025, p. 119). Instead, staff attempted to move them to the balcony, a clear effort to enforce an unwritten racial hierarchy. When the couple refused to surrender seats they had lawfully bought, the situation escalated and the police were summoned. Yet rather than uphold the civil rights protections that guaranteed equal access, the responding officer threatened the couple with arrest, effectively reinforcing the theater's discriminatory practice and prioritizing the manager's wishes over the law itself. Reporting on the incident, Lester Walton, the editor of the New York Age, highlighted the couple's high status (Walton, 1911). Dr. Roberts was recognized as one of New York City's prominent Black dentists and this challenged racist narratives that sought to justify segregation on the grounds of decorum. Walton proceeded to emphasize the interesting fact that instead of simply recounting the mistreatment they faced, the Roberts chose to challenge this injustice through courts, establishing legal action as a model for other people of color to use (Walton, 1911). By the 1920s, these tensions surrounding access to public spaces had begun attracting wider public scrutiny.

According to research conducted by Alyssa Lopez for The Gotham Center for New York History, in 1924, Walter White, then serving as assistant secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), circulated a letter to several Black newspapers in New York City drawing attention to the issue (Lopez, 2020). In his message, White explained that Black residents had repeatedly reported being refused service at numerous public establishments, including venues in Harlem that were supposed to be open to all. He encouraged newspaper editors to publish the text of New York's civil rights law so readers would be aware of their legal protections, while also warning that the pattern of exclusion suggested a coordinated effort to restrict the rights of Black New Yorkers. The city's Black press became a central tool in

challenging these practices. The New York Age, a leading African American newspaper and a central voice within the Black press during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, served as a key platform for reporting on issues affecting Black communities (Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance, 2004, Vol. 2, p. 901-902). This included areas such as discrimination, civil rights, and access to public spaces. In its coverage of entertainment venues, it regularly documented exclusionary practices, transforming individual incidents into broader public concerns and framing them as part of an ongoing struggle over racial equality and citizenship. This is, then, not merely a question of privilege, but a matter of legal right. While New York often appeared progressive in comparison to the South, there were systematic and deliberate efforts to deny Black New Yorkers the rights guaranteed to them by law. Turning a blind eye to these organized campaigns of exclusion risks erasing the very real struggles of justice that shaped the city's public spaces.

This tension between rights on paper and barriers in practice, which had already unsettled the community, intensified as conflicts began to escalate across the city, particularly in Harlem. The March 1935 Harlem Riot erupted by rumors that a Black Puerto Rican teenager had been beaten by employees at an S. H. Kress "five and dime" store for shoplifting (Robertson, White, & Garton, 2013). That evening, a demonstration formed outside the store, and when someone threw a rock through a window, the unrest quickly escalated into broader damage to the store and other white-owned properties. A subsequent city commission by Mayor LaGuardia's office concluded that a central cause of the disturbance lay in Harlem's commercial structure, as Black residents were concentrated consumers of goods and services they largely could not own (Villard & Roberts, 1935, p. 29). The neighborhood had undergone a rapid demographic transformation as Black migrants from the South settled there, creating an economically active community.

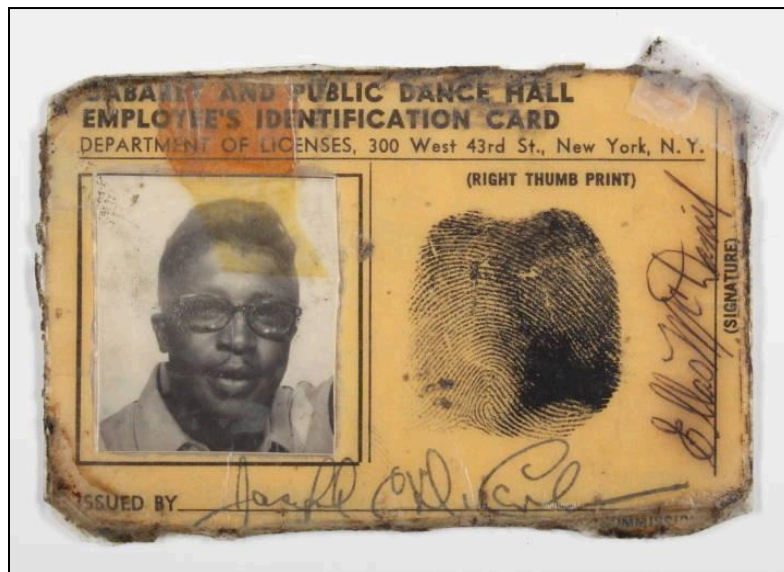
Yet the majority of commercial enterprises remained in white hands. Surveys from the *New York Age* in the 1920s show that white proprietors largely owned local stores. As a result, Black residents could engage fully as consumers, but the economic benefits of their spending mostly bypassed their community, keeping them central to the neighborhood's economy while excluding them from its rewards (Robertson, White, & Garton, 2013). This imbalance had its obvious consequences. It prevented wealth accumulation within the Black community even as neighborhood commerce thrived. It also created cultural tension as Black customers could gather in these spaces, yet these areas were often managed according to white owners' preferences, who controlled how events were conducted.

This imbalance of control did not end with property ownership or retail, it also became embedded in the regulatory power of the state, which extended racial hierarchy into the governance of culture itself. Authorities operationalized this control through the 1926 Cabaret Law and, later, the cabaret card system administered by the New York City Police Department (Chevigny, 2005, p. 35). In this period, "cabaret" referred broadly to nightlife venues (such as clubs, bars, and restaurants) where dancing, live music, and social mixing between patrons took place. These spaces were especially prominent in urban entertainment districts like Harlem. Their popularity grew significantly during the early-to-mid twentieth century as jazz culture and nightlife became central to urban leisure and interracial cultural exchange (Ward, 2001, p. 312). However, the cabaret licensing system required both venues and performers to obtain official permission to operate, effectively giving police authorities the power to regulate who could work in or attend these spaces. In practice, the cabaret card system allowed law enforcement to deny or revoke performers' ability to work in nightlife venues, particularly targeting Black musicians and

other marginalized groups, thereby controlling access to some of the most socially and culturally influential spaces of the era.

Figure 1

Bo Diddley's Cabaret Licence circa 1960



Note. Bo Diddley New York cabaret license. From Julien's Auctions, <https://www.juliensauctions.com/en/items/233979/bo-diddley-new-york-cabaret-license>.

This regulatory system also exposed a deeper contradiction at the center of cabaret culture itself. While the state sought to restrict Black participation in nightlife through licensing, the economic viability of these spaces depended heavily on stereotyped Black performance. As Duke Ellington observed, “the opening themes of the third movement reflect the supposed-to-be-Negro – the unbridled, noisy confusion of the Harlem cabaret which must have plenty of ‘atmosphere’ if it is to live up to the tourist’s expectation” (Ward, 2001, p. 312). Ellington’s description underscores how Harlem cabarets were constructed, especially for white tourists, as spaces requiring a particularized “Black atmosphere,” one rooted in performance

styles associated with Black cultural expression. Yet this demanded visibility existed alongside institutional efforts to limit Black autonomy within the same venues, revealing a structural tension in which Black cultural labor was simultaneously commodified, controlled, and disciplined.

Originally, this system was presented as a neutral ‘public-safety’ regulation, and the policy in practice operated as a discretionary licensing system, requiring musicians to undergo fingerprinting, background checks, and formal police approval just to earn a living, while granting authorities the power to revoke that permission after virtually any arrest, no matter how minor (Chevigny, 2005, p. 38). This amounted to a form of soft social control, in which the state used administrative procedures rather than explicit racial statutes to structure access to employment. Since arrests already fell disproportionately on Black residents, the law reproduced racial inequality through ostensibly colorblind mechanisms, converting criminalization into economic exclusion. Artists such as Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, and Miles Davis lost their cabaret cards and, with them, their legal right to perform in the very venues that sustained the jazz economy (Chevigny, 2005). Jazz musicians were especially dependent on cabaret cards because any performer working in venues that served alcohol and featured live music or dancing was required to hold one. Without a valid card, it was illegal to perform in these establishments, meaning access to nearly all professional jazz venues was controlled through this licensing system, which effectively functioned as a gatekeeping mechanism for employment within the jazz economy. Ultimately, the policy treated participation in artistic life not as a basic freedom but as something contingent on state approval, showing how administrative regulation could reproduce racial inequality indirectly, embedding stratification into the system without ever explicitly invoking race.

While on the topic of Miles Davis specifically, his experience provides a clear example of how New York City's institutions actively reinforced racial hierarchies. In 1959, Davis experienced a reminder that success and fame offered no protection for Black individuals in New York City. After finishing a broadcast for Armed Forces Radio and walking a white woman to a cab, Davis was confronted by a police officer outside Birdland, a prominent jazz venue in Midtown Manhattan (Davis & Troupe, 1989, p. 238). When the officer ordered him to move, Davis refused, pointing to his name on the marquee to signal that he was performing. The officer arrested him for resisting, and as Davis later recounted, "...this white detective runs in and BAM! hits me on the head. I never saw him coming. Blood was running down the khaki suit I had on" (Davis & Troupe, 1989, p. 238). He was dragged to the police station, where officers continued to harass and provoke him, seemingly testing whether he would retaliate, and subjected him to rough treatment despite his international reputation.

Figure 2

Excerpt from *Melody Maker Magazine Documenting Attack on Miles Davis. September 12, 1959*



Note. Melody Maker, September 1959. From Miles in the Press,

<https://milespress.wordpress.com/2015/10/10/melody-maker-september-1959/>.

Davis subsequently sued the New York Police Department, presenting substantial evidence but his case was dismissed, and his cabaret card was revoked as a result (Davis & Troupe, 1989, p. 240). The failure of the legal system to hold the police accountable demonstrates how structural and institutional racism permeated law enforcement practices, allowing violence against Black citizens to persist with impunity. This reveals that even visibility could not shield Black people from racialized violence or systemic inequities. The attack on Davis showed the ways New York institutions, such as the police, reinforced racial subordination, maintaining a hostile environment that undermined both the rule of law and the promise of equal protection.

The impact of these patterns extended far beyond individual encounters and permits, shaping the conditions under which Black artists lived, performed, and built community. In New York City, nightlife venues functioned as more than simple sites of entertainment. They were places where the politics of race and power were visibly negotiated, shaped both by market forces and by the state's hand in determining who could legally take the stage. In nightclubs and cabarets, social hierarchies were simultaneously performed and contested, and every booking, every table arrangement, and every audience mix carried political meaning. For Black performers, these spaces could offer rare platforms for visibility, community, and resistance, yet they also remained sites of surveillance and exclusion. Understanding the role of these venues, then, means recognizing that they were not merely cultural hotspots, but frontlines in an ongoing struggle over recognition, dignity, and who could claim full participation in a segregated society.

1.2 Café Society

New York City's nightlife from the 1920s to the 1950s largely reflected the racial hierarchies of Jim Crow America. Uptown jazz clubs booked Black performers for white audiences, yet forbade Black patrons except a few select celebrities. While Harlem's Savoy Ballroom welcomed integrated audiences, downtown Manhattan clubs remained segregated, and even within Harlem, many venues were divided along neighborhood lines (Miller & Jensen, 1996, p. 83). In this context, Barney Josephson, a white Jewish shoe salesman from New Jersey, opened a new kind of nightspot in 1938, with no prior experience (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. xi). Located in Greenwich Village, Café Society was intentionally racially integrated, bringing Black and white performers and audiences together. This was a rare occurrence in the United States at the time, matched only by Small's Paradise in Harlem, which

had opened in 1925. Josephson declared, “I wanted a club where blacks and whites worked together behind the footlights and sat together out front” (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 7-9). Café Society thus emerged as a quiet revolutionary space in New York City’s music scene, a modest Village basement lounge that sought to dismantle the entrenched segregation of jazz venues.

By the late 1930s New York had thriving Black musical scenes and popular movements against lynching. In this period, anti-lynching activism was prominently carried forward through organizations such as the NAACP , which intensified national pressure for federal anti-lynching legislation. A key example is the sustained mobilization around the Costigan-Wagner Anti-Lynching Bill (1934-1935), which sought to make lynching a federal crime and became a focal point for advocacy in Northern cities like New York (NAACP, 2026). These efforts relied heavily on documenting lynching cases and circulating them through the Black press to frame racial violence as a systemic national crisis rather than a regional issue, even as the bill ultimately failed to pass Congress. Despite all of this, public entertainment still remained largely segregated

Northern Manhattan clubs, such as The Cotton Club, often confined African Americans to operational jobs that did not require client interaction, or banned them outright, even while capitalizing on Black musical talent. Those who were let inside, were never truly meant to be seen. They were placed in the worst seats (near the kitchen), in positions that reduced their presence to a shadow at the edge of a room (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 8). Whatever symbols of achievement they bore, it still made little difference. The arrangement itself made sure they remained almost invisible, as though the space acknowledged their bodies, but not their presence. Greenwich Village offered a comparatively higher degree of tolerance. In the

1930s, it was widely regarded as a “leftist” or politically radical quarter because it had developed into a dense cultural and political ecosystem where socialist thought, artistic production, and labor activism overlapped in everyday life (Fitzpatrick, 2023).

Its status as a radical hub was also sustained by its social conditions. Compared to other neighborhoods, it remained relatively affordable, which helped concentrate writers, artists, and political organizers in close proximity. Within this environment, meeting spaces became sites of sustained intellectual exchange and political discussion. Together, these conditions created a climate of tolerance for dissenting ideas and nonconformist lifestyles, drawing in feminists, socialists, anarchists, and other political minorities often excluded from mainstream institutions (Fitzpatrick, 2023). In this political climate, Josephson chose Sheridan Square to host Café Society, confident that the Village’s seemingly liberal customers would embrace his vision. However, he also noted that the rent was much cheaper (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 11). In order to understand the political significance of Café Society, it is useful to situate it within the broader ecology of New York nightlife, which from the end of Prohibition through the early 1960s functioned as the unofficial capital of global urban entertainment.

Among New York’s main nightspots, none more clearly embodied the politics of elite social power than the Stork Club, the Midtown cabaret owned by Sherman Billingsley, whose antisemitic and racist attitudes defined the establishment (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 9). The club functioned less as a musical venue than as a private theater of status, where proximity to wealth and celebrity constituted the primary form of entertainment. Its clientele included writers, film stars, politicians, and more. These figures gathered beneath chandeliers less out of love for the music than for the ritual of watching one another, like an audience for themselves as much as for the stage. It was as if one's presence here was a performance in its

own right. The club's most exclusive chamber, the Cub Room, operated as an informal court of cultural arbitration, presided over by the gossip columnist Walter Winchell, whose syndicated reports could elevate performers or quietly destroy careers (Peverill & Adzima, n.d). In this environment, nightlife became an extension of elite governance: access was controlled, and racial boundaries were largely preserved in keeping with the social hierarchies of the era.

Even the Stork Club's promotional strategy with lavish illustrations depicting fashionable patrons reinforced its brand as a sanctuary for the nation's "right people," a space that celebrated exclusivity rather than democratic mingling (Figure 3). By the 1940s, the Stork Club had come to symbolize not merely sophistication but a particular vision of American public life, which was conservative, class-stratified, and resistant to racial integration. The racial politics of the Stork Club became unmistakably visible in the fall of 1951, when artists began publicly challenging discriminatory treatment, exposing the gap between the club's glamorous reputation and its exclusionary practices. Josephine Baker, an internationally renowned Black American entertainer celebrated for her boundary-pushing performances that challenged prevailing racial caricatures, was not an unknown patron but one of the most prominent figures in global entertainment at the time. Yet after arriving with a mixed-race party following a performance, she was left waiting for service while white guests around her were promptly attended to (Library of Congress, 2026). The slight was widely understood as deliberate. Baker immediately contacted allies in the NAACP, such as Walter White, transforming what might have been a private humiliation into a public protest (Figure 4).

