The Politics of Café Society

David W. Stowe

Café Society is above all founded upon publicity. Its members often seem to live for the exhibitionist mention of their doings and relations by social chroniclers and gossip columnists. . . . In the world of the celebrity, the hierarchy of publicity has replaced the hierarchy of descent and even of great wealth. Not the gentleman's club, but the night club, not Newport in the afternoon but Manhattan at night; not the old family but the celebrity.

—C. Wright Mills, The Power Elite, 1956

By any reckoning, Café Society, a New York City cabaret that opened in 1938, deserves a prominent place among twentieth-century American shrines to the politics of culture. A patron descending into the small basement on Sheridan Square in Greenwich Village might be met by a doorman wearing worn-out gloves and might be served by flip waiters clad in tails. To the left of the foyer, a simian-looking Adolf Hitler hung suspended from the ceiling along with papier-mâché send-ups of well-known Manhattan society icons. The club admitted customers and showcased talent regardless of race, tweaked high society, eliminated chorus lines and cigarette girls, treated its employees well, served good food, and offered pointed political satire. But the rise and fall of Café Society conjures up a subtext involving another kind of politics: of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) surveillance and break-ins, of plots to assassinate Hitler and sell the atomic bomb to the Soviets, of House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) hearings, blacklisting, and jailing for contempt of Congress.

Historians working at the margins of cultural studies have been much concerned lately with delineating the boundaries of these two kinds of politics—cultural and traditional, or orthodox—in their own lives as well as in those of the subjects they study.¹ Are teaching and scholarship a substitute for, a distraction from, or a com-


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plement to traditional politics? Historical subjects seem to divide along the same lines. In one camp are the agents of cultural resistance, such as those who participated in Café Society; they transgress cultural hierarchies or commit “sign crimes” against the dominant order. In the other are the activists who organize unions and strikes, commit acts of civil disobedience, run political campaigns, and risk blacklisting and jail. Sometimes these political domains overlap but not necessarily and, in the historiography, fairly infrequently.

The anthropologist James C. Scott has persuasively argued that for the great majority of people in the past, such “weapons of the weak” as gossiping, foot dragging, and pilfering have been the only available avenues of political expression and thus deserve to be taken seriously as legitimate forms of political action. While Scott’s work has focused on social groups denied access to ordinary politics—Indonesian peasants and disenfranchised African Americans, for example—the historian Robin D. G. Kelley has applied Scott’s categories to the twentieth-century United States, where opportunities for political expression are relatively open. Historians should broaden their concept of politics to include not only participation in working-class organizations and political movements, Kelley has urged, but also day-to-day forms of spontaneous resistance and cultural affirmation. But others have remained skeptical of applying a culturalist notion of politics to liberal democracies, arguing that these accounts both exaggerate the political efficacy of past cultural resistance and foster unrealistic hopes of challenging systems of power through gestures and rituals. “A healthy politics should offer more than therapy, more than potential benefits, more than memories of some moment in the past when times were good—more even, than dignity,” cautions William Graebner.

An analysis of Café Society and its milieu suggests that as it is usually framed, the debate over politics and culture has missed the mark. That is, the important distinction lies less between cultural politics and orthodox politics than between different types of cultural politics: between actions performed for the purpose of changing or opposing change in institutions of social life, and actions that, although they may have proximate impact on those institutions and may develop into legitimate political activity, are not undertaken with those ends in mind. The former are intentional and strategic; the latter, unconscious and reactive. At Café Society the former type of politics dominated, even when music, murals, or comedy functioned as the vehicle for political expression.

There are both epistemological and practical political reasons for considering in-


tentionality an important criterion for evaluating politics. Historians ought to represent their subjects in ways that those subjects would recognize, if not necessarily agree with. Accounts that stress the political significance of cultural activity risk romanticizing their subjects. Resuscitating the discredited notion of "false consciousness" in order to turn it on its head, these interpretations falsely imbue historical actors with what historians deem a correct, or true, consciousness. Moreover, when the notion of what constitutes the political is stretched too far, it loses its meaning and politics becomes indistinguishable from other forms of social life. Politics is reduced to a matter of style, of attitude, of consumption—to a life-style choice. Rather than uncovering a usable past that can guide and inspire the present, an indiscriminately culturalist view of politics that romanticizes its subjects, distorts their motives, and exaggerates the effects of their actions on social institutions is of little practical value. This is not to argue for a fixed line between culture and politics; cultural forms are charged with political meaning and serve as the medium for political ideas. But in the final analysis, political change is the result of people thinking and acting consciously about rational goals and strategies for challenging social power.

