DEFINING SUCCESS: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE JAZZ INDUSTRY, 1935–1965

by

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ABSTRACT

The present study evaluates how female jazz musicians challenged patriarchal notions of "success" in mid-twentieth century America. "Success" historically has been defined from a white male viewpoint, based around economic position and masculinity. Although the genre of jazz stems from African American musical traditions born out of cultural hardship, it matured under the umbrella of the popular music industry, which was grounded in traditional—in other words, male-coded—perceptions of success. However, if we broaden our lens to encompass women's stories—particularly African American women's stories—we can see how jazz musicians like Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and Nina Simone used their powerful voices to advocate for racial and gender equality during a time of intense civil unrest. For them, their talent and their songs reached millions of listeners to speak their truths to a nation divided over race and women's rights. This thesis begins with a cursory overview of success as traditionally defined in the United States. The body of this project analyzes how this framework affected Black female artists' musical contributions as well as gender and racial identities from approximately 1935 to 1965. Their voices live on today and remind us of the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion—ideals we are still fighting for in the twenty-first century.

Defining Success: African American Women in the Jazz Industry, 1935–1965

Humans, even though we may not admit it, care about the perception of others. Why? Our ideas and inventions come from a combination of observing not only the world around us but also the people in it. What do people want? What product will sell to the consumer? How can we serve society best? The approval and participation of others keeps our economies and communities functioning. But "society" is a social construct formed by people who agree on opinions, purposes, and values: a person's beliefs, morals, identity, career, and even aptitude for success all stem from the influence of the people around them, whether that be family, friends, professors, coaches, etc.[1] Out of these, notions of "success" are particularly crucial to many Americans and their formation of identity. The United States operates, in part, on the concept of the "American Dream," a national mythos positing that anyone can find a fulfilling career and live a life that brings them happiness and success.[2]

However, what *is* success? In this thesis, I examine the ways in which Black women in jazz have constructed their own success stories, often in opposition to standard definitions of success as defined by a white, patriarchal society. First, I map the history of "success" in the United States and its evolving definitions over time, from approximately 1935 to 1965. Then, I posit how historical ideas of success have presented various obstacles for marginalized communities, particularly African American women. Next, I present three chronological case studies of female jazz musicians—Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and Nina Simone—who

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[1] Florian Coulmas, *Identity: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 89–98.

[2] Sarah Churchwell, "A Brief History of the American Dream," *The Catalyst,* Issue 21 (Winter 2021), https://www.bushcenter.org/catalyst/state-of-the-american-dream/churchwell-history-of-the-american-dream.html.

sought to define success on their own terms. Ultimately, I hope to show that through the examination of perseverance and triumph in these stories, a different appreciation for the paths they paved may be discovered.

What is "Success"?

How has success been traditionally defined in the U.S.? When the United States was established in 1776, the founding fathers who created the U.S. Preamble and Constitution consisted only of white men. The composition of this group is significant to note because they determined the core values and systems that would define the United States for centuries to come. An article analyzing the Preamble of the Constitution by the New York Historical Society proposes that the identity of the founding fathers—in other words, free white men—contributed to the U.S.'s national identity as grounded in two key concepts: that of capitalism and democracy. At the same time, however, the founding fathers validated and gave voice only to a select portion of the American population: "For the purposes of ratifying the Constitution in 1787, 'people' was defined as free, white men… who 'establish this Constitution,' meaning no women or people of color were given a voice in forming the new government."[3] In doing so, the founding fathers set the framework for the development of an "American" society as dictated by the ideas, dreams, and desires of white men. The First Amendment would open up the definition of who constituted "people" in American society, but not until almost a century later. The amendment stated that citizens be allowed to vote regardless of race, color, or employment status.[4] Although this was a

[3] "We the People," *New York Historical Society* (December 20, 2016), https://www.nyhistory.org/sites/default/files/newfiles/We-the-people-with-discussion-questions12_20_16.pdf.

[4] "We the People," *New York Historical Society.*

step in the right direction, women still would have no voice in politics for another half a century, kept from the privilege of being included in "we the people."

In 1999, the Pew Research Center conducted a study addressing what people considered the United States' greatest successes to be in the twentieth century. Opinions varied depending on the demographics of the respondents. For example, most U.S. citizens concurred that accomplishments of the twentieth century arose from democracy established in the Constitution, free elections, and entrepreneurship opportunities. However, white and Black participants diverged in their responses when asked about the country's failures. The Pew Research Center found that "Blacks place the treatment of minorities and intolerance at the top of their list of America's failures: 21% hold this view, compared to just 6% of whites."[5] Although Americans—regardless of race and gender—endorsed the notion of freedom, this historical study demonstrates that "freedom" means different things to different people and has not always led to ethical or inclusive systems, economically or politically. In the same way, obtaining "success" in the United States tends to align closely with social standing, merit, and financial stability of an individual. As seen in Figure 1 below, the income disparities amongst whites and non-whites, specifically African Americans, is substantial. These mid-twentieth century income brackets are significant because they reveal how minorities are oftentimes placed at a significant disadvantage when attempting to achieve "success" as defined by American society.[6]

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[5] "Successes of the 20th Century," Pew Research Center, U.S. Politics and Policy (July 3, 1999), https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/1999/07/03/successes-of-the-20th-century/.

[6] Reynolds Farley and Albert Hermalin, "The 1960s: A Decade of Progress for Blacks?," *Demography* 9, no. 3 (1972): 353–70.

TABLE 4.—Income of White and Negro Males, in 1969 Dollars, by Age, Region, Education, and Occupation, 1959 and 1969[a]

Selected characteristics	Income in 1959					Income in 1969				
	Median income			Measures of income equality		Median income			Measures of income equality	
	White men	Nonwhite men	Ratio of nonwhite to white	Delta[d]	Gini[d]	White men	Negro men	Ratio of Negro to white	Delta[d]	Gini[d]
AGE										
20 - 24	$3408	$2183	64	23	29	$3822	$3466	91	8	7
25 - 34	6349	3667	58	38	49	8311	5558	67	34	44
35 - 44	7156	4050	57	41	53	9399	5810	62	36	49
45 - 54	6708	3543	53	39	51	9001	5117	57	40	52
55 - 64	5797	2833	49	35	46	7576	4263	56	34	41
65+	2307	1213	53	26	34	2941	1491	51	32	42
Total[b]	5464	2919	53	30	38	6765	3935	58	26	32
REGION[c] (for men 14 and over)										
Northeast	5824	4190	72	27	30	7055	5339	76	19	22
North Central	5701	4369	77	21	23	7133	5907	83	20	17
South	4440	2070	47	35	42	5841	3133	54	32	37
West	6013	4277	71	24	26	7255	5312	73	19	20
EDUCATION (for men 25 and over)										
Elementary < 8	3422	2300	67	18	24	3613	2973	82	14	16
8	5031	3667	73	20	24	5460	4293	79	17	18
High school 1-3	6313	4120	65	31	41	7309	5222	71	25	31
4	6972	4713	68	34	43	8631	6144	71	30	39
College 1-3	7682	5089	66	33	44	9575	7051	74	30	35
4	9791	6150	63	35	43	12437	8567	69	30	35
OCCUPATION (for year-round full-time workers only)										
Professionals	8952	5254	59	n.a.		11860	8606	73	n.a.	
Managers	8842	4725	53			11157	6598	59		
Clerical	5602	5380	96			8032	7263	90		
Craftsmen	6660	4498	68			8905	6488	73		
Operatives	6262	4485	72			7525	5824	77		
Service	5401	3515	65			6671	4865	73		
Laborers	5448	3893	71			6278	5328	85		

Figure 1

"Successes of the 20th Century," Pew Research Center, U.S. Politics and Policy (July 3, 1999), https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/1999/07/03/successes-of-the-20th-century/.

In terms of gender, a study from the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in the U.S. found that gender played a part in a discrepancy among those who held jobs during the mid-twentieth century. White men held more "white collar" jobs that paid higher wages, including doctors, executives, lawyers, and politicians. Women, on the other hand, either held no job at all or held subordinate positions like secretaries, clerks, or primary schoolteachers. In general, high achievement jobs in the mid-twentieth century were often held by white men in the

twentieth century, and these positions were considered more admirable, monetarily and socially.[7] The lack of diversity in white collar jobs highlights the original formation and perception of "success" in the United States and how job type, income, and economic prosperity are valued. The study continued to examine gender equality from 1970 to 2018. The researchers found that the "percentage of women (age 25 to 54) who are employed rose continuously until 2000 when it reached its highest point to date of 75%; it was slightly lower at 73% in 2018."[8] Through comparing earned degrees and vocations held by men and women, the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences noted huge strides being made toward gender equality in the United States since 1970. However, it is important to note the disparities between who held the jobs considered highly "successful," and how often gender played a large part in who held these positions.

The advancement of technology and media has changed how we define "success" today. As businesswoman and lifestyle blogger Rebecca Galeskas says, "Pop culture would have us believe that we have not arrived until we travel and take pictures of ourselves for a living… really, it's about becoming the person everyone else wants you to be."[9] Whereas traditional notions of success aligned with ideas of social status and finances, today success is even more closely connected to one's appearance, socially and occupationally, as mediated through the lens of social media, one's internet "presence," and other such technological advancements. Building

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[7] Paula England, Andrew Levine, and Emma Mishel, "Progress Toward Gender Equality in the United States has Slowed or Stalled," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences,* 117, no. 13 (March 31, 2020): 6990-6997.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Rebecca Galeskas, "Success in Today's Pop Culture," *Honestly Rebecca* (March 26, 2019), http://honestlyrebecca.galeskas.com/blog/success-in-todays-pop-culture/.

on historical movements that drew awareness to the rampant inequalities in American society—Women's Rights, Black Power, Gay Rights movement etc.—we have increasingly become more aware of inequalities in pay, equal treatment, and opportunities for women, people of color, and the LGBTQ community. Most recently, women and minorities have used social media platforms to advocate for themselves and each other via Black Lives Matter, Women Employed, and, most recently, Stop Asian Hate.[10]

The push for equal opportunity and treatment, specifically in the Black Lives Matter movement that began to sweep the country in 2020 and the Stop Asian Hate movement of 2021, has led to a call by United States citizens across current events and social media platforms for recognition of these minorities and their stories. Undoing the systemic issues present since the founding of the United States has been difficult, however, particularly the systems that have allowed white men accessibility to the ladders of success. Disparate treatment based on gender and racial biases—embedded into the very fabric of American cultural identity and American political and economic systems—still present layered obstacles for many seeking success and occupational prosperity in the United States.[11]

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[10] Black Lives Matter, https://blacklivesmatter.com/; Women Employed, https://womenemployed.org/; and Stop Asian Hate, https://stopasianhate.carrd.com.