Figure 3

Illustration of the Stork Club by Albert Dorne, Depicting the Club's All-White Crowd and Reflecting the Club's Racial Exclusivity



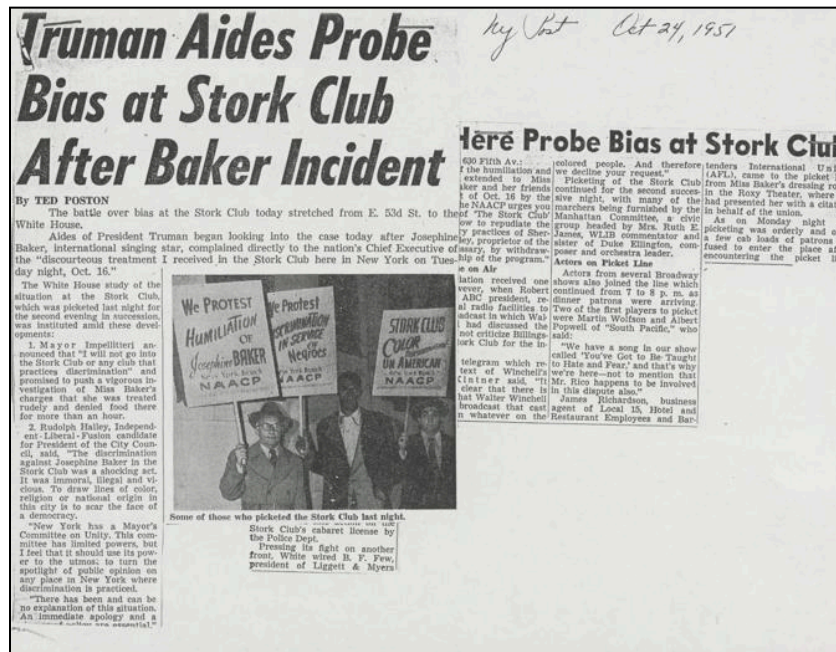
Note. Mariampolski, H. (2020, December 7). From the Stork Club to Café Society. Postcard History. <https://postcardhistory.net/2020/12/from-the-stork-club-to-cafe-society/>.

Civil-rights leaders organized pickets outside the club, demanded investigations, and even drew the attention of Harry S. Truman, whose administration ordered inquiries into the matter (Figure 4). In effect, the Stork Club suddenly became a political battleground over race and dignity. The incident also revealed how power operated informally within elite cultural spaces, where media figures such as Walter Winchell, shaped public opinion and ultimately undermined Baker's claims, demonstrating that reputational authority could blunt civil-rights protest even when discrimination seemed evident (Library of Congress, n.d). It was precisely this model of nightlife, where privilege determined belonging and Black performers were rarely treated as social equals that Barney Josephson sought to challenge. Conceiving his Greenwich Village venture as the ideological opposite of Billingsley's establishment, Josephson wanted an intentional counter-space. If the Stork Club represented nightlife as a performance of hierarchy,

Café Society was designed as an experiment in cultural democracy, using music and interracial collaboration to model a more egalitarian social order.

Figure 4

Newspaper Clipping from the New York Post (October 24, 1951) Showing Demonstrators Protesting Outside the Stork Club in Support of Josephine Baker



Note. Naacp Legal Defense And Educational Fund. (1951) NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund Records: Subject File, -1968; Baker, Josephine, Stork Club incident, New York, N.Y.; Clippings, 1951 to 1952. - 1952. [Manuscript/Mixed Material] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mss6557000549/>.

The club's design itself was a deliberate political and cultural statement. Vividly painted murals covered the walls, often satirizing the pretensions, snobbery, and racial prejudices of the wealthy elite, turning the architecture of the space into a critique of social hierarchies (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 34). Artists such as Ad Reinhardt contributed works that

combined modernist abstraction with subtle social commentary, while other illustrators and cartoonists incorporated comedic imagery that both entertained yet provoked reflection (Figure 5). Together, the murals created an environment in which patrons were constantly reminded that the club celebrated inclusion, in sharp contrast to the status-driven atmosphere of establishments like the Stork Club. Therefore, the décor was more than aesthetic, it was an everyday enactment of Café Society's integrationist mission, embedding political ideals into the very walls where music, dance, and conversation unfolded.

Figure 5

"Speak No Evil..." Mural Created for Café Society Downtown (1938) by Ad Reinhardt



Note. Reflecting the club's alignment with progressive artistic and political culture. Author's Collection. Barney Josephson, & Terry Trilling-Josephson. (2015). *Café Society: The Wrong Place for the Right People*. University of Illinois Press.

Josephson launched Café Society with small startup funds and borrowed capital. The debut lineup (December 1938) was inspired by the work of John Hammond, a white producer renowned for promoting Black music. Hammond had just organized Carnegie Hall's well-known

“From Spirituals to Swing” concerts bringing Black music before white audiences for the first time (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 14). Josephson was inspired by European cabarets he had visited, and imagined bringing a similar form of performance to the United States (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 18). On opening night, Hammond booked three boogie-woogie pianists (Albert Ammons, Pete Johnson, Meade Lux Lewis), Kansas City blues shouter Big Joe Turner, trumpet player Frankie Newton, and a relatively unknown singer (at the time), Billie Holiday (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 14; p. 38). Josephson even hired a white comedian, Jack Gilford, to MC alongside the Black musicians, symbolically integrating the stage itself, which an audience member pointed out by saying “Why you’re the only white person in the show?” (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 14; p. 43).

The name *Café Society* itself was a deliberate gesture, referencing the term “café society,” which columnist Clare Boothe Luce had coined to label aristocratic socialites. The venue was also known by the phrase “wrong place for the Right people” which carried a sharp edge (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 3). By framing the club as the “wrong place,” Josephson implicitly critiqued elite venues like the Stork Club, which marginalized Black performers and patrons. At the same time, the phrase identified its clientele as the “Right people”: citizens and African American musicians who embodied ideals of racial equality, cultural integration, and social justice. In this way, the club used a witty, self-aware slogan to stake out a public position in the broader struggle for civil rights, turning a nightlife venue into a symbolic arena for contesting power, privilege, and access in New York.

From the beginning Josephson embraced a socially conscious ethos. According to others, he rejected the usual nightclub “girlie lines” and “Uncle Tom comedy” tropes that demeaned Black performers (Margolick, 2001). Instead, Josephson was chasing after patrons being engaged

with the art being put in front of them. This was reflected in the club's open-door policy, where seating was never segregated by race (unlike most other New York clubs at the time). Josephson pointed out that Café Society was taking a chance because no other venue in the United States (that he, at the time, was aware of) had tried anything like it before (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 9). As a result, the club attracted White New Yorkers, as well as ambitious Black artists who were usually confined to Harlem stages.

Café Society's stage featured a roster of Black talent, often in mixed-race ensembles, which it presented to multiracial audiences. The club advertised its pride in treating Black and white artists equally. In subsequent years, it became a launching pad for major Black stars. It was said that Josephson and Hammond helped 'launch the careers' of Lena Horne, Hazel Scott, Ruth Brown, and many others (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 217; p. 322). Gospel and blues acts like Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the Dixie Hummingbirds, and the Golden Gate Quartet were also regulars, introducing these styles to downtown audiences. As New York Times critic John S. Wilson observed, the clubs (including the later Uptown branch) aided in helping Black performers branch out into the mainstream, and because of this there had been a "rekindling [of] a spirit that has been missing from Greenwich Village for quite a while" (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 327). He often provided long-term engagements (months at a time) that allowed artists to develop, rather than the short two-week gigs then common in other clubs. This nurturing policy helped artists refine their acts and crossover to broader fame (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 279). John Hammond made recordings by Café Society alumni, further integrating Black music into the national culture. The New York Amsterdam News also cited that Café Society became "the foremost swing spot below Harlem" with white and Black audiences alike drawn to its music and message (New York Amsterdam News, 1939).

Over 1939-45, Café Society Downtown and Uptown featured virtually every leading Black jazz and blues artist of the era. Even African American activists, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes and Paul Robeson, were known to frequent the Village and the club (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 73). Lena Horne believed that she “found people there decent to each other,” a bare-minimum, yet also, remarkable experience amid pervasive racism (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 131). The club also took stands in its broader programming, as Josephson banned or revised songs with demeaning racial content. He persuaded Horne to drop the song “When It’s Sleepy Time Down South” which (to Josephson, at least) romanticized plantation life. In another notable incident, white performer Carol Channing was immediately fired after delivering an offensive impersonation of Ethel Waters. Despite repeated warnings from management that such an act would be disrespectful to the Black artists performing at the venue, Channing went ahead with the imitation and was faced with appropriate backlash (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 121-122; p. 197). In these ways, Café Society actively challenged the entertainment norms that reinforced racist stereotypes.

Although Café Society proclaimed welcome to all, its audience was still largely white. Minimal amounts of working-class New Yorkers, regardless of race, could afford to attend late-night jazz performances, as the high cover charges and the expectation of purchasing drinks made such venues financially inaccessible for many (Down Beat, 1967, p. 80). Many photographs show that Café Society’s patrons were overwhelmingly white (Figure 6). This was not surprising given the club’s Village location. Uptown, by 1940 a second branch opened, a “Park Avenue crowd” was drawn in as well (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 114). The Uptown branch quickly gained widespread popularity, overcoming skepticism from outsiders, and even attracted a visit from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson,

2015, p. 107; p. 137). Despite the majority-white clientele, the experience of witnessing Black performers on equal footing with white people had a subtle liberalizing effect on many listeners and performers. For example, Lena Horne later wrote that at Café Society “He [Josephson] and Barney taught me a great deal about what it is to be proud and to be Black and how to work” (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 131). In other words, the club allowed some white New Yorkers to confront racism in a sheltered environment, but especially empowered Black artists to assert dignity.

Figure 6

Mary Lou Williams Performing at Café Society Downtown to a Predominantly White Audience, Capturing the Club's Integrated Environment



Note. From *Café Society: The wrong place for the right people* (Photos2j, Barney Josephson, & Terry Trilling-Josephson, 2015).

White patrons were sometimes deliberately encouraged by the venue to experience forms of discomfort they would not typically encounter elsewhere. Accounts of Café Society’s décor (ragged doorman, satirical murals, sculptures mocking Adolf Hitler) suggest these elements were

intended to make wealthy visitors feel deliberately “uneasy” (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 107; p. 30-31). But many were drawn precisely by the aspect of integration, as you could mix without much thought involved. Indeed, the integrated setting was itself a form of gentle protest. However, this did not mean all white New Yorkers approved; many conservative spectators often sneered at Josephson’s mission. In 1947 right-wing gossip-columnists Westbrook Pegler and Winchell lampooned Café Society (in part due to its leftist associations) and implied its patrons were subversives (Wilson, 1988).

Winchell consistently sought to capture the club at moments of tension, quickly publicizing incidents in ways that amplified their drama and undermined its reputation. For example, when Hazel Scott and Lorne briefly argued and the exchange turned mildly physical, he sensationalized the episode by reporting it as a “hair-pulling contest” (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 126). His scrutiny was not limited to his physical presence; even when absent, he relied on informants such as Irving Hoffman to gather material from Café Society, ensuring a steady stream of gossip for his column (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 344). In addition to this, Winchell labeled the venue “Café Pink,” a pointed political jab rather than a casual nickname (Riedel, 2016). In the 1930s and 1940s, “pink” functioned as shorthand for perceived left-wing or pro-communist sympathies, allowing him to cast the club’s progressive atmosphere as ideologically suspect. Therefore, while many liberal white people embraced the club’s racial idealism, others viewed it as meddling in social order, foreshadowing the later investigation of Café Society affiliates by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 233). This was a committee that investigated suspected alleged communist influence among citizens or organizations, especially during the early Cold War (Boston Public Library, 2025).

Beyond nightly entertainment, Café Society played an active role in the political mobilizations of the era, as Josephson used the club for fundraisers and meetings supporting progressive causes. Yet the club's commitment to civil rights was most dramatically embodied in Billie Holiday's performances of "Strange Fruit." Written by Abel Meeropol as a protest against lynching, the song begins with the lines, "Southern trees bear a strange fruit / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root" immediately confronting audiences with the brutality of racial violence (Holiday, 1939; Bakan, 1998, p. 31). The lyrics make one think of vivid, horrifying imagery of Black bodies hanging from trees, combining poetic language with harrowing melodic phrasing that made the song both beautiful and unbearable to hear.

At Café Society, Holiday's performances were deliberately staged for maximum dramatic effect, and she later admitted that the intensity of the material sometimes left her anxious of how the audience might react. The lights were dimmed to near darkness except for a single spotlight on her face, service in the club was stopped, and patrons were enveloped in silence (Nicholson, 1996, p. 113). As she sang lines like "the bulging eyes and the twisted mouth" audiences were forced into a quiet, almost ritualistic confrontation with the realities of lynching (Holiday, 1939). Many, accustomed to the nightclub's socializing and lively music, were stunned into stillness, experiencing a mix of empathy and reflection. The performance ended without an encore, leaving listeners to wrestle with the song's images long after Holiday exited the stage (Nicholson, 1996, p. 113). Some accounts suggest that white patrons, many of whom were seeing the realities of southern racial violence for the first time in this intimate setting, were shaken profoundly, while Black patrons often responded with quiet affirmation, recognizing the song as a rare public acknowledgment of ongoing suffering (Nicholson, 1996, p. 112-113). These parallel reactions, however, did not mean that the song was universally accepted. Some patrons

(whose racial identities remain unclear in the historical record) reportedly objected to Holiday performing the piece and attempted to disrupt both the performance and the club's atmosphere. In response, Café Society's management took a firm stance that individuals who caused disturbances during the song were promptly removed from the venue (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 107; p. 55). A journalist from Time magazine characterized the performance with an interesting headline, describing it as "the most unusual song ever to be heard in a nightclub" (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 107; p. 49).

Figure 7

Patrons at Café Society Downtown Listen to Billie Holiday Perform "Strange Fruit"



Note. The photograph captures a range of contemplative expressions, reflecting the emotional impact of Holiday's performance and the song's confrontation with racial violence. From Riedel, M. (2016, July 15). NYC's first integrated nightclub was a '30s celeb magnet. New York Post. <https://nypost.com/2016/07/15/nycs-first-integrated-nightclub-was-a-30s-celeb-magnet/>.

When Holiday recorded "Strange Fruit" in April 1939, a release that Columbia Records initially resisted, the song quickly drew national attention (Nicholson, 1996, p. 113). Publications

such as Time described it as a “prime piece of musical propaganda” for the NAACP, yet simultaneously criticized Holiday’s weight, noting that “she does not care enough about her figure to watch her diet, but she loves to sing,” illustrating how Black artists were often subjected to negative and personal judgments regardless of their artistic contributions to society (TIME, 1939). Café Society embraced the song as central to its mission, featuring it in club advertisements and making it the climactic moment of Holiday’s set (Figure 8). Josephson wanted patrons to “remember every word” upon leaving, transforming the club into a space where entertainment and activism merged (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 47). Therefore, Holiday’s performances at Café Society made the nightclub a site of public witness, confronting audiences directly with the harsh realities of lynching in a space normally reserved for entertainment. In this way, the execution of “Strange Fruit” exemplifies how Café Society converted the nightclub stage into a site of political witness, giving Black artists the power to directly challenge audiences and broader cultural norms around racial violence and memory. Other performers similarly used the stage to highlight injustice. Josh White, who at one point also performed Strange Fruit, used his folk songs to denounce Jim Crow laws and colorism issues (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 53; p. 227-228).

Figure 8

Advertisement for Café Society Featuring Lyrics from “Strange Fruit” by Billie Holiday



Note. From “Strange Fruit (1939) Billie Holiday,” by Swing & Beyond, 2018,
<https://swingandbeyond.com/2018/04/29/strange-fruit-1939-billie-holiday/>.

These political uses made the club a lightning rod. It was common knowledge that Josephson and his circle leaned left. However, the club’s progressive stance incurred fierce backlash in the early Cold War climate. By the late 1940s, the FBI had opened files on Hammond and Josephson, while artists like Hazel Scott, who briefly served as general manager, were also placed under government surveillance and compelled to testify (United States Congress, House, Committee on Un-American Activities, 1951). When Leon Josephson refused to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1947 (and was later jailed for contempt), members of the press turned against Barney Josephson and Café Society (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 233). Right-wing writers Dorothy Kilgallen and Lee Mortimer joined the criticisms of the establishment as well (Wilson, 1988). These attacks had immediate effect, as the business “dropped 45 percent in five weeks” after the HUAC hearings (Josephson & Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 240). Patrons abandoned the stigma, and Josephson’s public image as a “champion” for Black rights was tarnished by red-baiting (Josephson &

Trilling-Josephson, 2015, p. 16). In retrospect, the closure of Café Society foreshadowed the larger cultural repression of the McCarthy era, as the idea of interracial integration in entertainment was branded as “communist propaganda” by many. Yet even as the club faded, its impact was everlasting.