The case of Café Society demonstrates how one-sided the debate over what constitutes genuine politics has been. Attention has generally focused on left-liberal politics, as if the Right somehow skirts the distinction between orthodox politics and merely cultural politics. Perhaps because of the Right’s ascendancy in United States electoral politics during the past half century, the cultural politics of the Right has been largely overlooked. But to grasp the rise and fall of Café Society, it is necessary to view the cabaret not only against the backdrop of the political forces that brought it down—J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI, HUAC, and Cold War repression more generally—but also against the culture of nightclubs. Café Society’s formula, which competed successfully with many others during the war years, combined a business ethos of honest value with an aesthetic that held authenticity as its primary value while it experimented with genre blending and cultural hybridism. Café Society challenged, but ultimately failed to dislodge, the culture of celebrity promoted by rival establishments such as the Stork Club. If the Popular Front Left achieved an apt cultural expression through Café Society, the anticommunist Right found an equally suitable vehicle in the Stork Club. But it was the Stork Club, ironically, that more clearly expressed the cultural style C. Wright Mills had in mind when he described "café society."4

Barney Josephson was inspired to open Café Society, the public transcript tells us, because of his indignation at the nightclub practices he observed while conducting

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3 This point was brought home to me in a series of interviews I conducted with swing-era musicians, who generally found my questions about the racial politics of swing academic, if not irrelevant. Joe Bushkin interview by David W. Stowe, July 9, 1996, transcript (in David W. Stowe’s possession); Jerry Jerome interview by Stowe, 1996, July 23, 1996, ibid.; Jimmy Maxwell interview by Stowe, 1996, ibid.

business as a shoe salesman. First, he sought to dissolve the rigid racial segregation of audiences that prevailed in New York clubs outside of Harlem. Josephson was appalled that even in establishments featuring all-black entertainment, such as the Cotton Club, black patrons were turned away or shunted to the corners. “I wanted a club where blacks and whites worked together behind the footlights and sat together out front,” he said later. “There wasn’t, so far as I know, a place like it in New York or in the whole country.” Furthermore, Josephson aimed to eliminate the gangster ethos that characterized the business practices of most clubs and replace it with an ambience of social significance. “I had been to Europe in the early thirties, and had visited the political cabarets, where there was very pointed satire,” he later said. “And I’d seen Gypsy Rose Lee doing a political striptease at fund-raising affairs in New York for the Lincoln Brigade. I conceived the idea of presenting some sort of satire and alternating it with jazz music.”

Another dimension of Café Society’s mission was reflected in the name itself: to lampoon the newly discovered social phenomenon designated café society, described by Wilfrid Sheed as “that meritocracy of foppishness and social inutility which was gradually driving real Society into the back pages.” C. Wright Mills, in his genealogy of the term, traced it back to 1919, when the original author of the “Cholly Knickerbocker” gossip column, Maury Paul, attached it to socialites who felt comfortable meeting each other only in public. A 1937 piece in Fortune magazine gave the term wide circulation. Another analysis linked café society to the Great Depression, which led nightclub operators to admit at no charge sons and daughters of wealthy families for their publicity value. It was editor Helen Lawren-son of Vanity Fair who dreamed up the idea of naming a nightclub after café society and suggested it to Josephson. (Some accounts credit Lawrenson’s colleague Clare Boothe Luce with the idea.) This satirical impulse underlay the nightclub’s visual trademarks: the doorman clad in rags and white gloves with the fingertips worn out; the matchbook motto, “The wrong place for the Right people”; and the murals depicting the foibles of the café society set.

In opening his club, Josephson made an unsurprising decision to locate on Sheridan Square, in Greenwich Village, a neighborhood that, despite its reputation for bohemian open-mindedness, was still plagued by incidents of racial conflict, especially during and after World War II. But Café Society did attract a significant number of African American customers, chiefly members of the intellectual and

5 James C. Scott defines “public transcript” as “a shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate,” while “hidden transcript” refers to “discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by powerholders.” Here I will modify Scott’s distinction between “hidden transcripts” and “public transcripts” to refer to the sources upon which historians draw. Café Society’s cultural politics can be traced most easily through the public transcript of magazine articles, newspaper stories, and memoirs. The prolabor, antifascist, and antiracist thrust of those politics is unmistakable. Conversely, the club’s orthodox politics—its clandestine Communist party fund-raising activities—appear primarily in the hidden transcript of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) files, including material prepared for publication in the columns of journalists friendly to the bureau. For the original usage, see Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance, 1–16, esp. 2, 4.