[11] *Women Employed*, "The Intersection of Gender and Racial Equity: Why American Feminism Should Care," (August 6, 2020), https://womenemployed.medium.com/the-intersection-of-gender-and-racial-equity-why-american-feminism-should-care-11af5d68164b.

The Jazz Industry and Success

The American music industry is a microcosm of the society in which it developed. As such, it mirrors the beliefs and practices outlined in the previous section on historical notions of success. Therefore, the music industry situates itself within ideals of mainstream capitalism proselytized by the white patriarchy. Despite this, many artists from underrepresented communities have used their musical talent to redefine what it means to be successful, even when success is prescribed by the white men running the United States' industries and government. In particular, many jazz musicians orchestrated their careers to advocate for a new type of success seen through a more nuanced lens.

African Americans developed the genre of jazz, yet some of the highest paid and recognized jazz musicians are white.[12] What is more, many of the premiere jazz musicians have been men. Black women who pursued careers in jazz thus had to overcome not only racial obstacles but also gender biases. As American Studies scholar John Baskerville writes, "The jazz world, and the music industry in general, has been somewhat closed to female artists… because of their perceived minor roles [often solely voice or piano in the context of a big band], the available literature on female jazz artists is limited."[13] For one, women jazz musicians, Baskerville notes, had to contend with society's perceptions of appropriate feminine conduct, which did not always align with the lifestyle of a working musician. Of particular concern was the necessity of constant traveling and touring: "Sleeping in hotels with several men, and the

[12] Zola Philipp, "The Social Effects of Jazz," *The York Review* (November 2016), https://www.york.cuny.edu/writing-program/the-york-scholar-1/volume-6.1-fall-2009/the-social-effects-of-jazz

[13] John Douglas Baskerville, "The Impact of Modern Black Nationalist Ideology and Cultural Revitalization on American Jazz Music of the 1960s and 1970s" (PhD Diss., University of Iowa, 1997).

potential for conflicts arising from romances… female jazz musicians sometimes were perceived as being 'loose,'" which, Baskerville emphasizes, was "a double standard men did not have to be concerned with."[14] In order to be successful, then, women jazz musicians had to negotiate society's expectations for female behavior when pursuing musical success—regardless of the inequal treatment, reduced wages, and personal sacrifices demanded of them.

Arguably, the stakes were even higher for Black women than white women pursuing a career in music. In 1973, Bettie Bullen Walker proposed in the *Chicago Defender* that Black women had to carry their family both in the home and through a job because Black men were paid less than white men. What is more, Walker proposed that "There will be black men who feel threatened by the working or successful female and associate ideas of dominance and aggression with such extraneous factors."[15] In this sense, the women who wanted to pursue something more than a life of domesticity—say, a career in jazz—were often seen as presumptuous or even controlling. Walker's article highlights what scholar Brené Brown calls a "quiet concern." Brown proposed that women tend to settle into domestic life and give up certain aspirations because they are expected to behave a certain way and live a specific lifestyle: "It's not the cruel criticism from the people who hate us that shakes us from our knowing. It's the quiet concern of those who love us."[16] Both Walker and Brown elucidate the "hidden" (or sometimes not so hidden) societal barriers that women, both past and present, encounter when

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[14] Ibid., 25.

[15] Bettie Bullen Walker, "Bettie Bullen Walker's Inside View: Black Females and Fem Lib.," *Chicago Defender* , April 24, 1973.

[16] Brené Brown, "Glennon Doyle and Brené on Untamed," *Unlocking Us*, podcast by Brené Brown, Spotify, March 24, 2020, 00:44:30.

pursuing their dreams. This domestic projection placed upon women inhibits progress in specific fields, as in the case of this thesis, those who aspired to a career in jazz. Finding true satisfaction thus can be a strenuous process for female musicians, demonstrating how much determination and creativity it took to truly achieve success in the industry.

So what were female jazz musicians up against in their pursuit of success in the twentieth century? Perhaps notions of "success" for women in jazz may have included being able to perform in public, landing paying gigs, cutting records, performing on radio, and achieving a high level of publicity and (inter)national recognition. But various "quite concerns" dogged their dreams. For example, in an unsigned "letter to the editor" appearing in *Down Beat Magazine* in 1938, the author outlined their perceptions of female musicianship in jazz. To them, women were inferior in every way to men: "You can forgive them for lacking guts in their playing but even women should be able to play with feeling and expression and *they never do*."[17]The author goes on to describe women as "emotionally unstable" and inconsistent musicians, insinuating that women's concern with beauty and looks trump all else.[18] Such opinions highlight the very social factors and ingrained sexism that kept women in a subordinate and devalued position for much of the twentieth century. Indeed, most of the female artists who received recognition for their musical talents were "girl singers," women believed to possess a "lesser" musical skill than the men wielding their horns in the jazz band. One might simply list some of the names of well-known jazz musicians to see how gender (and racial) disparities play out in jazz history: Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, Paul Whiteman, Miles Davis, Count

[17] "Why Women Musicians are Inferior," *Down Beat*, February 1938, 4.

[18] Ibid.

Basie, Frank Sinatra etc. All of these were male bandleaders and/or businessman in the jazz industry. Only a few women made it "big" as singers, or simply sang with big bands such as Count Basie or Artie Shaw's Orchestras.

If we move away from patriarchal definitions of "success," however, we can better understand how female artists like Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and Nina Simone challenged the status quo. They underwent compromise and sacrifice in pursuing their dreams but continued to use their voices to advocate for their music, women, desegregation, and civil rights, among others. Their narratives manifest how intersectionality, personal notions of success, and belief in their own voices are crucial to reframing and restructuring a society free from inequality, both musical and otherwise.

Billie Holiday: "Lady Day"

The year is 1944. Big bands and swing music captivate audiences, while artists such as Glenn Miller, the Andrews Sisters, and Frank Sinatra vie for the American spotlight. Meanwhile, a younger generation of male jazz artists explore new ways to play and perform jazz, ultimately creating bebop. Now, imagine this exact scene from the viewpoint of a Black woman in the jazz industry. She hopes America will listen to her, struggling to present an image that meets the expectations for female entertainers constructed by upper-middle class white families.[19] Famous white artists such as Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, and Frank Sinatra developed their respective stylistic flair from jazz music, music originally performed by Black jazzers. This caused Black

[19] Jennifer Keohane, "Other Peoples' Kitchens": Invisible Labor and Militant Voice during the Early Cold War, in *Women at Work: Rhetorics of Gender and Labor*, edited by David Gold and Jessica Enoch (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), 209–23.

artists like Billie Holiday to ask, "Where is the recognition for their [the Black musicians'] influences?"[20] Holiday knew that she could not easily climb the ranks of the music industry as a Black woman living in the 1940s and 1950s. Yet her determination enabled her to succeed in an industry that did not treat her kindly. With no formal musical training, Holiday found her passion in jazz by observing blues and jazz artists perform in Harlem clubs. She also built connections with some of the greatest names in the business like John Hammond, Benny Goodman, and Louis Armstrong.[21] Holiday's road to success was not an easy one, however, and her experience as a Black woman in Jim Crow America took a heavy toll on her physically, mentally, and emotionally. Holiday often turned to alcohol and drugs, marijuana specifically, and sex to cope with her circumstances.[22] Although many jazz musicians fell into a similarly fast-paced lifestyle, women like Holiday were among the most harshly scrutinized by those around her, from her audiences to her close companions. But if we look beneath the veneer of the tales of her "fast living," Holiday's voice tells of the deep pain and truth of what it meant to be both Black and a woman in mid-century America. She made this pain both audible and visible, leaving behind a legacy grounded in a fight to be heard. This pain, particularly regarding Holiday's advocacy for civil rights, can be heard in such songs as "God Bless the Child" and "Strange Fruit."

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[20] Billie Holiday in *Billie*, directed by James Erskine (Greenwich Entertainment, 2020), Hulu.

[21] "Billie Holiday," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, last modified March 2, 2021, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Billie-Holiday.

[22] *Billie.*

Holiday admired jazz from an early age. Originally from Baltimore, Maryland, she was born Eleonora Fagan to an unwed teenaged mom on 7 April 1915.[23] After growing up in an unstable home, Holiday set her sights on New York City, where her mother had relocated. She worked in Harlem, selling her body at times just to get by until she found work singing at the Hot-Cha Club. She was only fourteen. It was during this time that Holiday began to refer to herself as "Billie," allegedly in reference to the movie star Billie Dove.[24] Describing her introduction to jazz music, she said, "I guess I'm not the only one who heard their first good jazz in a whorehouse. But I never tried to make anything of it. If I'd heard Louis [Armstrong] and Bessie [Smith] at a Girl Scout jamboree, I'd have loved it just the same."[25] Holiday was enamored with Armstrong's musicality, saying, "I always wanted to sing like Louis Armstrong played. I always wanted to sing like an instrument."[26] Building on this musical inspiration, Holiday started building her reputation as a jazz singer by performing in various Harlem clubs. Harlem was the place to listen to jazz in the 1920s, and one could make a decent living from working in the entertainment scene and performing for the white patrons of the Roaring Twenties who wanted to experience something new and exciting. As Detroit Red, one of the dancers who worked with Holiday, said, "I worked with Billie at the 'Cha… White people were coming up in

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[23] "Billie Holiday Biography," *Biography.*com, last modified February 26, 2021, https://www.biography.com/musician/billie-holiday.

[24] "Billie Holiday Biography."

[25] Billie Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues*, (New York City, Penguin Books), 10.