Café Society can be situated in relation to Black indigenous organizing not as a participant within it, but as a site that drew upon and redistributed its energies. Though owned by Barney Josephson, the club relied on Black performers and the political currents emerging from Harlem, where much of the civil rights struggle was being articulated through community-based forms of expression. Performances such as “Strange Fruit” carried the themes and urgency of indigenous organizing into the nightclub setting, translating them for integrated audiences who might otherwise remain distant from these realities. In this way, Café Society functioned as an intermediary space, one that did not originate within Black organizing traditions, yet amplified their reach by carrying their cultural and political meanings into downtown nightlife, transforming the venue into something far beyond a traditional nightclub.

1.3 Apollo Theater

The Apollo Theater in Harlem emerged in the 1930s as a stage for African-American performance and political life. Originally opened in 1914 as Hurtig & Seamon’s New Burlesque Theater, a whites-only burlesque venue, the building took on a completely new identity in 1934. Under new ownership, it was transformed into the Apollo, a music hall that welcomed the surrounding African American community, becoming a cultural centerpiece inspired by the energy of the Harlem Renaissance (Fox, 2003, p. 39). By opening its doors to both Black performers and audiences in a segregated era, the Apollo forged an important public space. As

Guthrie Ramsey notes, it also simply became “one of the first [venues] to allow Black and white patrons to enjoy the music together,” reflecting Harlem’s growing prominence (Giles, 2024).

Over the next three decades the Apollo would become a national legend. When Sydney Cohen reopened the former burlesque house, he consciously reoriented it toward Harlem’s burgeoning Black population, and their interests (Fox, 2003, p. 39; p. 4). Cohen, a white Jewish man, positioned the venue within this shifting cultural and demographic landscape. This pivot was largely a practical response to the African-American population in Harlem having grown dramatically during the Great Migration, but it also carried political weight. In short order the Apollo outgrew its origins.

Cohen soon ceded the Apollo to Frank Schiffman, a white Jewish entertainment entrepreneur, in 1935, marking a continuation of the venue’s white-owned management, and his family would run it until the late 1970s. Cohen was reportedly opposed to Schiffman running the venue due to concerns about his treatment of Black performers (Fox, 2003, p. 66). Under the Schiffmans the Apollo’s programming expanded to reflect Jazz Age and swing tastes. The theater’s programming shifted toward a “vaudeville variety” style, which Schiffman envisioned as a form of entertainment that could lift the spirits of Harlem’s hardworking community (Fox, 2003, p. 25, p. 74). Vaudeville, a popular early 20th-century entertainment format, consisted of a fast-paced sequence of short, varied acts designed to appeal to working-class audiences. By adopting this structure, the theater offered not just a single performance but an ongoing stream of lively entertainment, allowing audiences to momentarily escape the pressures of daily life. In this context, the shift to vaudeville-style programming aligned with Schiffman’s goal of creating an inclusive, engaging environment that catered to Harlem’s working-class patrons, providing both amusement and a sense of communal relief through shared cultural experience. Throughout the

late 1930s the Apollo's bill also featured top Black entertainers: Jackie "Moms" Mabley, Cab Calloway, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, and Ella Fitzgerald (Fox, 2003, p. 3). Even legendary blues singer Bessie Smith performed her only tour of 1935 at the Apollo (Fox, 2003, p. 31). The stage quickly became associated with Harlem's cultural renaissance, and the Apollo emerged as one of its central institutions. Its significance extended beyond the performances themselves. By 1937, the theater reportedly employed more Black theatrical workers than any other venue in the country, offering opportunities not only on stage but also in backstage roles. In fact, Schiffman was said to be the only white 'employee' at the theater (Fox, 2003, p. 27; Figure 9).

Figure 9

House Staff of Apollo Theater, 1950



Note. From Background and Historical Materials, in the Frank Schiffman Apollo Theatre Collection (NMAH-AC0540-0000133), National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

By the late 1930s the Apollo had established itself as a central performance venue for Black culture. However, the success of Apollo Theater unfolded under a structure that was never fully an indigenous organization to the Black community it served. Despite its status as Harlem's premier showcase for Black talent, the theater remained white-owned for much of its formative decades, meaning that profits, property rights, and ultimate managerial authority rested outside the neighborhood. This arrangement distinguished it from explicitly Black-run venues such as Minton's, operated by the first Black delegate, Henry Minton, where ownership and cultural production were aligned within the same community (Fox, 2003, p. 138). At a broader level, the Apollo appears to reflect a dynamic in the entertainment industry, in which Black performers generated much of the venue's cultural and economic value, while white owners captured a disproportionate share of the revenue and institutional power. Such a structure hindered the growth of independent Black businesses by consolidating audiences and capital in a white-controlled enterprise that outcompeted locally owned alternatives.

Yet, this contradiction also explains Apollo's complicated importance. Precisely because it commanded larger capital reserves, better publicity networks, and access to citywide circuits typically unavailable to Black owners, the theater became a powerful platform from which Black performers could reach national audiences. Artists effectively appropriated the space from below, transforming a commercially white-owned institution into a symbolic center of Black public life. Through performance, they asserted cultural ownership even in the absence of formal control. In this sense, the Apollo reflected a central tension of civil rights-era cultural politics, where the same segregated and economically unequal entertainment structures that constrained Black performers also created spaces for visibility. The Apollo thus operated simultaneously as a site of exclusion and a vehicle for racial presence and empowerment. Black performers and patrons

treated the stage as their own not because the institution was structurally theirs, but because redefining it was itself an act of political claim-making.

During the Schiffman era, the Apollo's management gradually earned the trust of Harlem residents, many of whom came to refer to the venue as "*our theater*." Its operations were also structured to avoid racial segregation, ensuring that no "color lines" existed within the theater (Conwill & Carlin, 2010, p. 169; Fox, 2003, p. 72). Even during Harlem's race riots, the Apollo reportedly remained untouched. Singer Maxine Brown recalled that, regardless of the chaos unfolding outside, the theater was left unharmed, leaving some of the musicians inside feeling a sense of guilt about the protection they seemed to enjoy (Fox, 2003, p. 284). This sense that the theater existed almost on a separate plane from the turmoil around it reflected its symbolic importance to Harlem's Black community. The Apollo had become a major source of pride and frequently served as a gathering place during demonstrations.

It was not only the theater's management that had to earn the trust of Harlem's residents; performers also placed themselves entirely in the hands of the Apollo audience, never quite knowing how they might respond. This balance was put to the test when Eartha Kitt was scheduled to take the stage. Bobby Schiffman had sought to book her for some time out of admiration for her talent, but her management had repeatedly declined the invitations, insisting that she was not a "Black act" (Fox, 2003, p. 189). Although she was Black, such a response could be due to an effort to prevent Kitt from being defined primarily by her race. At the time, performers were frequently marketed according to racial identity, often limiting the kinds of venues and audiences available to them. By insisting that she was not a "Black act," her management attempted to position her as an artist whose work should be judged on its own merits rather than through the racial labels that shaped much of the entertainment industry.

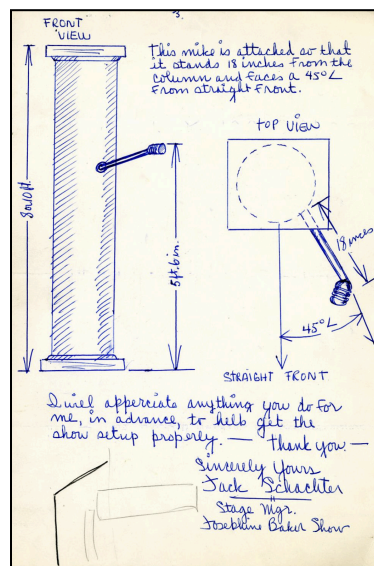
At the time, Kitt was facing significant criticism from portions of the public for marrying a white man, leaving her uncertain about how she would be received by the famously discerning audience at the Apollo Theater (Fox, 2003, p. 189-192). The Apollo crowd was known for its honesty, and performers often approached the stage with a mixture of confidence and anxiety. Yet when Kitt appeared, the audience responded not with hostility but with an extraordinary display of solidarity, greeting her with a ten-minute standing ovation. The audience's reaction affirmed the theater's reputation as a place where performers were embraced as members of a shared cultural community, allowing them the freedom to express themselves fully on stage. In this early period Apollo's power lay in its ability to stage Black artistry in a grand venue, thereby challenging segregated norms.

From its inception, the Apollo Theater was formulated not simply as an entertainment venture but as a political project. The white businessmen who controlled the theater understood that legitimacy in Harlem could not be purchased solely through investment. It had to be negotiated through public gestures of racial goodwill. They consulted Black journalists, built relationships with the Black press, and prominently announced that proceeds from opening night (1934, directed by Cohen) would be donated to the "Fresh Air Fund" of Harlem, a summer program serving children from under-resourced neighborhoods (Fox, 2003, p. 61). Such philanthropy functioned less as straightforward altruism than as a strategic move, a way to secure community trust, though others might argue that even seemingly generous acts ultimately operated as calculated positioning. By redistributing a portion of profits back into the community, management sought to soften suspicion and position the theater as a civic benefactor rather than an outside commercial enterprise extracting wealth from Black consumers.

Even the mechanics of production revealed the scale of ambition. Surviving correspondence about early shows, including preparations for appearances by Josephine Baker, details elaborate stage diagrams and technical demands (Figure 10). In the *New York Age*, management promised “lavish and colorful extravaganzas,” language that simultaneously celebrated Black performers and commodified them (Fox, 2003, p. 61). Blackness was both the product and the selling point. The advertisement also reassured readers that the theater would be “an entertainment edifice that Harlem will take pride in showing off,” effectively casting the Apollo as a symbol of neighborhood respectability and progress (Fox, 2003, p. 61). The rhetoric suggested collective ownership, even though legal ownership remained white.

Figure 10

Hand-Drawn Production Sketches for Josephine Baker's Set



Note. Submitted to management of Apollo Theater outlining staging requests and technical requirements for Baker’s performance. From Frank Schiffman incoming personal and business correspondence, in the Frank Schiffman Apollo Theatre Collection (NMAH-AC0540-0000119-03), National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

The opening night of the venue, which occurred on January 26th, 1934, however, exposed the gap between aspiration and reality, as reviews noted uneven performances (Berger, Berger, & Patrick, 1982, p. 61; p. 129). These imperfections mattered because the theater had been burdened with representational weight. Even advertised as “America’s Smartest Colored Shows,” this venue was being asked to stand in for Black cultural competence itself (Figure 11). Any misstep risked confirming racist assumptions among white observers who viewed Black entertainment through a lens of scrutiny rather than appreciation. Yet despite these flaws, the house was full. The venue’s targeted publicity helped draw crowds, and the event was fairly successful from that point on (Berger, Berger, & Patrick, 1982, p. 130-131). Funds raised for local causes reinforced the image of the theater as socially responsible, while the turnout demonstrated something more politically significant. Harlem residents were willing to consolidate their patronage behind a venue that centered Black performers on a major stage. In doing so, they redirected economic power within their own neighborhood, even if the profits ultimately flowed upward to white ownership.

Figure 11

Promotional Handbill for the Apollo Theater Advertising “America’s Smartest Colored Shows”



Note. Reflects the era’s racialized marketing language and the theater’s positioning of Black performance as both spectacle and commercial draw. From *Publicity*, in the Frank Schiffman Apollo Theatre Collection (NMAH-AC0540-0000117-01), National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

The symbolism of this shift becomes clearer when placed against the memory of segregation. Less than a decade earlier, Black patrons at theaters along 125th Street had been forced to enter through separate entrances, a spatial reminder of second-class citizenship (Fox, 2003, p. 49). At the Apollo, by contrast, Black audiences entered through the front, filled the seats, and watched Black musicians perform as headliners rather than novelties. The change in architecture signaled a change in status. Space that had once been policed and exclusionary became, at least temporarily, a site of collective presence.

The connection between stage and audience, however, was strengthened by Apollo's commitment to showcasing new talent alongside established stars, blending popular culture with community pride. Its signature tradition, Amateur Night, which began in 1934, provided a platform to nurture emerging Black talent while also introducing Black music culture to broader white audiences through radio broadcasts (Fox, 2003, p. 71-72). So much so that, on Amateur Nights, the audience was predominantly white, reportedly comprising as much as 75 percent of attendees (Fox, 2003, p. 123). The event launched the careers of numerous future stars, from Sarah Vaughan to The Isley Brothers, and gave many others their first opportunity to perform on a major New York stage, which essentially cemented the Apollo's role as a gateway for Black artists into the national spotlight (Fox, 2003, p. 18-19). In this way, the predominantly Black audience did not simply consume culture but actively participated in shaping it, helping establish the Apollo as a space that influenced the careers of the Black performers who played there. But this does not mean the experience was easy for the artists. Performing at the Apollo demanded resilience, discipline, and an ability to win over one of the most discerning audiences in the country. The same community that nurtured emerging talent also held performers to exacting standards, making the stage both an opportunity and a trial by fire.

The archival index cards written by Frank Schiffman offer an unfiltered window into the actual internal decision-making culture of the Apollo Theater (Smithsonian Institution, 2023). During the apparent height of the venue, Schiffman functioned as both gatekeeper and arbiter of taste for one of the most influential Black performance spaces in the United States. A review of 1,338 of these index cards (each one containing written judgments alongside notes on performer wages and audience reactions), reveals them to be not casual backstage annotations, but as a thought-process of one's cultural value. What initially appeared to be routine documentation gradually revealed itself as a system of ideas: quiet but forceful remarks through which talent was measured, audiences were interpreted, and artistic labor was translated into economic worth. In their brevity, the cards perform a kind of intellectual condensation, distilling performance into not neutral records, but arguments about marketability vs. meaning.

With room for slight documentation error, only 83 of those 1,338 thousand cards, approximately 6.2%, explicitly labeled performers as "white." That statistic is small in raw terms, but the act of notation is rhetorically large where whiteness is marked, Blackness assumed. Those two facts together open the cards as a document of classification. The most obvious pattern for this is categorization. White performers are explicitly marked as "white," while Black performers are not racially labeled at all. Whiteness becomes an exception that requires notation. Yet the white acts are overwhelmingly described as acrobats, dance acts, or novelty performers, rarely are they evaluated as core musical contributors. This distinction subtly partitions the stage into domains of cultural authority. Musical expression appears implicitly coded as Black territory, while white performers occupy spectacle.

But the marking of whiteness also signals anxiety. To write "white act" is to frame racial differences as relevant to audience reception and institutional fit. When Gene Krupa is described

as having “Absolutely no drawing power for us” and only viable “if he includes colored musicians,” the note acknowledges that racial authenticity carries commercial weight for Schiffman (Schiffman, 1950, Card 687). Blackness is not only cultural identity; it is currency, yet this currency is unstable. A “black and white band” being described as “not satisfactory” suggests that racial mixing, though symbolically powerful, did not automatically translate into audience enthusiasm (Schiffman, 1958, Card 275). The cards expose the gap between integration as a political ideal and integration as consumer desire.

If race establishes the boundaries of belonging, gender organizes the terms of visibility inside those boundaries. The cards repeatedly position women (particularly Black women) through a lens of physical appraisal before artistic merit. Faye Adams appears as “fairly attractive” and “very well groomed... did well.” (Schiffman, 1954, Card 1). Little Miss Cornshucks is cataloged as “wears short dress with panties showing... Went over very well.” (Schiffman, 1947, Card 748). Abbey Lincoln is reduced to “Very attractive but does not have the talent necessary to be successful” (Schiffman, n.d., Card 743). Those lines are not incidental. They encode a market logic that the female body is both instrument and asset. In many entries beauty and sex appeal are literally counted as features that “help” an act. Schiffman’s note on Chuck Born, that he added “a sexy looking girl which helps,” reads less like an observation and more like a calculation (Schiffman, 1952, Card 129). Yet even attraction is apparently unstable as currency. As an example, Savannah Churchill was a “good looking girl” but still not well received (Schiffman, 1951, Card 214). The cards therefore reveal a cruel observation in which women must satisfy simultaneous thresholds of visual desirability, vocal excellence, and box-office magnetism. The moral upshot is that liberation in the Civil Rights era did not

automatically displace the commodifying gaze; it simply folded that gaze into new circuits of cultural measurement.