7 Wilfrid Sheed, Clare Boothe Luce (New York, 1982), 67; Mills, Power Elite, 72–74; Robert Sylvester, No Cover Charge: A Backward Look at the Night Clubs (New York, 1956), 223–42; Helen Lawrenson, Whistling Girl (Garden City, 1978), 86–89.
artistic middle class, such as Walter White, Ralph Bunche, Richard Wright, E. Franklin Frazier, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, and, of course, Paul Robeson. When patrons occasionally used racial slurs or complained about interracial dancing, they were firmly informed of the club's policies concerning racial toleration. The white bandleader Benny Goodman routinely carried his own mouthpiece in his pocket. But he reportedly made a point of conspicuously popping into his mouth the instrument being played by the African American clarinetist Edmund Hall.8

Employees and performers were fairly treated, and customers received honest value, contrary to the prevailing practices of New York clubs. Josephson prided himself on running the club like a shoe store, where customer satisfaction was paramount. “Folks tell me they’re glad to find a place that’s run by a former shoe-store

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owner," he announced. "They know so many of these places are run by former bootleggers, or the Broadway boys, and it makes them feel good to go to a place they know is run by a little business man." In contrast to practices in mob-controlled clip joints, food and beverage prices were kept low, the kitchen took pride in its menu, and patrons were spared the nuisance of cigarette girls. Those who provided the entertainment were treated with respect, not kept isolated from the audience. A number of artists developed unusually long-standing professional relationships with Josephson, including Hazel Scott, Josh White, Teddy Wilson, Mary Lou Williams, and the boogie-woogie pianists Meade "Lux" Lewis, Albert Ammons, and Pete Johnson. Billie Holiday worked exclusively at Café Society for two full years, Lena Horne for a year. "I always paid people scale or better, and the highest salary I paid was around thirty-five hundred a week," Josephson told an interviewer. "I also managed a lot of my performers for free when they went out to Hollywood and such." This sort of security was unusual in the nightclub business, and it helped the artists develop professionally. Moreover, it made explicit ideological indoctrination of performers unnecessary; when asked if his artists were educated to become politically conscious, Josephson said it resulted simply from treating them fairly and allowing contact with the "liberal thinking people" who attended the clubs.9

Josephson treated other personnel equitably as well. All employees, from musicians and comedians to office workers to cooks, waiters, and bartenders, were unionized, a fact in which Josephson took much pride. He was the first nightclub operator to sign with the American Guild of Variety Artists. When the club was picketed by the Stagehands' Union for failing to hire an electrician to switch on an electric light for the floor show, Josephson reiterated his support for unions, protesting that he paid wages higher above union scale than any other club in the area. "Even my press agent belongs to a union with which I do business," he told the New York Times. Because employees were unionized and their families were allowed to sit where they chose in the audience, speculated Lena Horne, "I never felt that atmosphere of hating the boss that I was used to."10

In a variety of ways the club wore its cultural politics on its sleeve. Lawrenson had originally wanted to send cigarette girls around chanting, "Cigars, cigarettes, wolfhounds," and she proposed that waiters offer gratuitous insults to customers, but the staff rebelled. Instead, patrons were greeted by a doorman wearing tattered gloves who complimented them on their discriminating taste and served by waiters in tails. The club's decor made a striking political statement. Josephson had announced his intention of opening a club satirizing the upper classes and invited


10 The Stagehands' Union wanted the club to hire an electrician at $90 a week to switch on an electric light three times a night for the floor show. Oddly, the New York Times ran three articles covering this controversy while otherwise ignoring the club. New York Times, Jan. 21, 1944, p. 19; ibid., Jan. 22, 1944, p. 15; ibid., Jan. 25, 1944, p. 21. Lena Horne and Richard Schickel, Lena (Garden City, 1965), 115.
Cafe Society Is Built Up on Idea Of What Not to Put in Night Club