[26] Billie Holiday in *Billie*.

parties… that's where you got all your big money from… they wanted to see a little spice after dark, so they would come here."[27]

Entertainer and businessman, Pigmeat Markham, discovered Holiday at the Hot-Cha and helped promote her career. Her first appearance on a stage performing was at the Apollo Theater. Markham reminisced, saying, "She stood on the Apollo stage and she sang and sang, and she was terrific."[28] Not only did Holiday use her voice as a means of spreading a particular message, but the unique vocal timbre and spoken style of her voice captivated audiences from the get-go. After this performance at the Apollo, Holiday's musical career took off, and she gained national attention. John Hammond, American producer, recorder, and music promoter helped Holiday establish herself in the jazz scene and mainstream media. He first heard her sing in Harlem and later connected her with artists like Benny Goodman and Louis Armstrong.[29] Hammond claimed that "I was the first white guy that ever heard Billie… I heard an improvising horn player, that is what she sounded like, and I knew these two [Holiday and Louis Armstrong] would make incredible music together."[30] Besides connecting her to famous jazz musicians, Hammond helped Holiday land a contract with the American Record Company.[31] Holiday's business relationship with Hammond came at a cost, however. Both journalist Linda Kueh and drummer Jo Jones claimed that Hammond fired Holiday because "he wanted her to be a submissive girl

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[27] Detroit Red in *Billie*.

[28] Pigmeat Markham in *Billie*.

[29] "Billie Holiday Biography."

[30] Billie Holiday in *Billie*.

[31] *Billie*.

singer and sing the blues, and project a certain image," which she did not comply with.[32] Despite the fame and financial rewards that could come from building a successful career in music, Black jazz musicians—especially women—lived and performed in a world that accepted them so long as their behavior adhered to the expectations of white America.

Following the cessation of World War II, for example, American cultural norms and social expectations—particularly for women—shifted. The men fighting abroad returned home, expecting American life to return to "normal." The women who had filled in the labor gaps during the war now were expected to give up their jobs to take up the mantle of the domestic front, embodying the wives and mothers happily "keeping house" for their husbands and children.[33]

As a jazz musician, Holiday did not conform to social norms or expectations. Her job required her to travel constantly, work late into the night, and keep up with the rigors of performing day in and day out. To unwind, Holiday returned to the coping mechanisms she had embraced while working as a teenage prostitute, finding release through drugs, alcohol, and sex.[34] Holiday did not have a family or a traditional setting in which she could "keep house," and as a mid-twentieth century female celebrity, she lived on the fast-track, often succumbing to the abuse of the men she dated. Sadly, the concept of roughness toward women was not uncommon at this time. One pimp who knew Holiday, Skinny Davenport, expanded on the normalization of

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[32] Jo Jones in *Billie*.

[33] "Postwar Gender Roles and Women in American Politics," History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives, Office of the Historian, Women in Congress, 1917–2006, (2007), https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/WIC/Historical-Essays/Changing-Guard/Identity/.

[34] *Billie*.

society's ill treatment of women, saying "That's what they liked baby, you had to treat them rough… they'd be so proud of a black eye, saying 'look what my man done to me.'"[35] Davenport's comment only marginally highlights the potential lifestyle many Black women endured.

To some, Holiday was seen to be pursuing her own self-destruction. Her lifestyle drew judgement those within and beyond the jazz scene, especially men, about how a woman "should" behave.[36] Holiday's relationships with men, on the one hand, allowed her to do what she loved: singing and performing. Journalist Linda Lipnack Keuhl elaborated, "Whether the men who Billie went with treated her well or not, she always chose them for a reason. They played for her, they protected her, and… in the man's world at the nightclub, they allowed her to do the one thing that mattered… which was to sing."[37] The United States' patriarchal society allowed little room for women to thrive professionally: men did not need protection or approval in order to succeed. On the other hand, Holiday's substance abuse could have been her way of finding freedom in a reality that often limited her choices. As comedian James "Stump" Cross said about Holiday's drug use, "She could consume more stimulants than any ten men, and she could still perform… she was an extremist."[38] Friend and singer, Tony Bennett, similarly described Holiday in this way: "She really dug being high… but I never knew someone with such a capacity."[39] Bennett's query—"I wanna know why all girl singers crack up. They all crack up. When they hit

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[35] Skinny Davenport in *Billie*.

[36] *Billie*.

[37] Linda Lipnack Keuhl in *Billie*.

[38] James Cross in *Billie*.

[39] Tony Bennett in *Billie*.

the top something tragic happens. I want to know what causes that."—however, speaks to the criticism that Holiday and women like her encountered. For her part, Holiday believed that her choices were hers to make, "I never hurt nobody but myself and that's nobody's business but my own."[40]

Beyond the jazz industry's patriarchal framework, segregation provided additional roadblocks for Holiday. For example, when Benny Goodman and Holiday first worked together in the 1930s, Goodman allegedly was afraid to record with Holiday because of her race.[41] Holiday, too, ended her time working with Artie Shaw and his orchestra due to an increasing number of objections raised by audiences in response to a Black woman singing with an all-white band.[42] In these settings, Holiday endured numerous indignities because of the color of her skin. Even her work with Count Basie's orchestra posed similar difficulties to her work with Goodman and Shaw because she experienced a lot of difficulty with management and producing behind the scenes of Basie's performances.[43] Perhaps responding, at least in part, to her working conditions and personal experiences, Holiday chose to speak out against racism and racial oppression, using songs like "Strange Fruit" to confront the horrors of Jim Crow.

"Strange Fruit" highlights the painful reality of African American suffering in the early twentieth century, particularly the common practice of lynching in the South. Abel Meeropol, a Jewish communist educator and civil rights activist, wrote the poem "Strange Fruit" after seeing a photo of the lynching of Black men from Indiana in 1930. Lyrics like "strange fruit hanging

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[40] Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues,* 90.

[41] Benny Goodman in *Billie*.

[42] "Billie Holiday Biography."

[43] *Billie*.

from the poplar trees," clearly reference the bodies of murdered victims hanging from trees. Meeropol passed his composition along to Holiday one evening at a nightclub, and she became enamored with it. The lyrics struck deep with her and the racism in the United States she had seen and undergone.[44] She would perform the song until she passed.

The public reception of "Strange Fruit" varied. Those in favor of the song appreciated how it exposed discrimination and hatred toward Blacks. What is more, the song proposed that change was needed, and it fueled Black voices fighting for civil rights.[45] But to those in opposition to the song, it needed to be silenced. For example, the lyrics bolstered the hatred of Harry Anslinger, a "known racist" and government official in the Bureau of Narcotics. He "believed that drugs caused Black people to overstep their boundaries in American society and that Black jazz singers [using drugs] created the devil's music."[46] The 2021 film, *Billie vs. The United States*, vividly depicts the struggle Holiday underwent trying to perform "Strange Fruit" and the opposition she encountered from Anslinger. According to the film, Anslinger oversaw Holiday's arrest for heroin possession, determined to stop her from singing the song about the murder of Blacks in the South. Despite serving time in jail, Holiday fought to perform "Strange Fruit" after her release and up through her committal to the hospital for heart and lung complications in 1959.[47] Anslinger, however, continued his attempt to stop Holiday's voice.

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[44] "Billie Holiday Biography."

[45] *Billie vs .The United States,* directed and produced by Lee Daniels, 2021, Hulu.

[46] Eudie Pak, "The Tragic Story behind Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit,' " *Biography.com*, last modified August 25, 2020, https://www.biography.com/news/billie-holiday-strange-fruit.

[47] *Billie vs. the United States*.

Journalist Eudie Pak elucidated that "Anslinger had his men go to the hospital and handcuff her to her bed… [they] forbid doctors to offer her further treatment. She died within days."[48]

The powerful and tragic message Holiday communicated through "Strange Fruit" clearly made history. This was a bold move for a Black woman in the entertainment business, which catered to mainstream (white) Americans who chiefly delighted in love songs or humorous tunes. Musician Charles Mingus said it best, saying that Holiday "…was fighting equality before Martin Luther King… with the songs she chose to sing… exposing discrimination and putting it on stage."[49] Here, one could speculate on the significant power and success that Lady Day found in her voice.

For Holiday, the music she produced and the audiences she touched were paramount to her satisfaction as an artist. In her autobiography, Holiday described how music served as a crucial mode of communication, "If you find a tune and it's got something to do with you, you don't have to evolve anything. You just feel it, and when you sing it other people can feel something too."[50] Besides drawing attention to racial injustice, she often used her songs to present the experience of being a woman in mid-century America. For example, in "You Let Me Down," 1935, the lyrics, by Al Dubin, tell the tale of a woman falling for a lover and experiencing betrayal from someone she trusted. Holiday's performance imbues a rather typical broken-hearted song with undeniable rawness and emotion. Feminist writer Angela Davis said that Holiday "…sounds as though she is protesting something more than the fickleness of an individual lover, thus transforming the song into an indictment... there are hints to the

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[48] Eudie Pak, "The Tragic Story behind Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit.'"

[49] Charles Mingus in *Billie*.

[50] Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues,* 43.

recognition and coded indictment stemming from the fact that white racist society 'let us down.'"[51] As Holiday herself said in her autobiography, "You Let Me Down" offered a broader social commentary. The United States proffered a suffocating environment where Holiday often had to undergo daily judgement and roadblocks pursuing her music and career choice. The tune could describe not just the ill deeds of a feckless lover, but those of an entire country, one that disappointed and "let her down."

Despite living in a time and place that continuously "let her down," Holiday left an indelible mark on the world of jazz. Music was an outlet for her in many ways, a medium through which she could negotiate her personal life, communicate with audiences, and attempt to change the world for the better. Although many critics and historians have painted Holiday as a victim of men and her own worst enemy, she owned her voice and her choices. She felt every song and gave each note she sang its own attitude.[52] In her unfinished manuscript about Holiday, Linda Kuehl gave a powerful description of what success may have looked like for the artist, saying, "Music didn't bring Billie to Harlem, but it was her voice that would allow her to escape."[53]

Consider this: Billie Holiday's voice *was* her success, The voice that jazz fans still listen to today. Holiday once said: "Everyone's got to be different. You can't copy anybody and end up with anything. If you copy, it means you're working without any real feeling… No two people

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[51] Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday,* (New York City: Vintage, 2011), 198.

[52] "Billie Holiday Biography."