Closely allied with gendered appraisal is an unrelenting commercial determinism. The phrase “No drawing power” functions as a verdict as decisive as any aesthetic criticism. Chuck Berry, whose later historical canonization is all but undeniable, is harshly noted as having had “no drawing power at all, very bad experience” (Schiffman, 1958, Card 88). The Bobbettes are “Excellent, still in public eye, no drawing power” (Schiffman, 1957, Card 101). Gene Ammons “registered nicely” while being judged “very troublesome” and “no box office value” (Schiffman, 1950, Card 25). These pronouncements translate art into units of attendance; they treat cultural labor as a line item. What is remarkable is not merely that talent and profitability are disentangled, but that profitability becomes the final arbiter. The cards enact a market existentialism: to “draw” is to persist; to fail commercially is to face a managerial death sentence... “not to be repeated under any circumstances.” In this almost scoreboard-like world, the audience’s embodied votes (applause, silence, movement) are the data that determine future Black visibility.

However, the existence of these written cards does not mean that artists who were women were unwilling to stand up for themselves. In 1934, Jackie Bass and Bertie Lou Wood (Chorus Girls) led the first strike by African American performers at the Apollo Theater (New York Amsterdam News, 1940). Instead of taking the stage for a scheduled performance, the overworked women walked out to demand higher wages. White audience members also demonstrated solidarity with the performers by refusing to cross the picket line, withholding their patronage of the venue in support of the strike (Figure 12). The event itself lasted around a day, and as a result, dancers’ wages increased from \$25 to \$30 per week (New York Amsterdam

News, 1940). On the surface, these concessions suggested a meaningful victory, demonstrating that Black performers were willing to challenge unfair labor conditions. Yet the outcome was more complicated. In response to the increased costs, Frank Schiffman ultimately eliminated the chorus girls entirely, a decision made to offset the financial burden of higher wages (Fox, 2003, p. 78). What, then, was truly gained from the strike remains uncertain. While Black performers asserted their agency and secured improved conditions in principle, the structural realities of the industry allowed management to remove them from future production altogether in the name of economy. Even when marginalized workers claim their rights, those rights remain vulnerable to the calculations of profit that shape the institutions in which they labor.

Figure 12

Citizens Supporting the Apollo Theater Strike, 1940



Note. From ‘The first strike by black performers of the American Guild of Variety Artists, an affiliate of the Associated Actors and Artist of America, picket in front of the Apollo Theater on 125th Street in the Harlem section of New York City’, February 23, 1940. Photographer Uncredited. Photograph by Associated Press (AP Photo).

The same evaluative logic visible in disputes over showgirls' pay continues in a different form through judgments about cultural relevance. Repeated notes also condemn acts for being "too slow," "not the type of material for us," or "uninspiring meaningless routine." Prof Alex Bradford's gospel experiment "resulted in great loss," while jazz voices like Ernestine Anderson could be praised personally but failed to "register" with a crowd in that week's emotional tempo. In the cards, time is not neutral; it is prescriptive. The era's rapid social change of new popular rhythms produced an impatience. Audiences sought immediacy, and those who were "out of sync" were not merely unfashionable, they were judged as failing the communal pulse. The ethical judgement is subtle; to be vibrant is to be relevant, and that relevance itself becomes a kind of moral currency on the stage.

Even so, the archive is not only disciplinary. Intermittent exclamations such as "Audience loved every minute" for Oscar Brown Jr., "really good" for Bunny Briggs, "one of the greatest shows we have ever had" for Pearl Bailey's revue suggest alignment between artist and community that is almost religious in its intensity. When alignment occurs, the cards register a collective joy that temporarily suspends economic calculation. The crowd and the performer merge, recognition becomes reciprocity, and those few words point toward the irreplaceable communal functions of performance.

All in all, these cards teach a difficult lesson that representation is necessary but not sufficient. Presence on stage did not mean freedom from commodification, objectification, or temporal discipline. The cards do not deny the vitality of the performers they record; rather, they show the precise conditions that made that vitality legible, saleable, and sometimes truly extinguishable. Even in their short nature, the notes hold a long argument about what a community values and what it will buy, and therefore, who gets to be seen again.

Despite all the commercial considerations, Schiffman still tried to align the theater with Harlem's emerging leadership. He kept ticket prices low to serve local residents and even advertised on Black radio stations in Harlem. The Apollo's stage occasionally served as a space for local political organizing, extending its role beyond entertainment into civic life. Schiffman was even praised by Martin Luther King Jr. for maintaining a "long record of dedication to justice and racial equality," particularly through his support of emerging Black artists (Smithsonian, n.d.). As civil rights activism intensified, Schiffman increasingly made the theater available to community organizations, renting the venue for workshops that addressed issues affecting Black Americans and the broader struggle for civil rights (Conwill & Carlin, 2010, p. 172). In this way, the theater literally became a community center as well as a performance hall.

Throughout, Apollo helped define a Harlem identity that was proud. Its marquee proclaimed Black achievement in a city where segregation was still legal in many spaces. Community members described the Apollo as a place of opportunity, emphasizing that when people were given a platform to be heard, meaningful success was, in fact, possible. In an era when many white New York venues barred Black patrons or performers, the Apollo's very existence challenged racial hierarchies.

By the late 1960s the Apollo had endured through Harlem's highs and lows. Even as national mainstream venues slowly integrated, the Apollo continued to insist on its mission of Black voices. It stands today as a testament to the political power of the performing arts. Throughout the Civil Rights era, the Apollo Theater functioned as a political arena. It launched careers and nurtured community, it hosted movement leaders and fed the culture of protest, and it brought Black art into contact with broader publics. In those roles, it became a distinct symbol of the struggle for civil rights and racial equality. The stage was never just a stage in Harlem, it was

a platform from which new possibilities for society were announced. The Apollo did not march on Washington, but it helped raise money for that march. It did not negotiate laws, but it changed hearts and minds through music and speech. Above all, it provided a space where Black people could see themselves as makers of history.

1.4 Conclusion

This chapter reveals that the history of integrated music venues is not a straightforward narrative of progress. These spaces did not dismantle segregation outright; rather, they reconfigured the foundation on which it operated in ways that formal law often could not. Across the cases examined, music venues functioned as contested environments where racial hierarchy was simultaneously reinforced and challenged. Systems such as the cabaret licensing and the ownership structure of the Apollo Theater demonstrate how inequality persisted through economic control and the commodification of Black performance. Yet at the same time, venues like Café Society and even the Apollo's stage show how Black artists and audiences actively repurposed these spaces into sites of resistance, visibility, and political expression.

Integration within these venues, therefore, operated less as a legal breakthrough and more as a cultural intervention. By forcing interracial contact in intimate, emotionally charged settings, these spaces made it difficult for audiences to ignore Black humanity. Performances that confronted racial violence transformed entertainment into a form of public reckoning, compelling especially white audiences to engage with realities they might otherwise avoid. In doing so, these venues amplified the messages of the civil rights movement, extending them beyond formal political areas and into everyday social life. At the same time, their impact was

not unlimited. As integration was mediated by profit motives, white ownership, and audience expectations, these spaces remained constrained by the very systems they sought to challenge.

Ultimately, integrated music venues were not engines of complete structural change, but they were catalysts of perceptual transformation. They challenged segregationist policies indirectly as they amplified civil rights messages through public and affective performance, and reshaped attitudes by normalizing interracial presence. Their significance lies in making racial mixing visible, and at times unavoidable, laying the social groundwork upon which broader political changes would later build.

Chapter 2: New Jersey

2.1 Regional Development and Cultural Networks

New Jersey's racial history destabilizes the comforting geography that maps segregation neatly onto the South and integration onto the North. Like New York, the state did not codify a sweeping statutory regime of Jim Crow, yet the absence of it did not signify the presence of justice. Instead, racial hierarchy was settled into the ordinary grammar of governance. In place of explicit "white" vs. "colored" signage, New Jersey created a more quiet architecture of exclusion. In cities such as Newark, Trenton, Atlantic City, and Asbury Park, racial boundaries emerged less through spectacle than through administration. Segregation functioned not as a dramatic legal declaration but as structured containment, an ongoing process by which space, labor, and political voice were managed. Where Southern Jim Crow relied on overt statutory demarcation, New Jersey perfected what might be called "bureaucratic segregation" where rules that appeared neutral nonetheless reproduced racialized outcomes (Brodkin, 2000). As it lacked the theatrical visibility of explicit racial codes, this regime often eluded national scrutiny. Yet for Black residents, the phenomenology of exclusion was no less tangible.

Notably, these constraints also generated a need for collective organization. The state's diffuse and administrative character of racial control demanded equally adaptive forms of resistance. In New Jersey, Black civic life grew out of cultural spaces that brought people together and built trust within the community. Therefore, New Jersey offers a case study in how racial hierarchy persists without proclamation. That domination need not declare itself to endure, and the North's claim to liberal modernity often masked a subtler but equally durable regime of racial management. At the same time, it shows how marginalized communities, confronted with

a bureaucratic order, forged indigenous organizations capable of translating lived experience into political power.

By the early twentieth century, New Jersey's industrial growth as well as coastal tourism economy drew both European immigrants and Black migrants from the South. During the Great Migration, Black families arrived seeking employment in shore-based service industries (Johnson, 2010). Residential confinement, then, followed swiftly. Federal Home Owners' Loan Corporation redlining maps in the 1940s shaded Black neighborhoods as hazardous for investment, ensuring mortgage denial (Hawk, 2023). Therefore, municipal zoning laws avoided explicit racial language, while informal real estate covenants reinforced segregation through explicit racial language contained in private property contracts. As a result, Black communities became spatially concentrated and economically constrained. Therefore, the state's racial regime was defined not by exclusion from contemporary life but by unequal inclusion within it.

Nowhere was this more evident than along the Jersey Shore. In Atlantic City, de facto beach segregation operated for decades without statutory mandate. From the 1920s through the 1950s, Atlantic City's so-called "Northside Line" created a de facto racial boundary that confined Black residents and performers to the Northside district and segregated beaches, even though state law did not formally mandate separation (Johnson, 2010, p. 42). White-owned beachfront hotels and resorts regularly hired Black musicians to entertain white vacationers while denying them equal access to accommodations. Black artists such as Count Basie performed extended summer residencies at clubs like the Paradise Club entertaining predominantly white crowds in Northside venues while being excluded from whites-only hotel facilities (Johnson, 2010, p. 176). Despite their importance as cultural figures, Black musicians were subject to the same constraints as any other Black person. They could perform for white

audiences at elite venues, yet often had to sleep in segregated boarding houses in the Northside or stay at Black-friendly lodgings such as the Liberty Hotel, which served African American tourists when most mainstream hotels refused them (Bear, 2019). These patterns reveal the dual realities of Atlantic City: they outwardly presented an image of integration, yet still maintained a social order that excluded Black people. This would have allowed leisure capitalism to profit from Black cultural labor without granting social equality. Black sound generated profit; Black presence threatened order. Music functioned as an economic engine for the city's tourism economy, but only when detached from Black mobility. Black performers could cross into white spaces as labor, but Black communities were expected to remain geographically invisible.

The practice of relegating Black beachgoers to marginal shoreline areas solidified what became known as "Chicken Bone Beach" (also known as "Missouri Avenue Beach") a stretch informally designated for Black visitors when other beach entrances were obstructed (Johnson, 2010, p. 178). The name derived from white beachgoers' derisive references to food scraps allegedly left behind, a slur that simultaneously stigmatized Black leisure and justified segregationist custom. No written law barred Black residents from other beach sections. Instead, police used "conduct" violations and discretionary enforcement to remove Black beachgoers when white complaints accumulated (Johnson, 2010, p. 177-180). Segregation in New Jersey thus operated through containment rather than categorical exclusion. Sound and crowd size (rather than race explicitly) triggered intervention. The policing of music near the boardwalk also seemingly ensured that interracial gatherings did not visibly challenge spatial hierarchies (Horner & Horner, 2020, p. 10). Entertainers including Sammy Davis Jr., Louis Armstrong, and others remembered by the local Black community as performing impromptu shows on Chicken Bone

Beach during segregated summers, were denied access to the more affluent beachfront areas used by white patrons (Duhart, 2021).

However, it should be noted that most Black tourists of the era embraced Chicken Bone Beach not merely as a tolerated area, but as a lively social and cultural gathering spot. Though restrictive, the segregated stretch of shoreline became a destination where families from across the Northeast could see themselves reflected in the crowds and enjoy seaside leisure that was otherwise denied to them on Atlantic City's main beaches. African American Heritage Museum historian Ralph Hunter recalled his first experiences there in the late 1950s, saying "I got off the bus and saw tens of thousands of people who looked like me," capturing a sense of mass community and shared identity that was rare in leisure spaces of the time (Duhart, 2021). Hunter and others point out that families transformed the beach into a joyful, communal retreat. Martin Luther King Jr. even vacationed there with his family in 1956, underscoring how it served as a meaningful site of belonging for African Americans at a time when other Atlantic City beaches were effectively off limits (Figure 13). In these ways, Chicken Bone Beach became more than a segregated zone, it reflected both the constraints and the creative agency of Black Atlantic City tourists and residents.

Figure 13

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Attending Chicken Bone Beach, Atlantic City, 1956



Note. Image from the John W. Mosley Collection, Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection, Temple University Libraries.

In the immediate postwar period, this intensified in urban centers. In Newark, police launched coordinated raids on nightlife establishments, citing liquor violations for multiple areas (The New York Times, 1935). Although specific police raids on nightlife venues in Newark during the immediate postwar years are not extensively documented in digitized sources, this absence should not be mistaken for a lack of systematic enforcement. Rather, scholarship on northern urban policing suggests that public order and liquor statutes were deliberately employed as flexible tools of discretionary social control, often targeting marginalized communities (Walker, 1977, p. 25 ; p. 69). In New Jersey, these practices were further entrenched by political corruption, most notably in Jersey City under Mayor Frank Hague, a white political leader (Walker, 1977, p. 146). Hague's machine consolidated power through the strategic use of policing, directing disproportionate municipal resources toward law enforcement and blurring

the line between legal authority and political dominance, an approach captured in his notorious claim, “I am the law” (Walker, 1977, p. 70).

Nightspots in Newark’s Third Ward that were central to Black citizens, operated under constant threat of enforcement actions (Kukla, 1991, p. 2-9). Such discretionary policing reinforced patterns of containment and regulation without formal racial segregation statutes, demonstrating how power was utilized to manage Black urban leisure. The state’s anxiety centered less on sound itself than on the potential of Black crowds to translate cultural gathering into political mobilization.

Municipal vice commissions across New Jersey in the 1940s and 1950s reinforced this logic. Under the banner of moral reform, cities established investigative bodies to “clean up” nightlife districts. Jazz, rhythm and blues venues, such as the Harlem Club in the Northside, were frequent targets of scrutiny. Commission reports often associated Black musicians with narcotics use, sexual deviance, and delinquency, racializing musical genres without explicitly invoking race as a legal category (Johnson, 2010, p. 40; p. 26). Yet the underlying pattern revealed a racialized suspicion of Black-controlled entertainment spaces. Music venues anchored Black districts while simultaneously reinforcing racial boundaries by marking those districts as sites of vice.