Café Society's famous murals, such as this one depicting a patron at the mercy of nightclub ruses, were painted by a crew of artists affiliated with the Federal Art Project. The artists, who included Anton Refregier and William Gropper, received a small cash payment as well as free food and drink at the club.


several artists to pick a spot and go to work. The result was a number of modernist and surrealist works depicting patrons at the mercy of nightclub ruses: fawning waiters, unwanted palm readers, intrusive photographers and cigarette vendors. Another picture offered a caricature of a mustachioed fat cat doing a fan dance in his underwear. The murals were done by a crew of artists affiliated with the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), whose budget had just been slashed by Congress. Several contributors were members of the John Reed Club, including Anton Refregier, a founding member, and William Gropper. Even the murals' production expressed the communal barter system on which the club operated in its early days. The artists received a small sum of cash and an equivalent-due bill to be paid in food and liquor at the club. Another artist wandered in from the street to paint the piano in exchange for a small in-kind payment.11

Early press accounts remarked on the unshaven faces and disheveled appearance of some patrons, noting that sweaters were occasionally visible bulging under men's jackets. But the club also attracted the very crowd it tried to satirize. Holiday described the opening night audience as "celebrities, artists, rich society people" and recounted being pursued by a "rich white heiress from Fifth Avenue" she met at the club who sent her slacks, jackets, and suits "tailored like a man's with butchy accessories." On weekends, recalled Josephson, "the place looked like Princeton, Yale, and Harvard rolled into one." (He had run ads in each university's student newspaper.) Variety commented: "Originally a Greenwich Village sneer at that social strata after which it was named, paradoxically enough the spot is becoming a preferred hangout for the we-must-be-seen-nowhere-but-in-the-right-places crowd."¹²

This chi-chi tone was more pronounced at Café Society Uptown, which Josephson opened in October 1940. He had expected to close the struggling Sheridan Square club, soon renamed Café Society Downtown, but the success of the midtown establishment generated a surge of attendance downtown. The club was located on Fifty-eighth Street near Park Avenue, next door to the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society. In contrast to the Sheridan Square basement, which Josephson chose because it was cheap, the uptown club was expansive: its two-story walls featured murals by Anton Refregier and "overhanging ceiling decorations with startling effects." The New York Sun praised the $30,000 refurbishment: "Barney Josephson has turned loose a crew of inspired contractors, carpenters and brush wielders on the premises and evolved a layout that is remarkably active, tasteful and eyefilling." The trumpeter Bill Coleman described the uptown club as "a real pluffy joint"; where its forerunner had only one small dressing room, the Uptown had a large dressing room on the ground floor and several others on the third floor. Coleman recalled the clientele as of "a higher class than that at the downtown club." In fact, Josephson soon posted a sign in the dressing room prohibiting musicians from sitting with patrons. Bandleaders and solo performers were exempt from the rule. Coleman ignored the stricture, and Josephson filled his chair in Teddy Wilson's band with another trumpeter, apparently in retaliation.¹³

How did cabarets founded to needle the upper crust end up drawing that very crowd? This irony was widely noted in the extensive and mainly favorable press coverage that the two cafés generated in the early years. To be sure, both locations attracted more than just the café society. Their audience was a microcosm of an important segment of the urban coalition that supported Franklin D. Roosevelt: labor leaders, intellectuals, writers, jazz lovers, celebrities, students, and assorted leftists. Well-known patrons ranged from Harry Hopkins and Nelson Rockefeller to Charlie Chaplin, Errol Flynn, Gene Kelly, and Betty Perske, who later changed her name to Lauren Bacall. It included a class fraction Max Weber termed the "pariah--

intelligentsia”—free-lance writers, graduate students, bohemian artists, independent scholars—whose marginality to the dominant social order put them at a critical distance from its values, conventions, and opinions. 14 If the middle class was not represented, that was because the actual target of Café Society’s satire was less patrician elites than the middle-class aspirants to a culture of celebrity.

The experience of Lena Horne illustrates the conflicted class dynamics of Café Society. When Josephson auditioned the young vocalist, she was performing with Charlie Barnet’s big band at the Paramount Theatre. He noticed that she was stunning, but could she sing? At the first rehearsal he had another question:

I asked her if she was a Negro, and she bristled and said yes. I told her she could pass for anything and she blew up. “I don't dig you,” she said, and I said, “Lena, there are dozens of nice Jewish girls from Brooklyn doing the Latin routines. Let me present you as a Negro talent.”