[53] Linda Lipnack Kuehl in *Billie*.

on earth are alike, and it's got to be that way in music, or it isn't music."[54] Lady Day drew a direct connection between music and the very humanity of the world. Despite the seeming chaos of the world she inhabited, Holiday left a powerful message of perseverance behind for women and jazz artists to come. As she once sang in assumed reference to those she would touch in the future, "I'll be seeing you/In all the familiar places."[55]

Ella Fitzgerald: "The First Lady of Song"

By means of determination, natural talent, and an enduring spirit, Ella Fitzgerald achieved recognition as an icon for female artists and Black women during her lifetime. Today, we know her as the admired, loved, and popular artist she was. But beneath the glitz and glamor Fitzgerald's name and voice evoke still today, her story reveals the complex sociopolitical environment in which she lived and worked as an artist. Fitzgerald fought against social norms devaluing her identity as a Black woman in Jim Crow America to secure a respected place in the music industry. Fitzgerald's musical background was grounded in jazz, but she eventually mastered a multitude of genres spanning bebop to ballads. Fitzgerald's legacy lives on in many of today's artists like Adele, Lady Gaga, and Lana Del Rey, all who have cited the "First Lady of Song" as a major source of inspiration, not only with regard to their music but also to their public influence in general.[56] The struggle and realities of life, family, and a career in the music

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[54] Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues*, 53.

[55] Irving Kahal and Sammy Fain, "I'll Be Seeing You," 1938.

[56] "6 Modern Artists We Wouldn't Have without Ella Fitzgerald," *BBC*, 2017, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/5mmbCWZ0L88hpHCVPHwP4Gl/6-modern-artists-we-wouldnt-have-without-ella-fitzgerald.

industry made obtaining and maintaining success for Fitzgerald difficult at times, however. Attempting success as a woman in the male-dominated workplace brought many struggles, especially when success had for so long been defined against a male standard. But how did Fitzgerald herself view success? Against the odds, Fitzgerald confronted racial and gender biases to find success in her work and musical talent. Although she faced much adversity personally and professionally, Fitzgerald left one of the greatest lasting musical impressions of all time, a form of success transcending the twentieth century.

Fitzgerald was born in Harlem, New York in 1917 at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, the artistic and musical exposition of African Americans in Harlem. After losing her mother at age thirteen, Fitzgerald struggled to find her place in the world; she moved in with her aunt instead of her somewhat neglectful stepfather. She was later admitted to a state reformatory for girls in New York after running away from home. Singer Norma Miller described Fitzgerald's traumatic experience at the reformatory in a 2020 documentary, *Just One of Those Things*, saying that it stemmed from "the combination of reformed school cruelties and the particular abuses and insults handed out to young Black girls."[57] One report from the school described Fitzgerald as someone who was "ungovernable, will not obey commands, and [is] a judged delinquent."[58] Fitzgerald eventually ran away from the school and returned to Harlem, where she toiled tirelessly to make a name for herself as a dancer and performer. One of her most significant performances took place at the Apollo Theater, where her name happened to be picked for a chance to perform during Amateur Night. Fitzgerald originally planned to dance but

[57] *Just One of Those Things*, directed by Leslie Woodhead (Eagle Rock Film Productions, 2019), Amazon Prime Video.

[58] *Just One of Those Things*.

decided to sing after seeing her competition. In this performance, others realized her potential as a vocalist, and she went on to receive her big start with bandleader Chick Webb in 1935.[59] Webb, a respected drummer and leader in the jazz community, rejected Fitzgerald at first because of her "untraditional" look and image. One newspaper, for example, described her as "a big light-colored gal."[60] Soon, though, Webb came to love Fitzgerald and gave her career the jumpstart it needed. Fitzgerald even took over Webb's band when he passed away in 1939.

The male gaze proved strong within and without the music industry. When Fitzgerald began singing in the 1930s, women were pressured to adhere to a glamorous, feminine ideal consisting of flawless, creamy complexions; soft, voluminous curls; and slender yet curvy bodies. Glamor and attractive looks oftentimes equated to one's value as an entertainer if one was a woman. Yet Black artists were up against something their white colleagues were not. Their merit was assessed according to beauty standards grounded in whiteness. Light skin and other "white" features became markers of beauty for Black women. Beauty standards for Black women crystallized in the 1950s and became arguably more taxing than those for white women due to their infeasibility.

Moreover, women typically were pressured not to pursue a career or passion that would take them away from having a family.[61] And show business was a time-consuming enterprise. Advertising media provides insight into the social pressures affecting the female psyche. Between the 1930s and 1950s, for example, advertisements often showed women happily cooking in the kitchen or cleaning the home, in dresses cinched at the waist and with a full face

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[59] Ella Fitzgerald, "Ella Fitzgerald Biography," Universal Music Enterprises, April 7, 2017.

[60] Susan Stamberg, "Ella Fitzgerald: America's First Lady Of Song," *NPR*, March 29, 2010.

[61] *Just One of Those Things*.

of makeup.[62] One 1950s advertisement for a feminine product from Demure even claimed that their product would work so well, "you know you're the woman your husband wants you to be. Feminine… in every sense of the word."[63] Clearly, women were primarily meant to serve as objects of desire for men, both at home and in the entertainment industry.

1950s gender norms affected white women and Black women in different ways, however. After World War II ended and the soldiers returned home, Black men still found themselves earning much less than white men. This meant that Black women had to take on more work to make up for income disparities. Here, intersectionality affected the way Black families lived in comparison to whites. As feminist scholar Jennifer Keohane points out, social status, race, gender, and American politics produced "interlocking forms of oppression."[64] Although all women were expected to take care of their husband and children and maintain a perfect home, Black women were also asked to help provide for their families financially as well. These social and economic pressures extended to the music industry. On the one hand, women musicians, more so than their male counterparts, had to fight to be recognized and rewarded equitably for their talents. On the other hand, women musicians had to navigate additional social expectations for maintaining "appropriate" womanly behavior and glamourous looks.

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[62] "Beauty Ideal Over the Decades Part 8: The 50's," *Idealist Style*, March 2014, https://www.idealiststyle.com/blog/beauty-ideal-over-the-decades-part-8-the-50s#:~:text=A%20typical%2050's%20silhouette%20had,a%20great%20deal%20of%20skin.

[63] "Beauty Ideal Over the Decades Part 8: The '50s."

[64] Jennifer Keohane, "'Other Peoples' Kitchens: Invisible Labor and Militant Voice During the Cold War," in *Women at Work: Rhetorics of Gender and Labor*, edited by David Gold and Jessica Enoch (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), 209–23.

Fitzgerald, however, did not conform to the expectations for Black female artists.[65] Instead of trying to accentuate sex appeal, she crafted an identity grounded in her musical ability. In this way, Fitzgerald challenged standard expectations for success in the entertainment industry. Success, to Fitzgerald, came down to her artistry, not her appearance. She carefully built her reputation as a dynamic and skilled female jazz singer, attracting innumerable audiences mesmerized by her vocal talent for decades to come.[66] For example, she successfully used extreme determination as a Black female bandleader to build rapport with the Chick Webb Orchestra. British singer Jamie Callum said that Fitzgerald "kept up with the boys, and most of the time, she outplayed them."[67] She also made connections with other influential women of the time. One of Fitzgerald's biggest fans was Marilyn Monroe, who came to see many of her shows and demanded that the club be opened to all audiences, regardless of race.[68] Musicians and audiences alike genuinely admired Fitzgerald for her artistry and the full commitment she poured into her performances. Singer Patti Austin, for example, talked about Fitzgerald's integrity and resolve while she was on the road, especially when it came to substances and parties: "Ella never wanted to get high. She didn't do drugs. She'd go all the way to the back of the bus, put her coat over her head, and create her own filtration system… so that's how she took care of herself."[69] Fitzgerald was determined to prolong doing what she loved by maintaining a strong moral compass and healthy voice. Austin was in awe of her sincerity and humility.

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[65] *Just One of Those Things*.

[66] Lena Horne quoted in *Just One of Those Things*.

[67] Jamie Callum quoted in *Just One of Those Things*.

[68] Lena Horne quoted in *Just One of Those Things*.

[69] Patti Austin quoted in *Just One of Those Things*.

Despite her commitment to her voice and physical wellbeing, Fitzgerald still received incessant comments about her body and her looks throughout her career, resulting in a lifetime struggle with body image. Some negative judgement derived from the amount that Fitzgerald sweated when she performed. Audiences viewed—and still view—perspiration as particularly unattractive for women; women, unlike men, are not allowed to show the efforts of their labor. Fitzgerald, however, put every ounce of herself into her singing. She could expand upon a melody with natural talent and careful listening for ten minutes or more at a time, leaning into the music not only creatively but physically as well. Fitzgerald performed to express emotion and musicality, not to show audiences what they had been socialized to see: pretty faces and sexy bodies. Those who truly admired her for her musical leadership and endurance, however, realized her innate talent and hard work.

Still, Fitzgerald had to navigate both audience expectations for musical performance and her passion for jazz at a time of extreme social unrest. Jazz, for example, meant different things to different audiences in the 1930s. With its roots in the days of early American slavery, jazz music and dancing represented "an escape from life shaped by poverty and racism" to the Harlem community.[70] In order to manifest a musical melody that held sweet but dissonant harmonies, artists created jazz through a combination of blues harmonies and use of improvisation. To white audiences, however, jazz signified a rift in "normal" music-making at the time. Commentaries on jazz in the mid-twentieth century included uncertainty and even outright hatred, with white critics calling jazz, for example, "dangerous, unhealthy… a form of bayou voodoo."[71] Yet some, like twentieth-century American music critic, Henry T. Fink, called

[70] *Just One of Those Things*.

[71] Henry T. Fink, "Jazz—Lowbrow and Highbrow," *Etude* (August 1924): 141.

out these early criticisms of jazz as "pieces of racist propaganda" in *Etude* magazine.[72] Fink continued, "From the 1910s until 1960 and beyond, in more articles than can be treated here, writers use the topic of jazz music in order to express a dislike of African Americans."[73] In other words, criticisms of jazz highlighted white Americans' antipathy toward Black people and culture, rather than a dislike for jazz music itself. Widespread negative sentiment toward jazz, however, explains why mainstream success in the jazz industry could prove challenging for artists of color like Fitzgerald, particularly in the early days of jazz.

Public sentiment toward jazz softened somewhat over the 1930s, and Fitzgerald's first big hit, "A-Tisket A-Tasket" (1938), appealed across the musical color line. Fitzgerald first cut this recording with Webb in 1935, and it soon became a song the public could not get enough of. Indeed, it catapulted Webb's orchestra to newfound fame across the country.[74] The song's lyrics derived from a popular nursery rhyme, deviating from common song themes like love and romance. Although "A Tisket" helped launch Fitzgerald's career, its connections to youth culture reinforced gendered expectations for women mid-century. At the time, people believe that women simply had a feminine inclination toward singing songs with infantile themes. In reality, female lead singers were often told by managers and male bandleaders to sing such repertoire. As an aspiring singer, Fitzgerald sang what was asked of her.[75] She had joined Webb's band knowing that it would help her further her career as a musician, but she had to compromise along

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[72] Ibid.