The 1948 race riot in Trenton further entrenched official anxieties about Black crowd formation, and was nearly a final nail in the coffin. In late January 1948 the beating murder of William Horner, a white shopkeeper, sparked a full-scale police crackdown in Trenton’s Black neighborhoods. Within days “squads of police began monitoring Black neighborhoods, pulling men over and generally terrorizing people” under Trenton’s Public Safety director (Andrew J. Duch) (Lynn, 2019). By the end of January some 20 Black men had been detained on suspicion,

and newspapers applauded police for “solving one of the most brutal crimes” (Knepper, 2011). Officials then tightened controls on public entertainment: for example, Trenton’s city ordinance (later upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Kovacs v. Cooper*, 1949) banned loud sound amplification (“loud and raucous noises”) on public streets (*Kovacs v. Cooper*, 1949). In practice this atmosphere meant Black-owned bars, dance halls and clubs faced extra scrutiny (through noise complaints, licensing checks, or “disorderly house” raids) as officials treated large Black gatherings as potentially dangerous (Knepper, 2011). Direct archival evidence of specific new rules is sparse, but contemporary press and later histories make clear that the 1948 case intensified fear of Black crowd formation. This led to more aggressive patrols and regulation of Black music venues in Trenton and other New Jersey cities (often framed as crime prevention rather than overtly racial control). Uncertainties remain because most records of these changes are either unreported or coded as neutral “public order” policies, so the racial subtext must be inferred from context. The riot reinforced a state-level belief that Black assembly contained latent political danger.

The emergence of rock-and-roll in the 1950s also introduced a new axis of conflict centered on youth culture. The movement of the genre in New Jersey sparked fear among many white residents who viewed the music as a threat to social order. A major turning point was a 1956 concert by Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers at Convention Hall, which ended in a riot involving injuries (Horner & Horner, 2020, p. 13). This incident convinced city officials that rock-and-roll encouraged violent and uncontrollable behavior among teenagers, leading them to ban rock-and-roll performances on the boardwalk. Even before this event, adults had described the music as “devil’s music” with an “animalistic beat,” claiming it promoted sexual immorality and juvenile delinquency (Horner & Horner, 2020, p. 10). Complaints about loud music often

reflected deeper anxieties about teenagers behaving in ways that challenged traditional norms. Although often framed in moral rather than racial terms, these fears were tied to the genre's roots in Black rhythm and blues, leading to a racialized perception of rock-and-roll as culturally dangerous.

White parents complained explicitly about interracial dancing, halls and high school auditoriums cancelled events under pressure. New Jersey mirrored moral panics visible in New York City but often acted more swiftly and harshly. In 1974, state officials in New Jersey approved the creation of a new high school in North Brunswick, allowing hundreds of white students to leave New Brunswick High School in neighboring New Brunswick (Rasmussen, 2017). The transfer effectively sanctioned white flight through administrative policy rather than overt segregation, draining the city's formerly integrated school of much of its white enrollment in a single stroke. In the years that followed, white families continued to withdraw, and New Brunswick High became overwhelmingly Black, while the new suburban school remained largely white and better resourced. What had once been framed as the promise of integration gave way to a familiar pattern of separation: two districts divided by municipal boundaries. By mid-decade, the schools functioned as separate systems in practice if not in law, illustrating how suburbanization and state policy could quietly reproduce segregation even after the formal end of Jim Crow.

In turn of all of these events, youth music became a civil rights issue not only because of its sound but because of its capacity to erode racial boundaries through embodied interaction. The state's regulatory reflex revealed how deeply interracial socialization threatened the logic of containment. This background forms the necessary context for understanding Springwood Avenue and the West Side of Asbury Park, venues crucial to Black people during the Civil

Rights era. This interpretation necessarily works within the limits of the historical record. While there is substantial documentation on the regulation of youth culture and the broader social anxieties surrounding integration, there is far less direct evidence capturing the specific reactions of white audiences or the day-to-day interactions within these venues themselves. As a result, this chapter draws on available accounts and contextual evidence to reconstruct how these spaces likely functioned and were experienced. In contrast to the previous chapters, which rely more heavily on documented conflicts and public responses, this section places greater emphasis on integrated music venues as they were used and shaped by Black communities, providing not only moments of tension, but also the ways these spaces enabled forms of expression that are less visible in the archival record.

2.2 Springwood Avenue

Springwood Avenue in Asbury Park functioned as the cultural heart of New Jersey's Black community, offering a place where economic autonomy and social networks intersected to produce political influence (Horner, 2012). Through the late 1960s, Springwood Avenue was the primary artery of Asbury Park's west side. As mentioned previously, the spatial inequality produced by this "side" ordeal is what could be described as it being split into "two Asbury Parks," a bifurcated urban landscape where access to leisure and civic opportunity was racially mediated.

In response to these structural exclusions, Springwood Avenue evolved into a self-contained Black economy: restaurants, beauty parlors, churches, hotels, and over a dozen nightlife venues. Its cultural vitality earned it the nickname "Little Harlem," which captured that like Harlem in New York, Springwood was a place where Black artistry, entrepreneurship, and

social life flourished despite structural exclusion (New Jersey Department of Community Affairs, 2026). Music, especially jazz, gospel, blues, and rhythm and blues, was not merely recreation on Springwood Avenue. It was infrastructure. It generated income, shaped identity, and created spaces of dignity within a quote-on-quote “segregated” outlook.

By the 1930s and 1940s, Springwood Avenue had developed into a dense commercial ecosystem. City directories and oral histories document dozens of African American-owned businesses. Importantly, more than two dozen establishments on Springwood Avenue were listed in the “Negro Motorist Green Book” by Victor Hugo Green, the travel guide that identified safe accommodations and businesses for Black travelers during segregation (North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority, 2023). This concentration reveals that Springwood was not only a neighborhood hub but also part of a larger Black mobility network. Touring musicians and vacationers traveling along the eastern seaboard could find performance opportunities within this corridor. The presence of Green Book listings situates Springwood Avenue within a national geography of Black self-reliance.

Music supported this ecosystem. One could walk down Springwood Avenue and hear multiple genres blending into one another (Asbury Park African-American Music Project, 2024). Music extended beyond formal venues, where musicians practiced on porches, in barbershops, and on sidewalks (Asbury Park African-American Music Project, 2024). This diffusion of sound blurred boundaries between public and private space. Springwood Avenue functioned as an open-air conservatory where young Black players absorbed style and technique simply by being present. The avenue formed part of what later became known as the Chitlin’ Circuit, a network of performance venues across the United States that welcomed African American artists during segregation (Asbury Park African-American Music Project, 2024). Billie Holiday, Ella

Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, and Count Basie were remembered as having performed in clubs along Springwood Avenue. Whether as headliners or through informal jam sessions, their appearances linked this New Jersey shore community to national currents in Black music. The Chitlin' Circuit was not merely an entertainment route; it was an economic survival strategy that allowed Black performers to earn a living when mainstream white venues denied them access. Springwood Avenue's inclusion in that circuit placed it within a broader infrastructure of Black cultural exchange stretching from New York to the Deep South.

The most well known of the venues was the Turf Club, which was originally opened in 1940 under the ownership of Robert and Carroll Brown (Asbury Park African-American Music Project, 2024). Later that year, ownership transferred to John Moore, and in 1948 to Leo Karp and Sol Konvitz. During its earliest years, there is little evidence of regular musical performances. However, the club's relocation in 1956 to 1200 Springwood Avenue marked a turning point. Leo Karp demolished the Victory Hotel on the site, and constructed a simple, one-story building (Asbury Park African-American Music Project, 2024). On June 30, 1956, the new "Leo's Turf Club" opened its doors. Beginning in 1959, advertisements confirm that live music became a central feature of the venue. By the mid-1960s, Leo's Turf Club had become a critical cultural hub on Springwood Avenue, drawing major jazz and soul performers and audiences from Philadelphia and Newark. Unlike Big Bill's, the former Hampton Inn that catered to an 85% white clientele, Turf Club functioned as a rare Black-owned space where African American musicians and audiences could gather freely (Wolff, 2020). Its success, however, emerged within a racially stratified urban context that would later shape its trajectory.

Despite this, the 1960s represented the Turf Club's golden era. Local musicians such as Al Griffin and the Gents of Jazz, Cliff Johnson and the Squires of Rhythm, Dorian Parreott and

the Cubops, and keyboardist Dee Holland performed regularly (Asbury Park African-American Music Project, 2024). The club also hosted nationally recognized artists, including saxophonist Illinois Jacquet and organist Jimmy McGriff. Oral testimonies describe a raised bandstand positioned in the middle of the bar, placing musicians literally at the center of communal attention (Asbury Park African-American Music Project, 2024). Symbolically, this placed Black musicians at the center of communal space, visually asserting the community's authority in a city where racial hierarchies otherwise dictated spatial and social positioning. Jam sessions would then become increasingly common. Musicians finishing sets at neighboring venues would stop by to sit in for a few numbers, creating a fluid, collaborative environment within the community.

Performances at the Turf were, then, marked by their ability to attract both Black and, occasionally, white audiences, creating an environment in which interracial cultural engagement subtly intersected with civil rights dynamics. White musicians and patrons who attended Turf Club performances were often perceived as outsiders entering a Black-defined space, and their presence carried political and social weight. Oral histories suggest that white attendees were fascinated by the style of the performances, yet their movement into the space was carefully negotiated. While they could temporarily access Springwood Avenue nightlife, structural and social barriers remained in place, limiting reciprocal access for Black residents into the city's eastside venues. The interracial musical exchange fostered at the Turf thus functioned as a controlled, spatially bounded experiment in social integration, with music serving as a marker of asymmetrical social power.

The Turf Club's story also reveals layers of ownership that complicate simplistic racial narratives. Early ownership of the club included a mix of Black and white proprietors, reflecting the hierarchies that shaped West Side communities. The political dimensions became explicit in

1970 when Karp and the Konvitzs sold the liquor license to Waylon “Wakie” Goldston, a local African American entrepreneur, who rebranded the venue as Wakie’s Show Place (Asbury Park African-American Music Project, 2024). This transition coincided with the height of the Black Power era, a period when local business ownership was intimately tied to the pursuit of civil rights through economic empowerment. By taking control of the Turf Club, Goldston not only asserted economic agency but also created a space where Black residents could exercise civic authority and cultivate networks for political engagement. The grand opening under Goldston’s ownership featured nationally recognized vocalist Irene Reid, known for her association with Count Basie, signaling the West Side’s capacity to host performances of professional caliber independent of downtown, white-controlled venues. These events were framed as expressions of Black reinforcing collective identity and the perception that the West Side could sustain cultural production. Beyond entertainment, Wakie’s Show Place functioned as a semi-public hub where informal political organizing occurred and civic groups convened with broader regional civil rights organizations.

However, the calm did not last. The Springwood Avenue riots in July 1970 erupted as a sudden and powerful expression of the frustrations felt by Black residents on Asbury Park’s West Side (Phalon, 1975). Years of systemic neglect, including underfunded schools, inadequate housing, limited economic opportunities, and racially biased policing, had left the community isolated. Tensions erupted when reports of police harassment and indifference combined with high unemployment and poverty, sparking protests that quickly escalated into violence (Phalon, 1975). Fires destroyed homes and businesses along Springwood Avenue, looting occurred in some commercial areas, and streets became sites of confrontation between residents and law enforcement. The riots were not random acts of destruction but a form of collective political

expression reflecting deep racial and economic grievances. During this period, Wakie's Show Place, remained one of the few structures intact Wayland Goldstone responded by reopening the club, and hosting performers like Bobbie Tucker and the Me Three Souls even as much of the neighborhood lay in ruins (Wolff, 2020). Goldstone also assumed a leadership role in local politics, becoming chairman of the West Side Coalition's business development committee and lobbying the City Council to restore police patrols and community support (Wolff, 2020). His actions are direct evidence of the racialized dynamics of urban governance, where Black-owned businesses faced economic vulnerability while also serving as centers of civic advocacy. In this way, the venue exemplified how music and performance spaces could serve as sites of both cultural affirmation and civic mobilization.

Figure 14

Wakie's Show Place amid the Springwood Avenue riots, July 7, 1970



Note. Published in the Asbury Park Press. The photograph shows the club standing while much of the surrounding West Side was engulfed in fire and unrest.

The riots, however, sadly, fundamentally altered the Turf Club's role in Springwood Avenue. Even Goldstone himself said: "People are afraid to come [Springwood Avenue]" (Wolff, 2020). Although the building itself survived, fear and disinvestment kept patrons away, undermining its cultural vitality. Beyond that, the Turf Club continued to evolve, reflecting shifting patterns of ownership while retaining music as its priority. The venue became the Turf Melody Lounge, later Mae's Melody Lounge under Ella Mae Jackson, with each iteration marking a new chapter in community identity (Asbury Park African-American Music Project, 2024). Despite these changes, the club's enduring role as a gathering place for performances and social integration proves its importance as more than a mere entertainment venue. It was a place where political agency intersected for the West Side's Black community. However, the story of Springwood Avenue's cultural life extends beyond any single venue. While places like the Turf Club embodied evolving forms of community and resilience, others played a more overtly political role.

Among them, Roseland Hall stood out not merely as an entertainment space, but as a political institution. After Black music entrepreneur Reese DuPree, remodeled the former Lafayette Hall in 1923 and reopened it as the Roseland Cabaret, the venue quickly became one of the few large, Black-controlled indoor spaces on Asbury Park's west side capable of hosting mass gatherings (North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority, 2023). Community leaders used Roseland to hold organized political meetings, where residents discussed local governance (further discussed below). In practical terms, this meant that candidates could address sizable audiences in a respected setting, organizers could coordinate voter turnout efforts, and residents could collectively articulate grievances about unequal municipal investment, policing, and employment barriers. The venue provided lighting, seating, a stage, and a central location, all of

which made structured political assembly possible at a scale that informal street meetings could not sustain.

Roseland also advanced interracial engagement in ways that were concrete rather than symbolic. When Duke Ellington and his band performed at the ballroom in 1929 and 1930, the events drew attention across racial lines into a Black-owned establishment (North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority, 2023). These performances were ticketed, publicly advertised (with Black musicians on the posters) occasions that positioned Black musicianship at the center of regional cultural life (Figure 15). White attendees entered a space owned and managed by a Black entrepreneur and participated in an environment governed by Black staff and community norms. This inversion of typical racial power dynamics did not dismantle premeditated feelings, but it created structured moments in which cultural prestige flowed through a Black-controlled venue.

Figure 15

Advertisement for the Roseland Cabaret



Note. Published in the Asbury Park Press in 1927, promoting events at the venue on Springwood Avenue and showing how the ballroom publicly marketed its entertainment offerings to the broader community.

At times, this influence moved beyond music and performance, positioning the hall as a space for leadership and public discourse. In 1924, Marcus Garvey spoke at Roseland Hall, and in 1928, W. E. B. Du Bois addressed the Asbury Park branch of the NAACP there as well (Asbury Park Museum, 2020). These appearances brought nationally prominent voices into a local setting, transforming the hall into a space where ideas about social justice were actively discussed. Although no transcripts of their specific speeches at Roseland Hall survive, their broader messages were well known: Garvey advocated for Black self-determination and unity, while Du Bois emphasized the urgency of confronting racial inequality, famously describing “the problem of the twentieth century” as “the problem of the color line” (Williams, 2021). The significance of these events extended beyond the moment itself. At a time when segregation restricted where Black Americans could gather and organize, Roseland Hall provided a rare and vital space for political engagement within the community. Hosting influential figures connected local residents to national movements, helping to spread ideas associated with organizations like the NAACP and Garvey’s broader movement for Black empowerment. These gatherings fostered a sense of shared purpose, encouraging greater local activism. In this way, by combining political meetings and high-profile musical performances, the Roseland Ballroom materially strengthened Black civic organization while also serving as a controlled site of interracial contact in 1920s New Jersey.

2.3 Conclusion

Springwood Avenue reveals how northern urban civil rights struggles were sustained through localized institutional networks embedded in everyday life. In Asbury Park, spaces like the Turf Club and the Roseland Ballroom were foundational to building this institutional

capacity. As a Black-owned cultural venue situated within a socially segregated area, the club provided more than recreation. It offered a semi-autonomous environment in which economic initiative, political dialogue, and interracial encounters could unfold on terms shaped by Black community members. Within its walls, residents cultivated trust and strengthened the social ties that undergirded collective action. Music and performance were central to this process. They functioned simultaneously as artistic expression and political practice. Performances created a shared cultural language that affirmed identity in the face of structural exclusion. At the same time, the venue's popularity generated economic circulation and social capital, reinforcing Black authority and expanding networks that could later be mobilized for civic initiatives. Even when interracial engagement remained bounded by informal rules and unequal power relations, these encounters with white patrons demonstrated how cultural production could mediate hierarchy. The stage became a site of negotiation where visibility subtly reshaped relationships that formal policy had yet to transform.