This proved easier said than done.

She would close her eyes when she sang, or look at the ceiling. So I said to her, “I know about white people and the Negroes and that most Negroes cannot look white people in the eye. Is that why you never look at your audience? Don't be afraid of them.” I sat at a ringside table, and when she looked at the ceiling I'd make signals. And I went over the lyrics of her song, pointing out their meanings. Finally, she got to the point when she sang a blues of making people stand up and shout.

Horne’s own account largely follows Josephson’s. When he told her, “It’s almost satire to hear you sing the blues”—an example of his “painfully honest” manner—she could hardly disagree. “You could say that I had never really heard the blues before,” she admitted. “I had only overheard them, on a radio playing in the apartment next door or from someone singing on the same bill with me. But I had never really listened.” Her middle-class milieu considered the blues “dirty, an unpleasant reminder of their low origins. It’s ironic that the people who taught me to appreciate the blues were the so-called white liberals.”

Barney Josephson also helped in this process. He knew why I reacted as I frequently did—because he'd read it in a book. Since I had no books about it, it must have given him a lot of pleasure to inform me when I was acting like a Negro. . . . So when my dander would be aroused by some white women, Barney knew the history of that mutual antagonism. On the few occasions some white man was able to get near me and I jumped salty, Barney knew the history of what caused that and helped me to understand.

A middle-class African American such as Horne complicated Josephson’s attempts to break down racial barriers. In effect, he was asking Horne and other performers to “black up,” culturally if not in terms of grease paint. 15 By conflating class and race, Café Society put authentic blackness and middle-class values at odds with one

14 On the term pariah-intelligentsia, see Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance, 124.
another. This impulse to see a tension between racial authenticity and bourgeois background affected other members of the left jazz community. John Hammond, easily the most influential talent scout and producer of the era, felt that Duke Ellington, for example, lacked proper race consciousness. Hammond expressed that impulse clearly through the artists he chose for his “From Spirituals to Swing” concert at Carnegie Hall, avoiding the more commercial and white-influenced performers in favor of artists untainted by the cultural marketplace. “These are artists who, for the most part, have had no formal musical training of any kind, cannot read musical notations, and have never played before white audiences or in any formal way before colored audiences,” Hammond wrote proudly in the New York Times. In fact, many of those performers were regulars at Café Society, because Hammond was Josephson’s musical adviser.16

This is not to say that Hammond and Josephson were wholly responsible for molding the politics or performance styles of the artists they employed. The freemasonry of fellow artists proved more decisive for Horne, who later described her stint at Café Society as “a time of awakening for me,” a deepening sense of racial identity and political awareness. “Thanks . . . to the whole atmosphere around Barney’s clubs, which was friendly and secure, I began to interest myself in matters like Civil Rights and equal opportunities for everyone.” Through a friendship with Billie Holiday, who had preceded Horne as featured vocalist at Café Society and whom she sought out for advice, Horne boned up on the side of black life from which she had been shielded by her bourgeois upbringing. She met Paul Robeson, who “did everything he could to reinforce my weakened, mostly dormant sense of racial identity,” and Josh White, who introduced her to protest songs. Bandleaders at the club, including Teddy Wilson, once dubbed the “Marxist Mozart,” and Frankie Newton, were well known in the musicians’ community for their outspoken left politics. Through Canada Lee, Horne made the acquaintance of Orson Welles and many others prominent in the Popular Front Left. “I did not become close to them, but their attitudes were good for me—the respect they showed for talent, the interest they had in politics and the social order, the vibrancy of their beliefs and ideas—all this made me feel a part of the life of a much larger world than I had ever known before.”17

What sort of show did Café Society, as the self-styled cynosure of Popular Front New York cabaret culture, provide? While particular acts and artists were in constant flux (although more stable than in other nightclubs), certain patterns of entertainment stand out. Most shows included a comedian emcee such as Jack Gilford, Jimmy Savo, or Zero Mostel; a featured vocalist such as Mildred Bailey, Billie Holiday, or Lena Horne; or a self-accompanied vocalist such as Hazel Scott or Josh


White. A typical show would also include dancers such as Pearl Primus and Beatrice and Evelveryn Kraft and a small vocal or instrumental ensemble, such as the Golden Gate Quartet, the boogie-woogie pianists Albert Ammons, Pete Johnson, and Meade "Lux" Lewis, or one of the combos led by Eddie South or Billie Moore. Many shows included a featured solo pianist, sometimes Mary Lou Williams or Art Tatum, in addition to the versatile Scott. Finally, the show would feature a small "chamber jazz" dance orchestra (the club had a small floor for dancing), led variously by Teddy Wilson, Frankie Newton, Joe Marsala, or Eddie Heywood.