[73] Ibid., 144.

[74] Christopher J. Wells, "'A Dreadful Bit of Silliness': Feminine Frivolity and Ella Fitzgerald's Early Critical Reception," *Women and Music* 21 (2017): 43–65.

[75] Ibid.

the way. "A Tisket" helped cement her image as the "girl" who sang with Webb and his orchestra instead of the "woman." Despite this drawback, Webb allowed Fitzgerald enough freedom to eventually explore her own jazz improvisations and scat-singing, which helped cultivate a more mature feminine image.

Prior to Fitzgerald, the most famous scat singer in the United States was Louis Armstrong. Fitzgerald, however, perfected and commanded attention in her scat technique, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. Fitzgerald's scat on "How High the Moon" as performed during her "Live in Berlin" performances from 1960 serves as an excellent example. She performed and improvised over the 32-bar ABAC form of the song, quoting more than forty songs over the course of about seven minutes.[76] Jazz singer from the Manhattan Transfer, Janis Siegel, discusses Fitzgerald's jaw-dropping performances with awe in an *NPR* interview. Siegel claimed that Fitzgerald's performances were ethereal, saying, "It's like her life will end if she gets of that stage. And while she's on stage, she's in the dream. She's in a dream of everything is harmonious, and people love her, and she can just go for chorus after chorus of inventiveness. It's astounding."[77] Fitzgerald pieced together various parts of different songs that she kept in her musical vocabulary throughout the years, and the simultaneous ease and passion with which Fitzgerald appeared to carry herself as she showcased her scatting abilities still baffles artists and audiences alike today. Fitzgerald grew in her ability to tastefully combine her vocal technique

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[76] "Ella Fitzgerald How High The Moon," YouTube, posted by Michael Clarke, 5 October 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iR1__k-BxhY (accessed December 30, 2020).

[77] Susan Stamberg, "Ella Fitzgerald: America's First Lady of Song," *NPR*, March 29, 2010, https://www.npr.org/2010/03/29/125170386/ella-fitzgerald-americas-first-lady-of-song.

with her naturally musical ear over the course of her career, scatting effortlessly in her performances.[78]

Even when Fitzgerald encountered unexpected challenges, she appeared to effortlessly overcome them. When performing in Berlin in 1960, for example, something unusual happened during her rendition of "Mack the Knife." This piece had become popularized by Bobby Darin in the United States in 1958, although the song's origins came from Kurt Weill's German musical theater production in 1928. It quickly became a hit after Darin's rendition played across the country in the late 1950s. Fitzgerald, however, wanted to put a new spin on the song as one of the first female jazz artists to perform this song. Halfway through the performance, however, she forgot the words. Despite this, she kept going. Well into the song, Fitzgerald began to improvise her own lyrics, singing "What's the next chorus, to this song, now…", even mimicking Armstrong's iconic style of scat-singing.[79] She also integrated improvisation and imitative phrases along with her own lyrics into the performance. Her cleverness and ability to quote other songs with ease kept audiences engaged, even when she had no idea which words came next. Fitzgerald went on to win two Grammys for her performance of "Mack the Knife."[80]

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[78] Hannah Herndon, "'We're Singing It Because You Ask for It': Ella Fitzgerald, Scatting, and 'How High the Moon,'" Music 345: Race, Identity, and Representation in American Music, St. Olaf College student blog, April 7, 2015, https://pages.stolaf.edu/americanmusic/2015/04/07/were-singing-it-because-you-ask-for-it-ella-fitzgerald-scatting-and-how-high-the-moon/ (accessed December 30, 2020).

[79] "Mack the Knife," *Ella Fitzgerald: Ella—The Concert Years*, released 1994.

[80] Suraya Mohamed, "How Ella Fitzgerald Turned Forgotten Lyrics into One Of Her Best Performances Ever," *NPR*, September 6, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/09/04/757560624/how-ella-fitzgerald-turned-forgotten-lyrics-into-one-of-her-best-performances-ev.

Due to such artistic feats and her impressive musical talent, Fitzgerald was revered as "America's First Lady of Song." *NPR* reporter Susan Stamberg addresses the significance of Fitzgerald's nickname with regard to her career. Stamberg quotes Fitzgerald's pianist Billy Taylor as saying that "The feeling of music that she brought—you had to swing, you had to go along with the music, go along with the words… she sang like an instrument—the voice was the instrument."[81] Fitzgerald had perfect pitch, an unbelievable mastery of rhythm, and kept people smiling. As Siegal said, "Only on a record does she sing the same thing twice."[82] In the 1950s, Fitzgerald started recording tunes from the "American Songbook" and developed her image as the iconic singer we know today.

Still, Fitzgerald did not come by her career easily and worked hard until she stopped performing. Fitzgerald always "kept on keeping on," one of the sayings most commonly used by Fitzgerald according to her friends and colleagues.[83] Sadly, she often put aside her own needs, morale, and time for her personal life in order to "keep on." As the leader of a famous band, Fitzgerald had to develop a certain strength and toughness to endure the challenges of being a woman in the music industry. Women like Fitzgerald bore more of a personal burden than men when pursuing careers in the mid-twentieth century. As previously mentioned, businesswomen who found little time for home and family did not exemplify "success." Factors such as male dominance in the music industry and businesses alike along with societal pressures for families to conform and live peacefully behind their white picket fences contradicted Fitzgerald's lifestyle. Fitzgerald coped with the collateral damage in her personal life as a woman in business.

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[81] Billy Taylor quoted in "Ella Fitzgerald: America's First Lady of Song."

[82] Janis Siegel quoted in "Ella Fitzgerald: America's First Lady of Song."

[83] *Just One of Those Things*.

Constant separation from her family eventually took a toll on her marriage, resulting in a divorce from her husband, Ray Brown, in 1953. Fitzgerald, too, felt guilty for spending much of her time away from her beloved son, Ray Brown Jr. In this sense, Fitzgerald's focus on her career contradicted expected feminine behavior and made her feel "less than."

But her "failing" in the domestic sphere meant that Fitzgerald succeeded on numerous fronts elsewhere, even if the journey to success was fraught with challenges due to her gender and her race. She started her career by performing songs with lyrics drawn from children's stories, embodying an appropriately "girlish" image. But the fun and frilly songs like "A-Tisket A-Tasket" that catapulted Fitzgerald to fame—and that were associated with teenage girls—added their own weight to her struggle for legitimacy as a respected artist who sang quality repertoire. Her efforts to expand out into more audiences and into the 1950s and 1960s held its own difficulties for Fitzgerald as a Black woman. Farrah Jasmine Griffin, educator and researcher in African American Studies, elaborates on how Black women and their voices stand as foundational and essential aspects of the United States and its society [but portrays them as someone who] "heals and nurtures but has no rights or privileges within it [the nation]."[84] Nevertheless, Fitzgerald inspired other women to pursue their own dreams and careers. "A-Tisket A-Tasket" opened doors for aspiring artists, and the legacy of light-heartedness in jazz that she brought to the genre impacted many. As singer Lena Horne said, "After that record, a whole generation of us girl singers went looking for that damn yellow basket."[85]

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[84] Farrah Jasmine Griffin, "When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women's Vocality," in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 104.

[85] Lena Horne quoted in *Just One of Those Things*.

By the 1950s, Fitzgerald reached a point in her career where she had to adapt to stay relevant and "keep on keeping on." Fitzgerald thus decided to collaborate with (white) producer Norman Granz and signed to his record label, Songbook Records, in 1956. Granz was well recognized as a jazz music producer and helped Fitzgerald expand her market. According to Newport Jazz Festival founder George Wein, "Norman Granz took Ella out of the jazz clubs and put her in the world of American song."[86] As a producer, Norman had the right to "dictate" many of Fitzgerald's musical choices. As such, it could be inferred that Fitzgerald may have had to sacrifice her own control over her music in areas such as production or marketing. According to founder and editor for *Jazz History Online*, Granz did not disclose much concerning his relations with artists, but those who have studied Granz recognize that he offered the most for Fitzgerald's career.[87] The "Song Book" series that Granz produced with Fitzgerald boosted her career to another level of fame worldwide.[88] Granz promoted jazz, Fitzgerald, and racial equality, with no patience for discrimination, saying that he would "never tell a musician how to play."[89] Fitzgerald continued to give performances and go on tours with Granz as her manager in the 1960s, building a reputation as a more mature woman and artist.[90] At this point in her career, Fitzgerald transcended genres. She would scat-sing over 12-bar blues and quote from a seemingly infinite number of musical sources and genres: pop, blues, children's songs, etc. She

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[86] George Wein quoted in *Just One of Those Things*.

[87] Thomas Cunniffe, "Norman Granz: The Man Who Used Jazz for Justice (by Tad Hershorn)," *Jazz History Online,* 2019, https://jazzhistoryonline.com/norman-granz/.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Norman Granz quoted in "Norman Granz: The Man Who Used Jazz for Justice (by Tad Hershorn)."

[90] *Just One of Those Things*.

allegedly did not even realize when she crossed between genres or blended songs: she simply made music.[91]

Besides confronting gender norms, Fitzgerald also had to confront systemic racism in the music industry. Segregation divided the United States by race, while popular culture was dominated by a mainstream (white) perspective. Therefore, the music industry portrays a microcosm of white culture concerning racial issues. In general, a post-World War II American ideal championed suburban white families living in manicured subdivisions and enjoying the "American Dream"; races and cultures other than "white" seemingly did not factor much (or at all) into the typical American "way of life" as presented by various media.[92] Both audiences and critics likewise promoted a dominant white culture in the music industry. As Fink points out with regard to jazz, for example, jazz musicians were believed to have "plagiarized and then mutilated the works classical, white composers."[93] Such ideas were embedded into the fabric of jazz reception in the United States early on and persisted well into the twentieth century.

Fitzgerald thus could not escape the effects of racism in the 1950s and 1960s, despite the support and admiration of many professionals like Norman Granz. In turn, Fitzgerald openly started supporting the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. The movement became the basis for everything she did from then on, from the words she spoke to her audiences to performances on the stage. In 1963, Fitzgerald gave an interview with Fred Robbins, a New York radio host and close contact of hers, where she discussed her position concerning politics and racial justice. In this interview, Fitzgerald described how performers and celebrities of color were feeling about

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[91] Stamberg, "Ella Fitzgerald: America's First Lady of Song."