The purpose of this chapter has been to foreground the venues on Springwood Avenue as indigenous institutions, spaces created by and for Black communities that functioned as more than sites of entertainment. They operated as self-sustaining organizations, where music and community life interacted in ways that both resisted and reworked the constraints of segregation. By centering these venues, this chapter shifts the focus from integration as something granted or contested by white institutions to something actively shaped through Black community-building. At the same time, the limitations of the archival record remain clear. There is hope that as the Asbury Park African American Music Project continues its work of recovering and preserving local histories, a fuller picture will emerge, particularly one that brings into clearer view the

reactions of white audiences and authorities, further deepening understanding of how these spaces were experienced across racial lines.

Ultimately, Springwood Avenue can point toward the fact that music venues in northern cities operated as political nodes as much as entertainment sites. Through its ownership structure and programming choices, the venue incubated civic capacity and facilitated coalition building across lines of class and, at times, race. Springwood Avenue emerged not simply as a nightlife district but as a locus of institutional strength, where grassroots organizations were formed. The history underscores the inseparability of culture and politics. All of the factors collectively shaped the power of Black residents in Asbury Park. In doing so, it displays that the struggle for civil rights in the North was as much about sustaining and expanding local cultural institutions as it was about confronting formal systems of discrimination.

Chapter 3: Rhode Island

3.1 National Attention and Shifting Racial Dynamics

Though often perceived as a progressive, the history of Rhode Island's relationship with race and Black Americans is rooted in centuries of economic exploitation, social exclusion, and racialized policy. People of African descent have been present in Rhode Island since the seventeenth century, initially arriving through the transatlantic slave trade and later shaping every aspect of the state's overall life (Rhode Island Department of State, 2026). Rhode Island's early participation in slavery was complicated. As part of the colonial economy, Rhode Island merchants played a leading role in the Triangular Trade, exporting rum produced in state distilleries to Africa in exchange for enslaved Africans, who were then sold in the Caribbean and southern colonies. During the eighteenth century, Rhode Island merchants funded roughly 1,000 slave-trading voyages, transporting more than 100,000 Africans to the Americas (Rhode Island Department of State, 2026). The wealth and infrastructure of significant Rhode Island cities such as Newport were tied directly to this system; many buildings and port facilities were constructed by the labor of enslaved and free Africans (Farrow et al., 2005).

Legally, Rhode Island's history with slavery was contradictory. Although the colony passed a law in 1652 abolishing slavery, it was not enforced, and by the 18th century the state had one of the largest enslaved populations per capita in New England (Rhode Island State Archives, 1652). It wasn't until the Gradual Emancipation Act of 1784 that slavery formally ended in the state, and even then Black freedom was partial (Clark-Pujara, 2016, p. 4). This early history laid ground for racialized attitudes that would endure long after legal slavery ended. Black Rhode Islanders nevertheless organized institutions to build community. For example, the Free African Union Society, founded in Newport in 1780, was one of the first Black

organizations in the United States, offering a collective voice for African heritage residents (Clark-Pujara, 2016, p. 112). These efforts demonstrated early resistance to exclusion and helped sustain Black community life even in the face of broad discrimination.

Despite such community resilience, white attitudes in Rhode Island often marked Black residents as inferior. Segregation was evident in housing, education, and social life long before the civil rights era. In Providence, neighborhoods such as Fox Point became predominantly Black not simply through choice but through systemic pressures like redlining where lenders marked minority neighborhoods as “hazardous,” leading to disinvestment and limited opportunities for Black homeownership (Nelson et al., 2023). This pattern of structural discrimination built economic and social barriers that persisted into the 20th century. Racial tensions sometimes erupted violently. One historical episode was the destruction of “Snowtown” a Black settlement near what is now the Rhode Island State House, by a racist mob in 1831 (Clark-Pujara, 2016, p. 106-108). Residents lived in cramped, neglected housing that white Providence residents disparaged as immoral, and an altercation between sailors and Black men sparked broader violence that drove residents out and reinforced the image of Black neighborhoods as undesirable. This incident, like others in Rhode Island’s past, shows that racial hostility was not limited to the South but was embedded in northern urban culture as well.

In the early twentieth century, the Ku Klux Klan established a presence in rural parts of the state. During the 1920s and 1930s, institutions serving Black youth (such as the Watchman Industrial School, founded in 1908) were targeted in suspected Klan arson attacks (City of Providence, 2021, p. 72). The fact that the Klan operated in Rhode Island and that a school educating Black children faced violent intimidation underscores how pervasive racial anxiety and resistance to Black advancement could be, even in states that are often characterized as

progressive. Yet by the mid-20th century, Black Rhode Islanders were pressing for political and social change. A major local victory came in 1949 with the passage of the Fair Employment Practices Act, which prohibited discrimination based on race or national origin in hiring and housing (City of Providence, 2021, p. 83). This was an early step toward dismantling overt barriers in the labor market. In the 1960s, additional laws such as the Racial Imbalance Act sought to address segregation in public schools, though implementation faced resistance and uneven enforcement (Northeastern University Library, Archives and Special Collections, 1974). These legislative efforts reflected a broader shift in public policy and public awareness that paralleled the national civil rights movement.

Still, attitudes among many white Rhode Islanders reflected ambivalence to civil rights reforms. Segregation in housing and schooling, disproportionate economic disadvantage, and limited access to political power made the daily experience of Black residents markedly different from that of their white neighbors. These disparities were not merely the result of individual prejudice but emerged from structural practices embedded in public policies, lending institutions, and civic culture. In sum, Rhode Island's historical attitudes toward Black citizens have been shaped by centuries of entanglement in slavery and racialized policy, even as Black Rhode Islanders consistently tried to claim space in the public sphere. This history, then, influenced how the civil rights era unfolded in the state: it created both the conditions that made change necessary and the obstacles that activists had to overcome.

Against this backdrop, Newport emerges as a concentrated site of racial negotiation during the civil rights era. The three major festivals that defined the city's mid-century cultural identity (the Newport Jazz Festival, the Newport Folk Festival, and the short-lived Newport Rebels Festival) brought Black performers and interracial audiences into highly visible public

spaces at a moment of national upheaval. In this way, Newport offers a lens to examine how longstanding racial attitudes in Rhode Island handled civil rights-era transformation.

3.2 Newport Jazz Festival

The Newport Jazz Festival was founded in 1954 by George Wein, a Jewish jazz promoter from Boston, in collaboration with Elaine and Louis Lorillard, a wealthy white socialite couple from Newport (Morton, 2008, p. 83). The Lorillards approached Wein after learning about his success running jazz clubs in Boston and offered financial support to help launch a festival. As jazz enthusiasts with the resources to fund the project, they provided Wein with a substantial loan to make the idea possible. As a result, Newport was chosen largely because the Lorillards lived there and viewed the town as lacking major cultural attractions, leading them to bring a major jazz event to the area (Morton, 2008, p. 80).

Wein, an advocate for racial justice influenced by his Black wife Joyce Alexander, envisioned Newport as a place to fix the damage that segregation has had. At a 1955 Newport Jazz Festival board meeting, concerns over racial discrimination led some critics and observers, including Leonard Feather and Barry Ulanov, to propose relocating the festival to a more hospitable setting. Press coverage in *Ebony* further highlighted incidents of discrimination in Newport, including the refusal of service to pianist Billy Taylor at a local hotel bar, alongside other reported racial insensitivities at establishments such as the Viking Hotel. These accounts contributed to broader calls to move the festival out of Newport. However, John Hammond opposed relocation, arguing instead that maintaining an integrated jazz festival in Newport would “bring democracy” to a community unaccustomed to such racial inclusion (O’Meally, Edwards, & Griffin, 2004, p 132-133). As Wein also later reflected, “Integration and civil rights were my

way of life,” even if his activism was “more personal, less confrontational” than street protests (Wein & Chinen, 2003, p. 321). In these early years Newport’s festival helped introduce a form of cultural integration where its audiences and performers mixed black and white in ways rare for the time. Indeed, the 1954 festival saw Black and white concertgoers together onstage and in the crowd, challenging the de facto segregation still entrenched in Newport’s hotels and restaurants. (Even so, local discrimination persisted: musicians initially had trouble finding lodging and had to stay in private homes in 1954, though by the second year such barriers were easing) (Abrams, 2021).

From its inception, Newport was a racially integrated festival in practice. Black and white fans “mingled together on stage, in the crowd, and around town” during the first 1954 festival (Abrams, 2021). This was notable because Newport, a former slave-trading port, still enforced unwritten segregation and even had a substantial U.S. Navy presence from Southern states. The decision to keep the festival in Newport was thus, itself, inherently political. Hammond summed it up: “We have brought democracy to Newport, which was the last place in the world where it could have been expected to be found in America” (O’Meally et al., 2004, p. 132- 133). The Newport Festival emerged as a distinct cultural space within the wider field of power, where jazz performance and integrated audiences created opportunities to unsettle and reconfigure established social hierarchies. Jazz artists carried cultural capital as representatives of Black American art, and by placing them in the bastion of white privilege they exercised symbolic power to contest racial norms. The Newport Festival became a cultural site where segregation’s authority was quietly destabilized, as integrated audiences and celebrated Black musical performance worked against the norms that typically structured public space. Artists such as Duke Ellington had long refused to perform in segregated venues, establishing a tradition of

artistic defiance that carried into Newport during the mid-1950s (National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2026). There, performers shared the stage with white musicians on fully integrated bills. Without speeches or slogans, Newport became a quiet but pointed confrontation between the forward-looking spirit of jazz and the rigid racial logic of Jim Crow. Interracial crowds gathered openly, their very presence destabilizing racial boundaries simply by occupying the same space.

The Newport Festival's integrated audiences and program were not invisible to the media or to public opinion. Polls from that period showed that much of white America was wary of civil rights activism. For example, in 1961 a Gallup poll found 57% of Americans said sit-ins and freedom demonstrations were hurting Black Americans' chances for integration, and by 1963 about 60% thought mass demonstrations were detrimental to racial equality (Reinhart, 2019). But festival audiences were, by definition, politically heterogeneous and often younger; some local white Newportites were less than pleased by the crowds but found themselves coexisting in the same spaces. Over time, as the civil rights movement achieved legal victories and as mass culture exposed Americans to Black music, attitudes gradually shifted. By 1969, a Gallup survey found 63% of Americans believed Black Americans could win equal rights without resorting to violence (Reinhart, 2019). In this climate, the sight of Black and white fans shoulder-to-shoulder at Newport, a festival that was known for being an integrated event, likely helped normalize integration in some quarters. Academic studies of the era's polling on culture are sparse, but research notes that shared participation in public events can erode prejudice over time (Van Assche et al., 2023). Journalistic coverage by the late 1960s often lauded the festival's diversity as a point of pride. For example, retrospective accounts repeatedly emphasize that Newport's jazz crowds mixed races (O'Meally et al., 2004, p. 135- 136). Such images of Black

and white audiences enjoying the same music subtly challenged segregationist stereotypes in the media narrative.

Yet the festival was also a site of racial tension and conflict. During the summer of 1960, a predominantly white, affluent college crowd gathered in Newport for informal, free concerts surrounding the official festival (O'Meally et al., 2004, p. 127; Figure 16). When the main venue at Freebody Park reached capacity on the night of July 2nd, thousands of intoxicated attendees were left outside, where the atmosphere quickly deteriorated (Morton, 2008, p. 260). Many of these individuals were believed to be students from elite institutions such as Harvard, a perception reinforced by their visible displays of wealth, including the expensive alcohol they hurled during the chaos. As tensions escalated, the crowd became increasingly aggressive, and accounts describe the use of racial slurs shouted during the disorder, revealing that the violence was not merely spontaneous but also shaped by underlying racial hostility. Law enforcement responded with tear gas and water hoses, and even National Guard units were deployed to regain control. One witness later reflected that the fear they experienced that night rivaled that of their time in World War II (O'Meally et al., 2004, p. 127). By the end of the disturbance, more than two hundred arrests had been made and many were injured. Ultimately, the incident exposed the fragility of such cultural spaces, demonstrating how celebrations of Black artistry could become targets of racialized violence when intersecting with privileged white spectators.

Figure 16

Authorities Escorting Rioters Away from Festival Grounds



Note. From “Newport Jazz Festival Closed Because of Rioting,” by J. S. Wilson, *The New York Times*, July 4, 1960, p. 9.

In response, the Newport City Council abruptly canceled the remaining 4th of July concerts and voted to ban the 1961 festival altogether (Morton, 2008, p. 261). Local leaders later justified this by citing unruly crowds and public-safety concerns. This government intervention, unprecedented at the time, shows how civic power reacted to what was essentially a white youth riot. It is telling that most of the rioters were white, so the disturbance was treated as lawlessness rather than a race confrontation. The festival’s emcee, Willis Conover, publicly responded to the council’s decision, remarking that “instead of treating the sickness, they shot the patient – but the germs are still there” (Lees, 1960, p. 23). Through this metaphor, he criticized the authorities for targeting the festival itself (the most visible “symptom”) rather than addressing the deeper issues, such as racial tension or broader social conflict. In his view, while the immediate problem was

shut down, its underlying causes remained unresolved. Even so, the city's decision to effectively eliminate the festival for a year proved the limits of local tolerance for any form of disorder, integrated or not. Notably, President Eisenhower's impending arrival in Newport compelled authorities to drop almost all riot charges quickly, a reminder that even amid racial tensions, the federal and local governments were keen to preserve the social order and image of "calm."

Newport's city government, after banning the rest of the 1960 concerts, explicitly shut down the festival for 1961. These actions show how political power could override artistic freedom when social order was threatened. By 1962 the festival resumed under stricter terms, as federal civil rights policies made some discriminatory police tactics illegal. However, this time, George Wein exercised full creative control, rebranding the festival to better reflect what he saw as the true "meaning of jazz," and making it no longer a nonprofit organization (O'Meally et al., 2004, p. 143). In retrospect, Newport's 1960 reaction drew criticism in the press and later scholarship, with some accounts suggesting that the city's own handling of the event (treating the festival as a kind of spectacle while failing to anticipate the scale and behavior of the crowd) contributed significantly to the disorder (O'Meally et al., 2004; Gennari, 2006). This critique, that Newport officials over-reacted by canceling an increasingly popular integrated event, points to the complicated politics at play. While local merchants had profited from the festival, civic leaders used the riot to push the event out of Newport (Wein & Chinen, 2003, p. 377-378). In short, the festival's integration and the unrest it occasionally sparked forced city and state governments to balance civil liberties against public order, often erring on the side of coercion.

Against this backdrop of protest and policing, the music itself became an explicit vehicle for civil-rights commentary. Many landmark performances at Newport in this era directly invoked the struggle for racial justice, exemplifying what some scholars call the "protest

aesthetic” in jazz. In 1960 drummer Max Roach and poet-lyricist Oscar Brown Jr. released *We Insist! Max Roach’s Freedom Now Suite*, a bold five-part jazz album memorializing the centennial of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation (O’Meally et al., 2004, p. 322). The suite was conceived as an explicitly political work, and as Roach later declared, he would “never again play anything that does not have social significance,” urging Black musicians to “employ our skill to tell the dramatic story of our people” (Keepnews, 2007). All five movements of the suite trace the arc of African-American history, from slavery to the modern civil-rights struggle. In fact, jazz writer Ingrid Monson notes that the five movements (“Driva’ Man,” “Freedom Day,” “Triptych: Prayer/Protest/Peace,” “All Africa,” and “Tears for Johannesburg”) are organized “as a historical progression through African-American history” (Monson, 2024). Roach’s music blended hard-bop and avant-garde jazz with African and Afro-Cuban rhythms, alongside vocals from Abbey Lincoln.