The dominant theme could be described as syncretism—the blurring of cultural categories, genres, and ethnic groups. A recent study of Popular Front culture advances a taxonomy of musical genres, including "cabaret blues," best exemplified in the music of Billie Holiday and Josh White, which featured a promiscuous blending of Tin Pan Alley, hot jazz, Piedmont blues, and European cabaret music and suffused it with racial and working-class protest. Josephson himself had a special fondness for the contemporary fad of jazzing the classics (a preference that Hammond did not share). "I love songs of the people, and I'm fond of good swing," he told the New York Post. "When Hazel Scott plays Bach's Prelude in C-Sharp Minor, that's something! Or her Brahms' Hungarian Dance No. 5. And you should hear Eddie South going into Paganini's 24th Caprice, in Swing." Hailing from Louisiana, Missouri, South had studied in conservatories in Paris, Vienna, and Budapest. Likening South to a raucously inventive jazz violinist, a reviewer described him as "a Stuff Smith who has gone to musical high school. . . . who combines a substantial fiddle technique with a Negro's gift for rhythm. . . . [and] does as good a job on Hungarian folk music as he does on the better popular tunes of the day."18

"Authenticity" seems to have been the crucial criterion in critics' evaluation of acts that by definition skirted cultural boundaries. The Kraft Sisters, dubbed "Hindus from Englewood" by one sardonic caption writer, illustrated a different sort of blending, of the Indian subcontinent and African American styles. "They never lower the authenticity of the idiom, even unto the rousingly rhythmic finale number, which is Oriental by way of Harlem in orchestral background." (Another reviewer described them less generously as performing "positively authentic Hindu dances to the accompaniment of such old ritual music as The Bombay Lindy, Boogie-Woogie Temple Dance and Duke Ellington's Pyramid song.") The dancer Pearl Primus began appearing at Café Society in 1943, performing what were described as Haitian ceremonial dances and snake-worship rituals to the accompaniment of bongos and a Nigerian drummer. "Her African rhythms have the feeling of authenticity," reported Variety.19

In an area of segregated nightclubs, transgressing cultural and ethnic boundaries imbued these acts with a clandestine political edge, even when their messages were

not consciously political. More explicit political statements were usually left to the emcees. Observing Zero Mostel's return to Café Society Uptown, a reviewer noted approvingly that Mostel was "still doing his standard Hitler double-talk, the Jimmy Durante 'one-tooth-no-tooth' routine, Senator Pellagra and the Roseland jitterbug routines. And all remain big clicks." But the single most famous work of social criticism associated with Café Society was Holiday's anti-lynching anthem, "Strange Fruit."

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Responses to the song varied widely. Variety credited it with "an undefined appeal though it's basically a depressing piece. There's no compromise with Miss Holiday's stuff," the critic continued; "either the patrons like her very much or they don't care for her at all." Josephson himself described it as "agitprop," "a piece of propaganda" with which he insisted Holiday close every performance. "Lights out, just one small spinlight, and all service stopped. . . . There were no encores after it. My instruction was walk off, period. People had to remember 'Strange Fruit,' get their insides burned with it." Among jazz aficionados the piece was always suspect. "I never liked 'Strange Fruit' myself and I urged Columbia to have it recorded elsewhere," recalled Hammond, who played a big role in recruiting Holiday to Café Society. "In many ways I think the song hurt Billie as an artist, although there is no doubt that its shock value helped her career."