[92] Keohane, *Women at Work: Rhetorics of Gender and Labor*, 212–13.

[93] Fink, 141.

the fight for justice and equality. She also said, however, that "show people should stay out of politics."[94] Fitzgerald elaborated: "It makes you feel so bad to think we can't go down through certain parts of the South and give a concert like we do overseas, and have everybody just come to hear the music and enjoy the music because of the prejudice thing that's going on."[95] Fitzgerald saw no purpose in trying to reach the old "die-hard racists," stressing that the future lay in the hands of younger generations whose minds had yet to be molded.[96] She shared that she felt nervous about what she was saying—wondering if the interview would air in the South—because she knew how vital audiences were for maintaining her level of success and well-being.[97]

Social constructions of gender and race critically affected Fitzgerald's reception and criticism as a jazz artist. White men serving in positions of power—as producers, managers, critics etc.—historically have pulled the invisible threads guiding artists' success and shaped how we perceive them. Artists of color—particularly women of color—had to face an institution where the odds were not in their favor. Musicologist Christopher Wells proposes that "racism and sexism can persist in discussions of individual artists' trajectories over time through more subtle, indirect derision of oppressed groups."[98] Fitzgerald found success during her lifetime and lasting historical recognition as a jazz artist, but she had to confront the sexism and racism

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[94] Ella Fitzgerald in Patrick Ryan, "Ella Fitzgerald Made a Powerful Statement on Racism in 1963—But No One Heard It," *USA Today*, June 26, 2020.

[95] Ryan, "Ella Fitzgerald Made a Powerful Statement on Racism in 1963—But No One Heard It."

[96] Ella Fitzgerald in Fred Robbins interview in Ryan, "Ella Fitzgerald Made a Powerful Statement on Racism in 1963."

[97] Ryan, "Ella Fitzgerald Made a Powerful Statement on Racism in 1963."

[98] Wells, "A Dreadful Bit of Silliness," 65.

embedded in American society and institutions. As a result, she internalized feelings of insecurity and insignificance throughout her career.

Despite rampant sexism and racism in the music industry, Fitzgerald stuck to her music throughout the good times and the bad. She seemed to *know* that her artistry and hard work meant something. She inspired others and seemed to find success in every performance, big and small. Throughout her career—and particularly in the 1950s and 1960s—Fitzgerald may not have lived a life deemed successful according to societal norms, but she figured out how to find joy and passion in her work. In this sense, self-fulfillment and the joy found in pleasing others appeared to symbolize "success" to Fitzgerald. She knew the ways in which music could impact others and she committed to giving her all, even though personal struggles and sacrifices along the way.

Various musicians, artists, and women (in particular) find something inspiring in Ella Fitzgerald. On the one hand, she offers a life of lessons to learn from. On the other hand, she offers hope for women, African Americans, and musicians who find themselves looking for the next right step. When asked about Fitzgerald's influence on female artists in the music business, for example, one Latinx millennial said, "I think there are artists that you know are good, who in their generational moment, they mark that moment. And there are others who are eternal. Ella Fitzgerald was eternal."[99] Today, we can look back at what Fitzgerald accomplished and recognize how much determination, intuition, and confidence in one's own values can impact one's life and the way in which people view it. In the words of Fitzgerald's son, Ray Brown Jr.,

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[99] Catalina Maria Johnson, "How Ella Fitzgerald Is Influencing A New Generation of Latinx Musicians," *NPR*, September 7, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/09/07/749026094/how-ella-fitzgerald-is-influencing-a-new-generation-of-latinx-musicians.

"Music really is something that helps settle the heart."[100] Anyone who was lucky enough to know Ella Fitzgerald seem to recognize the way that music settled her heart when she performed.

Nina Simone: "The High Priestess of Soul"

The emergence of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement highlighted how deeply racism had been embedded in U.S. culture, drawing attention to the ways in which segregation undermined the nation's claim to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all." Racism and segregation also impacted the American musical scene. On the one hand, racial conflict affected how the music industry operated; it helped advance the careers of many Black musicians—at least in terms of celebrity and fame—but it also tended to advance the careers of white musicians in economic ways.[101] These structural inequalities—if not acknowledged publicly—affected many musicians of color on a personal, private level. As the 1960s began, the racial conflict affecting the political and social arenas also affected the musical sphere. Celebrities' opinions and political stances were heavily scrutinized. Jazz singer and pianist Nina Simone, for example, involved herself in social and political issues while captivating audiences with her music. "The High Priestess of Soul," as Simone was called, rose to the height of her musical career in the 1960s, challenging her audiences' attention as both a musician and civil rights activist in the fight to end segregation and expose racism.[102] She held a unique position in the world of music and entertainment, often

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[100] Ray Brown Jr. quoted in *Just One of Those Things*.

[101] John Rudolph Covach, *What's That Sound? An Introduction to Rock and Its History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006).

[102] "Nina Simone," *The Official Home of Nina Simone The High Priestess of Soul*, https://www.ninasimone.com/biography/ (accessed December 15, 2020).

weaving together different genres, such as folk music, pop, and jazz.[103] In doing so, she reached a broad fanbase and bridged many generic divides. For Simone, a fine line of balance existed between maintaining musical success and addressing the sociopolitical chasms in the United States, in the entertainment industry, and even in her personal relationships. In attempting to find this balance, Simone routinely questioned her worth as an artist in correlation with the weight that the Civil Rights Movement held for her as a Black woman, musician, and American citizen.

Simone's progressive and unwavering attitude toward racial equality transcended the era she lived in. At times, however, her ego led to a perceived haughtiness toward the social disruption concerning race and American politics. Simone, too, did not shy away from voicing that she encountered oppression in both her personal and professional life: from her marriage and society's expectations of her as a female singer to the demands that came from pursuing a career in show business. To some, Simone's "outspokenness" was alienating. To others, Simone was simply truth-telling. Simone navigated an intense internal battle—hitting frequent highs and lows—on her journey to success. But through it all, she roused many in her call for social justice, both via her career as a musician and as an active participant in the Civil Rights Movement.

Before she became Nina Simone, she grew up as Eunice Kathleen Waymon and discovered her first taste of music and performance in the church where her mother preached.[104] As a child, Simone learned the piano and discovered that she had an innate talent. Simone practiced tirelessly and was pushed hard by her piano teacher, who strongly felt that Simone could be a brilliant classical pianist. She poured herself into her piano studies, focusing on

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[103] George Wein in *What happened, Miss Simone?*, directed by Garbus, Liz (Moxie Firecracker Films, 2016), Netflix.

[104] *What happened, Miss Simone?*

classical repertoire rather than popular genres like the blues or jazz, which would later shape her unique musical style. Simone's musical drive, however, also meant that she lived quite a lonely life. Even as a young child, Simone felt isolated because her life consisted almost solely of lessons and practicing. She realized later that her skin color affected her loneliness even more.[105] Nevertheless, discipline led to success. Following her high school graduation, Simone attended The Julliard School in New York City for a year and a half, her musical education funded by her family and piano teacher, who had put aside money for her over the years. But Simone soon hit a roadblock. The Curtis Institute for Music denied Simone admittance to their program. In her personal speculation, Simone would always believe this denial was due to her skin color.[106] In her school of thought, through this denial, Simone had one of her first encounters with racial discrimination. This shaped and propelled her determination to succeed despite imposed barriers.

By 1954 and as money ran low, Simone found work as a pianist and singer at the Midtown Bar and Grill on Pacific Avenue in Atlantic City, New Jersey. She started to draw attention with her unique piano skills, combining her classical training with popular songs, blues, and jazz tunes that she sang at the restaurant.[107] Simone often worked shifts between midnight and seven a.m. The bar demanded that Simone play spirituals and blues music, and Simone—fearing that her mother would find out that she was a bar musician—adopted the stage name, Nina Simone. As Roger Nupie, a friend and associate of Simone's, said, "She changed her name

[105] Ibid.

[106] Ibid.

[107] "Nina Simone," The Official Home of Nina Simone The High Priestess of Soul.

because she didn't want her mother finding out that she was playing this 'devil's music.'"[108] Thus, the legendary Nina Simone was born, and her career in show business began.

Simone did not initially expect to remain in show business. But as she navigated the worlds of production and performance, she transformed into a brilliant female singer and jazz pianist.[109] She stuck to her classical training—even from the midst of the jazz industry—stating, "To most white people, jazz means Black and jazz means dirt, and that's not what I play. I play Black classical music."[110] The perception of jazz as something "dirty" in 1950s and 1960s America is telling. Racial bias clearly shaped how white Americans responded to the music, and jazz artists like Simone had to navigate that bias day in and day out.

Gendered constructs and expectations affected Simone's freedom of choice regarding her career, her schedule, and the way in which she lived. With the release of her cover of "Porgy" in 1957, recognition of Simone's talents started to spread across the nation.[111] When asked of her musical influences, Simone referenced Billie Holiday as a significant one.[112] One year later, "My Baby Cares for Me," from album Little Girl Blue, 1958, increased her popularity.[113] Despite her success, Simone remained painfully aware of her gender. She was a Black woman working in the male-dominated jazz industry. Although Simone's managers and male colleagues both opened doors for her in show business, they often made professional and artistic decisions affecting

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[108] Roger Nupie in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[109] Nina Simone in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[110] "Nina Simone" in Jazz at the Library, *Anacortes Public Library*, 12 December 2014.

[111] "Nina Simone," The Official Home of Nina Simone The High Priestess of Soul.

[112] Nina Simone in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[113] Mark Anthony Neal, "Nina Simone," *Grove Music Online*, 31 January 2014. This song is now known for its famous feature in a 1980s Chanel ad campaign.

Simone's career.[114] Simone, in other words, could not simply "run her own show" for herself. For example, Simone's spouse, Andrew Stroud, ran the entire financial side as well as scheduling, leaving very little freedom for her. As jazz enthusiast and long-time radio host, David Brent Johnson, explains, women in the music industry mostly gained attention mid-century by being glamourous rather than musically talented.[115] Specifically about Simone, Johnson stated that, "...female singers and artists such as Nina Simone fought to be recognized solely for their talent and hard work, not their looks and sweet temper. Although jazz artists often held innovative beliefs and came from an oppressive ancestral background, the jazz industry frequently treated women in the same way as the rest of the United States."[116] With men guarding the gates to occupational success, Simone—like many of her female contemporaries—faced societal and musical challenges that her male colleagues never would.