“Driva’ Man,” the opening movement evokes slavery, depicting the brutality of the slave system. A saxophone solo and Lincoln’s chant-like vocals portray the whip-wielding “slave driver.” Moving on, “Freedom Day,” celebrates emancipation. This movement marks Lincoln’s birthday when the Emancipation Proclamation took effect. Roach and Brown treat freedom itself as ambiguous, the liberating moment is honored by choir-like vocals and gospel-inflected singing. Nat Hentoff’s original notes even ended “Freedom Day” on a musical question, suggesting that true freedom remained incomplete. Following that, “Triptych: Prayer/Protest/Peace” moves from solemn prayer through anguished protest to a tentative peace. Brown’s lyrics (sung by Lincoln) and Roach’s drumming build to a famous climax: Abbey Lincoln’s wordless wailing. The effect conveys the intensity of racial oppression, channeling the emotional force of the civil rights era. “All Africa” shifts to a Pan-African perspective. Lincoln

sings in an African language while American and African percussionists trade rhythms. Lyrically the piece calls out ethnic groups (Yorùbá, Masai, etc.) and offers proverbs about freedom. Musically it celebrates African independence struggles; the b-side of the album (which includes “All Africa”) leaned on pan-African themes, with an expanded percussion ensemble and heavy African rhythmic influence. Finally, “Tears for Johannesburg” mourns victims of apartheid. It evokes a funeral dirge for Sharpeville and other massacres in South Africa. This pan-African concern closes the historical narrative: Roach takes the story from American emancipation all the way to global Black liberation. “Tears for Johannesburg” specifically responded to the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre, tying the American civil-rights struggle to worldwide movements for freedom (Turner, 2021, p. 151).

Although composed and recorded in 1960, the Freedom Now Suite became a live sensation a few years later. In the summer of 1964 Roach was invited to take the suite to the Newport Jazz Festival, where the quartet reprised *We Insist!* (Gammage, 2022). The timing was electric as their concert fell two days after President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 on July 2nd (Couch et al., 2015). By performing an overt civil rights suite on Independence Day, the musicians intensified the set’s political resonance. In other words, Roach and Lincoln turned the festival’s patriotic holiday into a statement about freedom, literally staging the narrative of Black American struggle on America’s birthday, just after outlawing segregation. As Roach insisted, this was jazz made for purpose, a dramatic musical chronicle of Black citizens.

In July 1966, Nina Simone took the stage, already known for blending artistry with activism, Simone structured her Newport set carefully, mixing standards and love songs with overt protest material. “Mississippi Goddam” was scheduled as her closing number. Unlike the

brisk arrangement of the original 1964 recording, the Newport version unfolded over a slower nature. Simone introduced a deeper, more deliberate melody (Cohodas, 2002, p. 187-188). At first, the audience did not immediately recognize the song. Only when she sang the opening line, “Alabama’s got me so upset,” did the realization set in.

“Mississippi Goddam” is a protest song whose upbeat musical style deliberately clashes with its lyrical content. Structurally, the song operates as a series of verses naming specific sites of racial terror (Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi) transforming geography into political indictment. The opening lines function almost like a grim “geography lesson” in Jim Crow violence. Each verse ends with the blunt, repeated refrain “Mississippi Goddam!” creating a cumulative effect of exhaustion. Simone wrote the song in 1963 in direct response to the murder of Medgar Evers and the bombing of Birmingham’s 16th Street Baptist Church. She later described the song as erupting from her almost uncontrollably, calling Evers’ assassination “the match that lit the fuse” (Cohodas, 2002, p. 138). By the time she performed it at Newport in 1966, however, the song had evolved alongside the movement itself.

Most significantly, Simone altered one of the lyrics during the Newport performance. Instead of singing “Tennessee made me lose my rest,” she replaced the line with “Watts has made me lose my rest,” directly referencing the 1965 uprising in Los Angeles (Cohodas, 2002, p. 187-188). This change expanded the song’s geographical focus. What had originally indicted Southern segregation now encompassed urban rebellion in the West. By bringing in Watts, Simone signaled that racial injustice was not confined to Mississippi or Alabama; it was a national crisis. The lyric alteration transformed the song into a real-time commentary on the widening unrest across the country, demonstrating Simone’s refusal to let the piece remain historically fixed.

The audience reaction at Newport was interesting. At the unfamiliar introduction, some listeners reportedly laughed lightly, unsure of what was coming. That laughter quickly disappeared once Simone delivered the opening lyrics. As the political weight of the song became clear, the crowd fell into attentive silence. The slower groove intensified the tension; rather than the biting theatricality of the studio version, this performance felt intimate. By the end of the song, the audience was spellbound. When Simone left the stage, festivalgoers demanded her return. The emcee announced a special message, and Simone reappeared alone at the piano, playfully commanding the crowd to “shut up” before transitioning into a quiet ballad (Cohodas, 2002, p. 187-188). The emotional shift captured the charged atmosphere of the evening. A predominantly white jazz audience had been confronted directly with the urgency of Black protest.

The Newport performance marked a crucial moment in Simone’s political evolution. “Mississippi Goddam” had already signaled her transformation from jazz performer to outspoken activist, but by 1966 she was fully immersed in the civil rights struggle, performing at benefit concerts and public demonstrations. The song itself had been controversial from its release; Southern radio stations refused to play it, and some promotional copies were reportedly destroyed. Yet its power endured. At Newport, Simone demonstrated that the song was not static but living... capable of absorbing new events, new griefs, and new rebellions.

Each of these moments brought civil rights discourse onto Newport’s stages. They showed that jazz musicians (and related black performers at Newport) were not shying away from protest; instead, they were integrating political content into what they played, converting the festival into a kind of cultural podium. These performances fit within broader fields of power in the 1960s. Culture is an area of symbolic struggle shaped by economic and political forces.

Jazz festivals like Newport, supported by cigarette sponsors by the late 1960s and catering to mass audiences, were tightly interwoven with capitalist interests. At the same time, the content of the music provided opportunities for counter-narratives. The idea of counter-hegemony helps explain how the festival could contain both conservative and radical elements. On one hand, promoters sought entertainment, on the other hand artists pushed against the dominant racial order. For example, Mingus's satirical piece "Fables of Faubus" (about Little Rock's segregationist governor) was effectively banned by Columbia in 1959, yet decades later Mingus still unleashed it in protest at Newport's New York edition (when the festival briefly moved locations) (O'Meally et al., 2004, p. 38-39). Louis Armstrong even publicly confronted segregation in the Little Rock crisis, showing that jazz greats themselves often took counter-hegemonic stances (Armstrong criticized President Eisenhower's reluctance to protect Black students) (O'Meally et al., 2004, p. 192-194). In every instance where music or crowd integration at Newport highlighted racial injustice, the festival embodied "symbolic power," to define social reality through culture. That power at Newport tended, on balance, to empower civil-rights ideas.

By the late 1960s, shifts in public opinion and policy were catching up with the festival's progressive culture. The Voting Rights Act (1965) and subsequent local reforms meant that African Americans' status was legally improving (Aiken et al., 2013). George Wein famously noted that Newport elected its first African-American mayor in 1978 and that this might not have happened without the festival's influence (Wein & Chinen, 2003, p. 149-150). More broadly, after 15 years of *Brown v. Board*, a majority of Americans by 1969 finally believed in nonviolent integration. Polls from the 1960s show that white resistance to integration was slowly eroding by decade's end, and it could be theorized that cultural touchstones like jazz played a role in this

normalization (Reinhart, 2019). During the festival's heyday, many white people who came for the music found themselves sharing the experience with Black people in harmony (O'Meally et al., 2004, p. 128). The sight of an integrated crowd dancing on the Newport lawn was at least a microcosmic fulfillment of the "democracy" Hammond had spoken of in 1955.

In conclusion, the Newport Jazz Festival stood at the crossroads of music, race, and politics. Through its insistence on integration and its platforming of outspoken artists, Newport consistently intersected with civil rights politics. It gave Black musicians significant cultural capital, at times even more than they could command on segregated stages, and allowed them to convert that symbolic capital into messages about justice and/or pride. Over the entire period, the festival nudged American culture toward a more inclusive vision. As critic and poet Stanley Crouch put it, jazz "predicted the civil rights movement more than any other art in America" and Newport was a key site of that prediction (Abrams, 2021).

3.3 Newport Rebels Festival

Inside the cultural field of the Newport Jazz Festival itself, however, tensions ran far deeper than the public image of interracial harmony suggested. By 1960, a number of prominent Black musicians had grown openly disillusioned with the festival's direction and with what they perceived as its paternalistic liberalism. While the festival promoted itself as jazz's "meaning," a respectable, national art form welcomed into America's cultural mainstream, it increasingly reproduced the very racial and economic hierarchies that jazz, as a Black expressive tradition, had historically contested (O'Meally et al., 2004, p. 143). For artists like Charles Mingus and Max Roach, Newport's success felt less like inclusion and more like containment; they believed

that the official festival “reeked of Jim Crow” and found its embrace of jazz “suffocating rather than liberating” (O’Meally et al., 2004, p. 128).

Their grievances were both material and symbolic. Economically, disparities in pay exposed how white marketability outweighed Black creative innovation. Mingus discovered he had been offered only \$700 for his appearance while white performer Benny Goodman had received \$7,500 for a comparable booking. When Mingus demanded at least \$5,000 in response, George Wein refused (O’Meally et al., 2004, p. 140). The numbers were not merely insulting; they revealed the racialized valuation structure of the jazz marketplace. Black musicians produced the music’s most forward-looking art, but white stars remained more commercially “bankable” within the festival’s programming logic. Therefore, the cultural capital accumulated by modernist innovators did not translate into economic capital, while white performers’ established brand recognition did. The supposed meritocracy of the festival essentially masked a market system that systematically devalued Black creativity.

Symbolically, the slight was just as sharp. Mingus and Roach watched improvisational, experimental, or politically engaged ensembles pushed to small afternoon slots while crowd-pleasers or novelty performers received prime evening stages before the largest audiences. The programming implied a hierarchy of legitimacy where serious Black modernism was treated as niche, while more digestible or nostalgic forms (often associated with white audiences) were elevated as the festival’s public face. What Newport marketed as “jazz tradition” was, in practice, a sanitized version of the music that fit Cold War ideals of respectability without conflict (O’Meally et al., 2004, p. 128). This was cultural hegemony at work since jazz was being absorbed into the dominant bloc, stripped of its oppositional energy and repackaged as safe national heritage.

Frustrated by both the economics and the ideology of the event, Mingus and Roach chose not simply to complain but to create an alternative institution, through the concept of indigenous organization. In 1960, tensions within the Newport jazz scene spilled beyond the official festival stage when Mingus and Roach helped organize what became known as the “Rebel Festival.” Rather than working through the established Newport structure, they carved out an alternative performance space that reflected growing frustration over artistic hierarchy and the commercial direction of the festival (O’Meally et al., 2004, p. 140-141). The opportunity to stage this parallel event came together almost accidentally through personal networks. Elaine Lorillard, who was in the midst divorce from Louis Lorillard, became unexpectedly instrumental in the process. According to accounts from the period, she was willing to assist Mingus in securing space partly out of personal conflict with her ex-husband and partly out of genuine sympathy for the musicians’ grievances. She reached out to the owner of the Cliff Walk Manor, who agreed to let the musicians use the grounds for performances (Monson, 2007, p. 184). This was not merely another concert series, it was an experiment in self-determination. The musicians built their own bandstand, printed handbills themselves, set up tents, and rejected the commercial apparatus (O’Meally et al., 2004, p. 128). No paid advertising, no liquor concessions, no corporate sponsors. The labor was collective and improvisational, mirroring the ethos of the music itself. Where Newport embodied managerial professionalism, the Rebel Festival embodied artisanal autonomy.

Musically, the lineup underscored the protest’s aesthetic stakes. Roach’s quintet, Mingus’s Jazz Workshop, and the quartet of Ornette Coleman (then one of the most controversial figures in jazz) represented the leading edge of modernism (O’Meally et al., 2004, p. 141). These were artists redefining the industry, yet marginalized by mainstream promoters. Presenting them

together constituted both an artistic statement and a political one: the future of jazz, they insisted, lay with creative risk and Black control, not nostalgic spectacle.

Contemporary observers recognized the action's broader significance. Civil-rights journalist Nat Hentoff saw the event as an exposure of the official festival's "venality," explicitly linking the musicians' protest to the tactics of the sit-in movement (O'Meally et al., 2004, p. 141). It was viewed as a kind of cultural direct action in which artists withdrew their labor from exploitative institutions and demonstrated their capacity for self-governance. His later production of recordings from the Cliff Walk concerts sought to preserve the moment as historical evidence of art resisting commerce. Critics who attended described the scene as handmade, communal, and intimate, which was the opposite of Newport's corporate sprawl (O'Meally et al., 2004, p. 141). Even the attendance, only a few hundred people, took on symbolic weight that this was jazz for those committed to listening, not for mass spectacle.

Financially, the Rebel Festival struggled and did not continue beyond its initial year, remaining a one-time event, but its impact was ideological rather than commercial. It marked one of the clearest moments when musicians publicly rejected the framework that Newport represented. Rather than seeking inclusion within an unequal system, Mingus and Roach attempted to build an autonomous space outside. In this sense, the rebellion foreshadowed broader shifts in both jazz and civil rights politics, from requests for fair treatment to demands for structural control.

However, Wein himself later framed the rebellion less as an attack than as a maneuver within the same publicity economy he understood so well. Looking back, he insisted there was no personal break: "Mingus might have cussed me out in public," Wein recalled, "but we were good friends and we understood each other. I was a P.R. person, and Charlie was too. Charlie and

Max saw a chance to grab a lot of publicity – don't forget that they had a record deal for the rebel festival – and they grabbed it. They were smart. It was a smart maneuver. I never rejected it or was upset about it" (O'Meally et al., 2004, p. 145). In this telling, the rebellion becomes less insurrection than media strategy, folded back into the same promotional logic that drove Newport itself. Hentoff was more doubtful about that retrospective generosity, noting, "To the best of my knowledge George didn't try to block the rebel festival, but he certainly didn't support it" (O'Meally et al., 2004, p. 145). His skepticism suggests that even if Wein tolerated the protest, he hardly embraced the musicians' demand for structural autonomy.

The disagreement here is telling, as it reveals how the same event could look either like friendly gamesmanship (to Wein) or necessary resistance (to the musicians and their allies). What followed further complicates any simple narrative of rupture. When Wein returned to Newport in 1962, he rehired Mingus and Roach. Mingus even appeared as a panelist discussing "The Economics of the Jazz Community" and, in an uneasy reconciliation, Mingus's band and Wein's band played together at the very site of the rebellion, Cliff Walk Manor (O'Meally et al., 2004, p. 145). The field had not split into two camps; it had reabsorbed its dissidents.

Therefore, the 1960 rebellion exposed a fundamental contradiction at the heart of Newport's success. The festival claimed to elevate jazz into America's cultural mainstream, yet the very process of mainstreaming threatened to neutralize the music's Black radicalism and independence. The Cliff Walk concerts dramatized that contradiction in concrete form. Jazz itself became the means of protest: improvisation as organization, collective creation as institution-building, and performance as political refusal. Even if the experiment "failed" in market terms, it succeeded symbolically, making visible the racial tensions that Newport's supposed polished image had tried to smooth over. From that point forward, the idea that jazz

musicians might organize against promoters, and that art could function as counter-hegemonic practice, could no longer be dismissed as unthinkable.

3.4 Newport Folk Festival

The Newport Folk Festival, founded in 1959, drew upon folk music's long-standing association with dissent, labor struggle, and democratic expression (O'Meally et al., 2004, p. 143). As the Smithsonian has noted, "as the civil rights movement gained momentum in the 1960s, folk music gave voice to a new generation longing for equality and justice" (Smithsonian Institution, 2026). When George Wein turned from jazz to folk, he did not begin from scratch. Having already established an interracial cultural space at the Newport Jazz Festival, Wein, even though he had "did not start the folk festival with a direct political statement in mind," managed to recreate that same atmosphere of openness and racial coexistence within a different musical tradition (Gillis, 2009). For Wein, the move into folk was more artistic, however there were still political undertones. He understood that folk music was explicitly tied to questions of social justice. By bringing figures such as Pete Seeger onto the founding board and shaping the festival's programming around a broad, inclusive understanding of "folk" Wein aimed to reproduce the environment he had fostered in jazz, but within a genre whose lyrics were appealing to a different audience (Wein & Chinen, 2003, p. 313). Wein later acknowledged that this atmosphere was intentional rather than accidental: "We can't say we were color-blind; we knew that we had to do these things if we were gonna be a representation of what we were supposed to do" (Massimo, 2017, p. 158). In other words, Newport Folk was consciously structured in a way in which artistic performance and social values converged. The stage became

a space where music functioned not merely as entertainment, but as a medium through which racial hierarchies were quietly challenged and alternative social arrangements were enacted.