One form of jazz was conspicuously absent from the promiscuous hybrid of Café Society: bebop. Since bebop emerged during the ascendancy of Café Society and has been widely viewed as black protest music, one might have expected Josephson to provide a forum for this new music. But in fact bebop found no place in the cultural Left centered in Café Society, demonstrating how thoroughly misunderstood have been the politics of jazz in the 1940s. Bebop was not a revolt against commercialism; its foremost stars hoped to achieve commercial success playing in big bands for dancers. Bebop was not mainly a vehicle for black cultural nationalism; indeed, it generated opposition from conservative whites precisely because it seemed to encourage integration and from jazz purists because it appeared to dilute jazz for white consumption. And it was not primarily a revolution against big-band swing; its greatest players emerged from swing bands and continued to play in that tradition. Apolitical establishments such as Minton's and Monroe's Uptown House in Harlem and Fifty-second Street clubs such as the Three Deuces, the Onyx, and Kelly's Stable, rather than Café Society, served as the incubators of bebop. Some Manhattan nightclubs promoted bebop, but for commercial rather than political purposes. In 1948, for example, the Royal Roost instituted a bebop-

only music policy, initially limited to Tuesday nights but quickly expanded to seven nights a week. The club catered to people on a limited budget and, by opening a milk bar, even to underage listeners. This formula proved so successful that it was copied by other establishments. In 1949, even the conservative Stork Club opened its doors to bebop, hosting a “Bop at the Stork Club” party sponsored by Benny Goodman and Capitol Records. A planning memo for the event described its purpose as “making Bop respectable and amusing, while keeping its musical flavor and controversial approach,” but it stipulated: “None of the really extreme boppers [are] to be present.” By 1948 bebop was perceived more as an exotic but marketable trend than as a subversion of dominant racial or musical practices. It was a world apart from Josephson’s Popular Front entertainment policy.21

By that year the owner of Café Society had other things on his mind than expanding the musical horizons of the cultural Left. He had run afoul of some of the most powerful figures of that period, men solidly grounded in the realm of orthodoxy politics. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover had opened a file on Hammond in 1941, and two years later the FBI began a dossier on Josephson that would eventually comprise 2,100 pages. By 1944, Josephson was placed on the Security Index, a list of people to be rounded up in case of national emergency, where he remained until 1965. During these twenty-odd years, Josephson and his businesses were kept under surveillance, and records and typewriting samples were obtained, presumably through a break-in. Josephson’s official records from New Jersey and New York, including birth and marriage certificates, were scoured in search of grounds for legal action. The bureau hoped to trigger an investigation for income tax evasion and thus gain access to the café’s records. He was periodically surveilled during the 1950s, after selling Café Society, and FBI agents initiated on-the-street interviews in 1954 and 1956 outside Josephson’s new business venture, a restaurant called the Cookery. Careful surveillance was again conducted in 1961, at which time agents observed Josephson conversing in his restaurant with an unnamed person later arrested on espionage charges. Josephson’s whereabouts during several trips abroad were tracked, and in 1949 embassies were asked to report on his activities. In 1950 his passport was confiscated.22

Why this extraordinary concern with Josephson over a period stretching from the Popular Front to the New Frontier? There are a number of possible reasons to explain Hoover’s interest in Josephson, some incontestable, others more speculative. First, Josephson was the brother of one of the more prominent and outspoken American Communists of the era, Leon Josephson. Because they were very close, sometimes sharing a residence as well as a business partnership in Café Society, Hoover assumed that Barney was an accomplice in Leon’s “un-American” activities. That the two were integrally linked in the FBI’s mind is revealed by the cross-listings in its files. Leon was precisely the type of “subversive” that attracted Hoover’s closest

22 This chronology was pieced together from no. 100–48754, “Barney Josephson” Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) File (J. Edgar Hoover FBI Building, Washington, D.C.).
Born in Latvia, Leon was naturalized in 1921 and reportedly joined the (Communist) Workers Party of America in 1924. An attorney for International Labor Defense, Josephson defended Communist union organizers charged with murder in Gastonia, North Carolina; he was later accused of procuring fake passports to help them flee the country while on appeal. Then working in his shoe store, Barney became involved in the case when he sent down a case of shoes at the request of Leon so that his clients—"barefooted hillbillies"—would have shoes to wear to court.23

In 1935 Leon was arrested by Danish police in Copenhagen for involvement in an alleged Soviet espionage ring accused of plotting to assassinate Hitler. In Barney's account, the news came as a surprise:

One morning in the winter of 1934, I picked up my New York Times and a little one-column dispatch about six inches long with the dateline Copenhagen caught my eye. It was entitled "Two Americans arrested for plotting to assassinate Adolph Hitler." I read, "A group of 30 people have been arrested and there are two Americans involved. One of the Americans is Leon Josephson, an attorney from Trenton, New Jersey." I suddenly became ill and thought, so that's what my brother has been doing in Europe!