Like Ella Fitzgerald and many other female jazz artists, Simone did not necessarily find success from a traditional viewpoint. She did not have the "perfect" family life, nor did she seek to build a reputation as a beauty icon. Instead, Simone dedicated extreme amounts of time and energy towards performing for her audiences, finding satisfaction through her artistic depth and passion.[117] American poet and music critic Stanley Crouch said, for example, that "Nina was a real rebel. She didn't fit in the revolutionary Black female role that was offered her. She could avoid pretentious phoniness and get more depth out of a song than people were used to hearing

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[114] David Johnson, "Jazz Women Of The 1960s," Indiana Public Media, 1 March 2011, https://indianapu.blicmedia.org/nightlights/jazz-women-1960s.php.

[115] Johnson, "Jazz Women Of The 1960s."

[116] Ibid.

[117] Nina Simone in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

in those songs."[118] Notable businessmen in the music industry and people like George Wein, Newport Jazz Festival founder, also identified Simone's ability to "get more depth" from her music. Wein remarked that part of this depth stemmed from Simone's unique voice: "...[it was] totally different from anyone else's... a woman's voice but had the depth of a baritone… it carried what depth was in Nina's soul."[119] After first encountering Simone's music in 1959, Wein immediately lined her up for the Newport Jazz Festival the following year.

One of the men that played a pivotal role in Simone's career was her manager and future husband, Andrew Stroud. Stroud took over Simone's management in 1961, putting together a team that included a publicist, coordinator, and photographer. With Stroud as her manager, Simone advanced even farther in the industry. Stroud even used his own funds to promote Simone's 1963 performance at Carnegie Hall when no other New York City promoter would. Her Carnegie performance secured more radio airtime, which jumpstarted nationwide publicity.[120] Simone allowed Stroud to take control of things, saying, "For the first time I knew what it was like not to be just, you know, floundering out there."[121] They fell in love and married. However, Stroud was known to have worked Simone ruthlessly. What is more, he treated her ruthlessly as well. Reflecting back on that time, Simone said: "All I did was work, work, work. I was always tired, the more I played the less I could relax. I kept thinking Andy would let me rest. He never did …and I was scared of him, because Andrew beat me up."[122]

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[118] Stanley Crouch in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[119] George Wein in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[120] Andrew Stroud in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[121] Nina Simone in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[122] Ibid.

Stroud's temper and abuse contributed to the bitterness and exhaustion marking not only their marriage but also Simone's career. Even so, she continued to make music. But Simone's well-being took a downturn. At some points, even music—the thing that Simone cherished—felt hard to her. In her memoir, Simone described the way music dictated her life: "Music is an art and art has its own rules. And one of them is that you must pay more attention to it than anything else in the world, if you are going to be true to yourself. And if you don't do it …it punishes you."[123]

American audiences marveled at Simone's raw talent, and Simone fed off the money and societal acceptance that success brought. So did Stroud. But while Simone appeared talented and successful on stage, passionate about both music and the experiences of the Black community, Simone struggled personally. Her daughter (with Stroud), Lisa Simone Kelly, reflected on her mother's professional drive, constantly travelling for gigs. Both her parents, Kelly stated, possessed an inner insanity, particularly her mother, who had "a love affair with fire."[124]

Part of the fire fueling Simone was that she found a place on the stage where she could use her talents and fame to speak out on behalf of the Black community. She would take a song and turn it into an emotional message. She once said in an interview that "I've had a couple of times on stage where I really felt free. I'll tell you what freedom is to me, NO FEAR."[125] Simone's discovery of freedom in her work may have been one of the primary reasons why she coped with the artistic confinement as well as the emotional and physical exhaustion she felt. She appeared to find her joy on stage. Claudia Roth Pierpont describes her stage presence in her

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[123] Nina Simone, "The Real Nina Simone," *Down Beat Magazine*, 1968, https://www.musicismysanctuary.com/real-nina-simone-1968-interview-beat-magazine.

[124] Lisa Simone Kelly in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[125] Nina Simone in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

article for the New Yorker, saying, "[Simone's] performances, richly improvised, were also confidingly intimate—she *needed* the connection with her audience."[126] As Simone said about performing, "it's just a feeling, it's just like how do you tell someone what it's like to be in love?... You just know."[127] A *New York Times* review of Simone's Carnegie Hall performance, for example, commented on Simone's ability to appear "totally absorbed in the mood of the moment… a performer blessed with both talent and a strong sense of showmanship."[128] She held an innate sense of emotional connection, with both the music and the audience. Those who heard Simone perform seemed to be awe in her ability to emotionally touch the listener and connect music to the current world through lyrics and commentary.[129] Jazz vocalist, Abbey Lincoln, later remarked that, "To really understand the '60s, you had to hear Nina... In some ways [she] became as much an icon of the 1960s as Billie Holiday did of the 1930s and 40s."[130] Off the stage, however, Simone seemed to become more exhausted and erratic as time went on. She started to feel pressured by expectations to be the voice behind a national movement, not only from the music industry, but from the Black and female communities as well.

Debates about the legal enforcement of segregation and discussions calling for change flooded the United States in the 1960s. As both a civil rights activist and a talented musician, Simone used her musicianship and position as a Black woman in Jim Crow America to

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[126] Claudia Roth Pierpont, "A Raised Voice: How Nina Simone turned the movement into music," *The New Yorker,* August 11 & 18, 2014, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/08/11/raised-voice.

[127] Nina Simone in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[128] John S. Wilson, "Nina Simone Sings At Carnegie Hall," *New York Times*, 1963.

[129] *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[130] Johnson, "Jazz Women of The 1960s."

communicate emotional honesty, advocate for social justice, and help make change in the United States a reality.[131] Through her performances and songs, Simone amplified her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, drawing attention to subject matter pertaining to Black lives, inequality, and hard times. Simone felt the reality of racial bias early on after her rejection from the Curtis Institute. Prior to that, Simone said, she never thought about race, at least not as grounds for prejudice.[132]

By the 1960s, however, Simone's eyes were wide open to the injustices of the world around her. She wanted something more out of her tours and performances than what was typically being orchestrated by Stroud. Simone's frustration led her to write "Mississippi Goddam," an explicit demand for racial equality. The song's content boldly calls out Southern states that endorsed segregation and racism, saying, "Alabama's gotten me so upset, Tennessee made me lose my rest, and everybody knows about Mississippi Goddam."[133] Friend and guitarist for Simone, Al Shackman, proposed that Simone's identity as a Black woman fueled the song, "There's something about a woman. Not one Black man would dare say "Mississippi goddam" ...we all wanted to say it. She said it!"[134] One can identify a sort of paradox between the difficulty of being Black and female during Simone's period of fame. Simone could also use her position and voice to communicate in ways many Black people could not. Simone first sang "Mississippi Goddam" during her second appearance at Carnegie Hall in March 1964, in front of a mostly white audience. The public reception of this song initially manifested itself in shock and

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[131] Ibid.

[132] Nina Simone in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[133] Nina Simone, "Mississipi Goddam," 1964.

[134] Al Shackman in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

awe—from Civil Rights activists. Other people found the lyrics accusatory, expressing anger and disbelief. Her most famous performance of the song, however, occurred on 25 March 1965 in Montgomery, Alabama.[135] In attendance were notable celebrities like Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Bunche from the United Nations, Langston Hughes, James Balwin, Sidney Poitier, Bill Cosby, and Leonard Bernstein.[136] Simone gave such a raw and powerful performance that her daughter, Lisa, later reminisced: "My mother said that after that performance her voice broke, and from that song on into the Civil Rights, her voice never really went back to its former octave."[137] Simone threw herself wholeheartedly into the fight for civil rights, a move that her daughter believes kept Simone going as societal and musical pressure bore down on her.

Simone viewed her music as a life-or-death calling, embodying the music she sang. She found it angering that no one spoke about the risk it took to stand up for one's rights: "When the civil rights [issue] came, I could let myself be heard, [saying] what I had been feeling all the time." [138] Black men who stood up against inequality, she observed, stood up to get killed. Simone's song, "Backlash Blues," featured lyrics written for her by Langston Hughes detailing how skin color affected the daily existence of African Americans living in a time of segregation. When asked why she chose to use her music as political statements, Simone replied, "When every day is a matter of survival, I don't think you can help but be involved. How can you be an artist and not reflect the times? [The next generation] will be the ones to shape this nation [going

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[135] Neal, "Nina Simone."

[136] *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[137] Lisa Simone Kelly in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[138] Nina Simone in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

forward]… All I can do is expose the sickness."[139] Simone accepted that she had a responsibility to advocate for civil rights, one could even speculate Simone's music as a "soundtrack to civil rights."[140] However, this was not easy for her, mentally and emotionally, even commenting on her mental struggle and its weight, saying, "I have to live with Nina, and you see, that is very difficult."[141] While most 1960s women strove for a successful home life and stable living situation, Simone strove to inspire emotional impact and change in her audiences: "I want to shake people up so bad, that when they leave a nightclub where I've performed, I just want them to be to pieces."[142]

Simone focused her attention on communicating to, and speaking for, the African American community while on stage. She spoke about being "Black and beautiful" and the pathway to really believing that, meaning that Blackness and beauty were not closely associated or encouraged in the mid-twentieth century United States.[143] Simone wanted to make people think about their roots through her music: why they are the way they are, and how to accept others with an open mind. But using her public position to be a successful spokesperson for civil rights began to wear Simone down. Her daughter, Lisa, expressed that Simone "was one of the greatest performers of all time, but she paid a huge price for it. She was Nina Simone 24/7, not just on stage, and that's where it became a problem."[144] The people closest to Simone, her family

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[139] Nina Simone in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[140] Jermaine Fowler, "Nina Simone Songs as the Soundtrack to Civil Rights," *The Humanity Archive,* 2021, https://www.thehumanityarchive.com/history/nina-simone-songs-the-soundtrack-to-civil-rights.

[141] Nina Simone in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[142] Nina Simone in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[143] Nina Simone in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[144] Lisa Simone Kelly in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

and colleagues, witnessed the singer's struggle. As musical director and guitarist Al Shackman said, "[On the surface] she had a wonderful way of taking a piece of music… and morphing it into her experience."[145] But, Shackman said, "I could tell something was eating at her."