In the early 1960s, national folk-music audiences were on the rise and the civil rights movement was gathering strength. Folk artists, particularly white singers like Seeger and groups like Peter, Paul and Mary, had already been aligning their songs with civil rights themes. At Newport, these performers brought their politics with them. From 1959 onward, festival programs and audiences demonstrated a commitment to equality. For example, the 1959 program included Pete Seeger, Brownie McGhee, and Sonny Terry alongside younger folk revivalists (Massimo, 2017, p. 23). By 1960 the festival had expanded to three nights and explicitly celebrated “diversity,” and the lineup even included international artists alongside American blues and folk musicians (Wein & Chinen, 2003, p. 317). White organizers and performers often insisted on integrated concerts as a matter of principle. As Wein noted, one could not claim to champion folk music’s democratic ideals while allowing racially segregated audiences (Massimo, 2017, p. 161). Indeed, African-American artists like bluesman John Lee Hooker were invited to perform in 1960 on equal footing with their white peers (Massimo, 2017, p. 52).

Moreover, from the very outset the folk festival was tied to social activism. Festival founder Wein had understood the political stakes of folk music. Around this time, many in the folk community were fighting McCarthy-era censorship. For instance, Seeger himself had been one of many to be blacklisted from television for seventeen years (Massimo, 2017, p. 24). Although Newport’s organizers never announced civil rights agendas in advertising, the tone was clear, the festival would not pander to segregation. As the civil rights movement heated up in the early 1960s, the festival quietly offered a space where integrated concerts were assumed. In interviews years later Wein recalled remarkable moments of informal desegregation backstage

and off-duty. At the 1964 festival, an all-white Sacred Harp singing group from Alabama and an all-Black Georgia Sea Islands choir happened to share a shuttle bus. At a moment when, only a few years earlier, the mere notion of a Black woman sitting beside white passengers on a bus had sparked violent reactions among many white Southerners, the absence of available seats led the white men to stand and give up theirs (Wein & Chinen, 2003, p. 328). Moments like this, which should be the bare minimum, exemplified how Newport's all-inclusive setting challenged segregationist attitudes in ways far from the cameras. As Wein put it, folk events at Newport were "an instruction on how things could be if people worked together" (Massimo, 2017, p. 102).

When the folk festival returned in July 1963, it did so at a moment when the civil rights movement was reaching a decisive turning point, and Newport quickly evolved into a public platform where that struggle could be heard, seen, and felt. Notably, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Freedom Singers, an African-American gospel quartet, performed at the festival (Massimo, 2017, p. 27). Pete Seeger and his wife, Toshi Seeger, had helped organize a nationwide campus tour for these singers, so by 1963, folk audiences were primed for their message (SNCC Digital Gateway, 2026). The Freedom Singers shared the stage with white artists like Seeger, Theodore Bikel, and others (Massimo, 2017, p. 51). They performed the anthem "We Shall Overcome," the Black church hymn that had become the soundtrack of civil rights marches (Figure 17). Even the audience, largely white youth, could not contain its excitement: one writer described the moment as a "deafening roar of applause." Wein later called that "We Shall Overcome" set "a moment never to be forgotten," an emotional highlight of the festival (Wein & Chinen, 2003, p. 322).

Figure 17

Performance of “We Shall Overcome” at Newport Folk Festival



Note. From Scherman, R. (1963, July). We shall overcome: Performers on stage, Newport Folk Festival: Left to right: Peter Yarrow, Mary Travers, Paul Stookey, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Bernice Reagon, Cordell Reagon, Charles Neblett, Rutha Harris, Pete Seeger, and Theodore Bikel [Photograph]. Rowland Scherman Collection (PH 084), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries <http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/muph084-b001-f030-sl002-i005>.

This on-stage performance was immediately followed (the next night) by an off-stage demonstration of solidarity. Around 600 Newport festival-goers, black and white, joined Joan Baez and civil rights activists in a march through Newport’s streets, stopping at Touro Park where SNCC leaders James Forman and Cordell Reagon spoke (Wein & Chinen, 2003, p. 321). The congregation rallied to support the upcoming March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (held the following year), reinforcing the link between Newport’s stage and the national movement. Thus, in one weekend the festival hosted both symbol and action: music inspiring

marches, and activists sharing songs with the crowd. Notably, one month after Newport, Dylan and Baez themselves sang “We Shall Overcome” at the actual March on Washington (Massimo, 2017, p. 27). In short, Newport 1963 crystallized the folk festival’s role, Massachusetts folk reporter Rick Massimo later noted that political themes were “overt from the start,” and that by 1964 civil rights was “in the forefront” of Newport’s culture.

Tensions, however, did, in fact, flare in 1967. That summer, civil rights organizations themselves became part of the festival milieu. In July the festival explicitly turned into a flashpoint. During that summer, SNCC and CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) established a purposeful presence on the grounds. They spoke with young folk fans and collected names, aiming to register Rhode Island voters and raise awareness (Wein & Chinen, 2003, p. 337). However, this atmosphere of activism existed alongside a noticeably strong police presence. The Newport Folk Festival, despite its countercultural image, was monitored by law enforcement. Police officers were stationed around the festival grounds, creating a sense of surveillance that contrasted with the event’s ideals of freedom and expression. Folk singer Phil Ochs captured this contradiction when he sarcastically referred to the event as the “Newport Fuzz Festival,” pointing out how pervasive the police presence had become (Massimo, 2017, p. 49).

For SNCC members, this environment quickly grew uncomfortable. The constant oversight by an all-white police force made many activists feel targeted. In response, they began chanting “Black power over blue power,” a slogan that challenged police authority (Wein & Chinen, 2003, p. 337). What began as peaceful outreach soon escalated into confrontation. Newport police intervened and forced SNCC members off Festival Field, shutting down their efforts and reinforcing the power imbalance between the activists and law enforcement. George Wein did not support the police’s actions. Recognizing the importance of the activists’ presence,

he took it upon himself to visit the local police station and request the names of the officers involved in the incident (Wein & Chinen, 2003, p. 338). His goal was to hold them accountable and to support a planned panel discussion where SNCC members would publicly identify and criticize those responsible for their removal. This panel was intended to give activists a platform within the festival itself, turning the incident into an opportunity for dialogue on civil rights. Yet, these plans were abruptly derailed. When the activists returned to Festival Field expecting to receive the officers' names, they were instead met by a large and imposing group of police officers already assembled. The situation appeared threatening and volatile. Some SNCC members reportedly feared for their safety, with one stating, "They're going to kill us." In response, they quickly left the area, effectively ending SNCC's formal involvement in the Newport Folk Festival (Wein & Chinen, 2003, p. 338).

This clash in 1967 laid bare the limits of Newport's liberal reputation. Although Rhode Island was comparatively progressive, local authorities were evidently unwilling to tolerate overt civil-rights agitation on festival grounds. A New England city contains white power structures, and in 1967 it still bristled at the direct activism of SNCC and CORE. In short, Newport, despite its image, reacted to the national surge of white backlash like many other communities. Indeed, 1967 was the notorious "Long Hot Summer" in America. There were over 150 urban riots nationwide as clashes between Black citizens and police boiled over (Upchurch, 2007, p. 35). The Newport incident, while on a much smaller scale, echoed that broader pattern.

Importantly, not everyone at Newport approved of the crackdown. Many younger festivalgoers, the college students and folk enthusiasts who had embraced civil-rights marches and songs just a few years earlier were reportedly sympathetic to SNCC's goals. As Wein himself later reflected, by the late 1960s the Folk Festival had become quite political, and taking

a strong stance on integration inevitably polarized people. Wein said the 1967 conflict “created some people against it, and more people for it. It was an exciting situation” (Massimo, 2017, p. 102). In other words, the public suppression of the activists at Newport did not crush support for civil rights; rather, it galvanized a new wave of commitment among attendees.

In hindsight, the 1967 Newport festival stands out as the point where folk music’s progressive culture ran headlong into institutional resistance. Earlier festivals had been marked by enthusiasm for integration, but in 1967 the organizers’ push for civil rights confronted a hard limit: local police forces that would not allow activist organizing even at a music event. This confrontation earned the festival considerable attention. Nonetheless, Newport remained a beacon for the movement’s cultural side. The fact that the audience largely sided with the activists helped reinforce folk music’s reputation as a catalyst for social change. Wein himself believed these struggles were worth it; as he said involvement in the Newport Folk Festival was “just another part of the continuing struggle” for civil rights (with 20,000 people singing in unity) (Wein & Chinen, 2003, p. 321).

3.5 Conclusion

The Rhode Island case reveals that integrated venues, in this case, more so festival areas, operated as spaces that both challenged segregationist policies and exposed the limits of racial progress in the United States. The Newport Jazz and Folk Festivals, by bringing Black performers and interracial audiences together in highly visible public settings, transformed integration from an abstract legal goal into a lived social experience. These festivals did more than reflect the civil rights movement, they actively contributed to it by helping circulate its ideas through popular culture, expanding its visibility beyond protests into mainstream public life. At

Newport, Black artists were able to use performance as a form of political expression, while integrated audiences experienced hearing their stories which gradually helped shift public attitudes.

The Newport Folk Festival in particular shows how music venues directly participated in civil rights politics through programming choices. By featuring the Freedom Singers, elevating songs like “We Shall Overcome,” and aligning with activist figures, the festival did not remain politically neutral; instead, it intentionally platformed civil rights messaging within its lineup and even became linked to on-the-ground activism such as the 1963 Newport march. This points to the fact that the festival functioned as more than entertainment, it became a cultural extension of the movement itself, where music, protest, and audience participation reinforced one another. In contrast, the Jazz Festival contributed more indirectly but still powerfully by amplifying protest-themed performances that challenged racial hierarchies in real time.

Taken together, all three Newport festivals show different ways cultural spaces intersected with civil rights struggles. The jazz and folk festivals brought integration into mainstream cultural life and gave civil rights ideas mass visibility. Meanwhile, the Newport Rebels Festival represented a more radical contribution, as it was the only indigenous organization out of them. It was artist-led and explicitly rejected institutional control, embodying the civil rights movement’s broader demand for autonomy. Across the board, these festivals contributed to the civil rights movement by spreading its message through performance and exposing the contradictions between American ideals and lived reality. They did not resolve segregation on their own, but they played a meaningful role in strengthening the movement’s reach.

Conclusion

When I first began this project, I thought I was writing about music. That I was tracing the history of concerts, clubs, and festivals that happened to intersect with the civil rights movement. But as I moved deeper into the archives, sat with booking cards, read old newspapers, and reconstructed the textures of these spaces, I gradually realized that what I was really studying was not music at all. I was studying power. I was studying space. I was studying the quiet, everyday mechanics through which democracy is either denied or practiced.

Throughout these chapters, I have argued that integrated concerts and music venues in the 1950s and 1960s functioned as fields of power in which racial hierarchy was not merely symbolically contested but materially renegotiated. What I found, again and again, is that these spaces did something law alone could not do. They made integration physical, embodied, and transformed it from an abstract promise into a lived experience. Before integration could be sustained in statutes, it had to be rehearsed in practice. Music venues became some of the first places where that rehearsal took place.

As I pieced together the histories of places like Café Society, the Apollo Theater, the Newport festivals, and the clubs along Springwood Avenue, I found that these were not simply stages where culture happened in the background of “real” politics. They were environments that actively shaped how people understood one another, how they behaved in public, and what forms of racial coexistence felt possible. In other words, they were political arenas, even if nobody called them that at the time.

The theoretical language that helped me make sense of this came from Aldon Morris’s concept of “indigenous organization.” Traditionally, that term refers to Black churches, colleges, and voluntary associations that nurtured leadership and collective action within Black

communities. As I worked through my research, I found myself extending that framework to cultural venues. These spaces, too, gathered people regularly, built trust, circulated information, and created shared norms. They cultivated habits of association that formal politics later depended on. They were infrastructures of the community. Yet what struck me most forcefully was the paradox at the heart of many of these venues. Most of them were not founded or owned by Black people. Café Society was created by a Jewish progressive, Barney Josephson. The Apollo Theater was run for decades by a Jewish man, as well, Frank Schiffman. The Newport festivals were organized by white promoters. Even in New Jersey, many of the most prominent clubs operated within ownership structures that were not fully controlled by the Black communities that sustained them. At first, this seemed to complicate the idea of “indigenous” institutions. How could a space be politically rooted in Black community life if it was not Black-owned?

As I spent time with the evidence, I came to understand that ownership and cultural authority are not always the same thing. Even when white proprietors held the deeds, Black performers and audiences often defined the meaning of the space. They shaped the sound, the standards, the atmosphere, and the expectations. They treated these venues as their own. In practice, they appropriated them from below, transforming commercial enterprises into communal institutions. The politics of these spaces did not flow only from management; they flowed from the stage and the crowd. This realization changed how I understood power. Power was not only located in formal control or property. It was also located in presence, in culture, in the authority to command attention and shape feelings. When a Black artist stepped onto a stage and an interracial audience fell silent to listen, something fundamental shifted. For that moment, the hierarchy that structured the outside world was suspended or at least unsettled. The person

whom society marginalized became the one everyone else oriented themselves toward. The stage inverted the social order.

What I ultimately found is that integration was a sensory and social process. Segregation had always worked through space. It told people where they could sit, enter, eat, and gather. Separate doors and balconies were not just logistics, but were lessons about who belonged. To dismantle that system required more than repealing laws. It required unlearning those embodied habits. Music venues forced that unlearning. When Black and white patrons entered through the same doors, they enacted a different social script. These were small gestures, almost mundane, yet they carried enormous political weight. People who had been told all their lives that interracial proximity was dangerous discovered that nothing catastrophic happened when they sat together. They listened to the same songs, laughed (or booed) at the same jokes, and applauded at the same time. Integration became ordinary.

That ordinariness, I now believe, was revolutionary. Courts could order desegregation, but they could not teach comfort. They could not manufacture familiarity. Only repeated social contact could do that. Concerts provided precisely this repetition. Night after night, week after week, they normalized shared space. At the same time, performers were doing more than modeling integration through their presence. They were communicating ideas. Through lyrics, stage commentary, and performance style, they narrated the realities of racial violence, labor exploitation, migration, and resistance. As I analyzed songs and testimonies, I became increasingly convinced that music functioned as a form of political education. But it was an education that worked through feeling rather than argument. A song could reach audiences who might never attend a meeting or read a pamphlet. It could bypass defensiveness and create empathy. It could make injustice hurt.

This emotional dimension is one of the most important things I take away from this research. Politics is often treated as rational debate, but what I saw in these venues was politics as affect. People changed not only because they were persuaded, but because they were moved. They felt grief, anger, pride, and solidarity together. Those shared feelings created bonds that abstract principles alone rarely produce. In that sense, concerts did not just spread information about civil rights; they cultivated the emotional conditions necessary for people to care.

However, one should also resist the romanticization of the events. These venues were not utopias. My work in the Apollo archives especially drove this point home. Reading Frank Schiffman's index cards, with their blunt judgments about drawing power, appearance, and commercial value, forced me to confront the contradictions embedded in these spaces. Even as the Apollo functioned as a beacon of Black cultural authority, it was also a business shaped by market logic and unequal ownership. Performers were celebrated and commodified at the same time. Gendered and racialized evaluations persisted. Representation did not automatically mean liberation.

What I ultimately came to understand is that cultural life was never a backdrop to the civil rights movement but one of its foundations. The victories of the 1960s grew out of years of quieter, embodied groundwork in which people were already learning how to share space in everyday settings. In these places, integration became tangible rather than theoretical, but just as importantly, these venues gave Black artists something even more radical than proximity: they gave them the microphone. In a nation structured to marginalize or silence Black voices, the stage became a site of authority where performers could narrate their own realities, testify to violence and inequality, and compel audiences not just to watch but to listen. These spaces turned art into political speech and performance into power, circulating civil rights ideas far

beyond formal protest and teaching empathy through shared feeling rather than abstract principle. What this history leaves me with, above all, is the realization that Black voice has never merely filled the air; it has reshaped the world around it, reminding us that power is not only held in institutions but carried in sound, in memory, and in the simple, enduring act of refusing to be unheard.

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