By the end of the 1960s, Simone was experiencing mood shifts and had a tendency toward violent outbursts because of the internal battle she seemed to be fighting. Betty Shabazz, Simone's neighbor growing up and friend, commented that "Participation in activism during the sixties rendered chaos in people's lives."[146] Her career began to decline because places would not book her to play once Simone quit playing anything other than political songs.[147] According to Stroud, Simone's soul had slowly begun to turn bitter toward humanity, specifically the whites who did not stand up for change or for racial equality.[148] Shackman elaborated: "If anyone were talking in the audience, she would just sit, and if they didn't stop, she would get up and leave and the gig was over."[149] The line between achieving institutional change and becoming resentful became very thin for Simone. Her frustrations increased because change in American society did not come easily, and, when it did, racial issues did not disappear altogether. As Shabazz said, "She wasn't at odds with the times, the times were at odds with her… most people are afraid to be as honest as she lived."[150] Simone fought openly and hard, finding both satisfaction in, and sorrow from, the same cause: racial justice. Following the death of Martin Luther King Jr. in

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[145] Al Shackman in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[146] Betty Shabazz in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[147] Roger Nupie in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[148] Andrew Stroud in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[149] Al Shackman in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

[150] Betty Shabazz in *What happened, Miss Simone?*

1968, Simone recorded a song dedicated to the fallen leader of the Civil Rights movement, underscoring the devastation that the African American community was feeling. Music became Simone's saving grace: "It was a gift from God."[151]

Consider this idea: Black individuals can only make considerable growth and find equality if whites in the United States accept and treat them as such. Progress for racial equality could be said to depend on historical foundations and the way a society is constructed around a dominant social group, as it is in the United States. An excerpt from a demographic journal in 1972 shows an overall increase in income for African American households and individuals. However, "the gains in income by Black women, relative to white women, seem more pervasive and extensive than those of Black men."[152] Therefore, Black women had grown in their income and influence significantly more financially by 1972. That said, Black women labor for a longer period of their lives than white women, and Black women typically must pick up more work wherever they can find it in order to augment their household's financial holdings. Even today Black women continue to bear financial responsibility for their families. CEO of Women Employed, Cherita Ellens, and CEO of Chicago Foundation for Women, Felicia Davis, elaborate on the intersectionality of race and gender, saying, "More than four in five Black mothers (84.4 percent) are breadwinners, with a majority of Black mothers (68.3 percent) bringing in the

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[151] Serena Edwards, "Nina Simone, The Jazz Singing Legend that Changed the World of Music," *Her Agenda*, February 21, 2021, https://heragenda.com/nina-simone-the-jazz-singing-legend-that-changed-the-world-of-music.

[152] Reynolds Farley and Albert Hermalin, "The 1960s: A Decade of Progress for Blacks?," *Demography* 9, no. 3 (1972): 360.

primary source of economic support for their families."[153] Differences in educational levels, income, and employment opportunities between Blacks and whites became less drastic after the 1960s, although still not equal.[154] Clearly, the Civil Rights Movement and push for sociopolitical change made a difference. Arguably, Simone contributed to social change uniquely as an influential Black woman. She challenged societal expectations—both in terms of her race and her gender—and encouraged Americans to see that every human deserves the right to live free and well. As an anthem on her 1967 album *Silk and Soul* professed: "I wish I knew how it would feel to be free."[155] Simone exposed the fractures in society, and some solutions came. However, there is still work to be done today.

Simone possessed a keen understanding of the United States's social and political ills, especially when it came to race. As she stated in an interview with *Down Beat* magazine in 1968: "Rules, orders. We have ordered things so long in a certain way, we are numb. Nobody dares question it. This is what is wrong, symbolically, with my country."[156] Conformity and complacency—"rules and order"—helped perpetuate systemic racism. Simone knew the "rules," but she chose to ignore them anyway—especially in music—with an eye toward the future. She proposed: "I believe the time will come when the whole definition of pop music will change… it [will require] a high level of creativity in writing and performance."[157] Confined by show

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[153] Cherita Ellens and Felicia Davis, "The Intersection of Gender and Racial Equity: Why American Feminism Should Care," *Women Employed* (August 6, 2020), https://womenemployed.medium.com/the-intersection-of-gender-and-racial-equity-why-american-feminism-should-care-11af5d68164b.

[154] Farley and Hermalin, "The 1960s: A Decade of Progress for Blacks?"

[155] Neal, "Nina Simone."

[156] Simone, "The Real Nina Simone."

[157] Ibid.

business and feeling burdened by her need to support the Civil Rights Movement, however, Simone became increasingly tired and pessimistic.

Upset with the slow rate of change in the United States, Simone moved to Europe and struggled to eke out a living in Paris. “I came to expect despair every time I set foot in my own country,” Simone wrote in her autobiography, “And I was never disappointed.”[158] At one point she even flew with her daughter to live in a beachfront home in Liberia and escape performing and music altogether. Later diagnosed with bipolar disorder and manic depression, Simone took Trilafon to enjoy performing once again, but her personal life was lonely. In many facets, one can observe the immensity of mental and physical sacrifices that Simone made to continue music-making.

What matters? What type of values and achievements should take the forefront of someone’s life and why? These questions manifest themselves in any person’s life, especially in terms of one’s purpose. Throughout her life’s journey, Simone answered these types of questions in music, politics, and personal life, all while sacrificing personal priorities for the reality of change and legacy. Family, a regular routine, and personal enjoyment of music took back seats to the cause she championed during the height of her musical success. As Simone said, “I have to constantly re-identify myself to myself, reactivate my own standards, my own convictions about what I’m doing and why.”[159] This was not an easy task. In her autobiography, Simone elaborated, “Talent is a burden not a joy. I am not of this planet. I do not come from you. I am not like you.”[160] But Simone’s desire to communicate candidly with the American people and

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[158] Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You,* 120-22.

[159] Simone, “The Real Nina Simone.”

[160] Simone and Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You,*

promote change won out. She used showbusiness to her advantage, which at times meant sacrifice and acceptance of current trends. Still, her drive and passion shone brightly through the musical convictions she left her audiences with. By the end of her career, Simone received fifteen Grammy nominations and, in 2000, won the Grammy Hall of Fame Award.[161]

Conclusions

Black women in the jazz industry made huge strides toward equality and recognition between 1935 and 1965. They confronted gender stereotypes and racism through their music, each in their own way. The stories of Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and Nina Simone reveal how each woman charted their own paths to success, oftentimes defying the white patriarchal standards embedded into the very fabric of American society and the music industry. These women paved the way for future generations of Black artists—particularly women—to be recognized for their talent and contributions to the world of music, on their own terms. Today, journalists and filmmakers have begun to uncover the layers of oppression that Black women—specifically Black female musicians—have experienced since the dawn of the twentieth century. For the Holidays, Fitzgeralds, and Simones, "success" came from embracing their own voices and beliefs about personal and perceived accomplishment in the lens of identity—class, gender, race, etc.—in the United States. Yet the fight for gender and racial equality, embodied by these women in the early twentieth century, still persists today.

Recently, we have seen a large spike in what has been called the "Black Lives Matter" (BLM) movement. Outrage over the death of George Floyd, who was inhumanely killed by

[161] *What happened, Miss Simone?*

Minneapolis policemen in Spring of 2020, contributed to the movement's formation. Founded by three Black women—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—the Black Lives Matter movement has resolved to recognize lives lost due to the racism and hatred still present in American systems, institutions, and individuals; they call for us to "say their name," admonishing every person in the United States to do their part in rebuking and exposing actions and behaviors that hinder progress and racial equality.[162]

There has been an increasingly urgent call for a united front to stop discrimination across the media. Yet the idea for a united front is not new. In a *USA Today* article, for example, journalist Marc Ramirez spoke with scholars and professors to address these concerns, finding that "Asian and Black communities have cooperated on social justice efforts since the civil rights movement of the 1960s."[163] Gabriel Chin, professor of law at the University of California, told Ramirez that "there's an increasing appreciation for the reality that Asian Americans are in the same boat as Latinx people, as African Americans, as people of color. We have no choice."[164] As Ramirez emphasized, "people are recognizing that each community's ability to thrive is related to the others."[165] No individual is their own island. But, as Ruben Martinez, professor of Sociology at Michigan State, pointed out, Americans continue to pit themselves in opposition to

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[162] "Herstory," About, Black Lives Matter Movement (2013), https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/.

[163] Marc Ramirez, "Stop Asian Hate, Stop Black Hate, Stop All Hate: Many Americans Call for Unity Against Racism," *USA Today*, March 20, 2021, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/03/20/atlanta-shootings-see-asian-black-americans-take-white-supremacy/4769268001/.

[164] Ibid.

[165] Ibid.

each other, prioritizing their own issues. We have "to go beyond that and focus on the system of racism as a whole," Martinez claimed.[166]

As we move forward into the twenty-first century, we must recognize that there is still much to be done to achieve racial and gender equality for all. For everyone to be given the opportunity to achieve success, on a personal and/or professional level. Our governmental system and institutions are far from perfect. Scholar Florian Coulmas summarizes the impact that institutions—"invisible" and otherwise—can have on individual growth, development, and inclusion in society: "Personal identity is something we are, something we have, and something we act. We perform acts of identity following culture-specific stage directions that leave room for individual expressivity."[167] In this statement, Coulmas touches on the directions people follow that are "culture-specific," referencing the immense impact that our culture and its norms can have on the individual. Because of culture's effect, views of important notions, like success, shift depending on the standard presented to the public.

So why do the stories of Holiday, Fitzgerald, and Simone matter? The answer lies in the foundations of our country: "*We* the people." All people deserve the right to live equally, without being limited by their gender or race. These factors, in fact, should be what contributes to each person's path to success, not what takes away from it. People must care for the treatment of others, and the structures of the community in which they live in order for every person to get their shot at success. Moreover, music and voices are the avenues for storytelling that people listen to, and in the same way, every voice deserves to be heard. The story each individual is trying to tell needs room to be heard and recognized. The merit and success of each individual

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[166] Ibid.

[167] Coulmas, 92.

depends not on their gender or racial identity, but on their abilities and who they are. In an industry like show business and music, individuals must be allowed to express their true selves. Through raw and unhindered expression, artists can manifest art. If we redefine what success is—from a non-white, patriarchal perspective—a more inclusive version of history and artist success can be uncovered. In this way, the United States can step up to embrace everyone who calls it home.

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