Rumors that Leon Josephson was a Soviet agent involved in procuring false passports and attempting to steal the atom bomb continued after the war. In 1947 Josephson was cited for contempt of Congress for refusing to answer questions about his alleged involvement in Soviet espionage in testimony before HUAC; he spent a year in prison after the Supreme Court refused to review his appeal. He emerged from prison unrepentant, vowing to intensify his efforts on behalf of the party and remaining particularly active in the area of civil rights.24

How closely did Barney's views and activities accord with his older brother's? In January 1935 he apparently visited Moscow and charged the cost of transportation to a Communist party (CP) account, for which a notice was placed in his passport record in 1940, saying any passport request should be refused. He later admitted having been a member of the party for six months, in 1937. But evidence in his dossier suggests that the FBI was mostly exercised by his support for groups labeled Communist front by congressional committees (a circular definition, since the committees based the designation mostly on information provided by the FBI). Josephson, his clubs, and the artists who performed there were involved in fund raising for an astonishing variety of left political causes. While he supported Spanish war relief and China relief, Russian war relief was a particular favorite of Josephson, whose family had emigrated from Latvia. Café Society once offered seats at a

23 New Common Good, Nov. 1984, p. 1. I have no evidence of Leon Josephson's active involvement in the club. He is simply named in the FBI documents as a co-owner, and the portions that might provide more insight into his role have been blacked out. See, for example, D. M. Ladd to Director, FBI, Re: Barney Josephson, memo, April 12, 1947, no. 100-48754, "Barney Josephson" FBI File.

24 New Common Good, Nov. 1984, p. 11. References to Leon are sprinkled through Barney's FBI file. In particular, see D. M. Ladd to Director, FBI, Re: Barney Josephson, memo, April 12, 1947, no. 100-48754, "Barney Josephson" FBI File; Ladd to Director, FBI, Re: Barney Josephson, memo, April 8, 1952, ibid.
Carnegie Hall concert to the first five hundred people who brought in working wristwatches for donation to Soviet military and medical personnel. Café Society sponsored a “From Bach to Boogie-Woogie” benefit at Carnegie Hall for the health fund of Local 802 of the musicians’ union. In 1944 the uptown club hosted a star-studded benefit for the fourth war loan drive, emceed by Max Lerner, which was broadcast coast to coast by the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS).25

Like Hammond, who supported many of the same causes and organizations, Josephson denied Communist membership, stressing rather his progressive views on race. Journalistic accounts portray him as quiet and unassuming with a bookish streak, far from the flamboyant stereotype of the nightclub operator. “He lives alone in a three-room apartment in 39th St.,” reported the Post in 1946. “One of his pleasures there is playing swing records. Another is cooking cutlets over a small kitchen stove. . . . He drinks very little, doesn’t play cards, has very few close friends.” Only the “murderous blobs of color which he innocently wears for neckties” suggested any involvement in show business. He emerges from the public transcript as an idealist who lost his shoe business during the depression but managed to strike it rich in entertainment almost despite himself.26

FBI officials clearly believed there were direct links between the Communist party and Café Society. Rumors circulated about the $6,000 Josephson acknowledged receiving from friends of his brother to start the club. (At the time he had just seven dollars and change to his name, he later claimed.) According to Lawrenson, the seed money came from the CP, which expected to raise funds through the venture. Earl Browder supposedly brought the club to the attention of Lawrenson and Vanity Fair, which contributed invaluable publicity. Howard Rushmore, who worked at the Daily Worker in 1938 and 1939 and later joined the New York Journal American, charged that V. J. Jerome, head of the CP’s national committee, was behind the establishment of Café Society and demanded that all profits go to the party. Rushmore also said that Josephson made frequent visits to CP headquarters and required that waiters be party members, preferably Spanish Civil War vets. Louis Budenz, an editor at the Daily Worker who later turned professional witness against his former colleagues, divulged the existence of a secret party fund that bankrolled Popular Front organizations, including Café Society Uptown. “The purpose,” he wrote, “was to make that night club a rendezvous for artists and entertainers and people of wealth, with whom Communists could there establish acquaintance.”27

An intriguing unsigned press release–like document in Josephson’s FBI file, apparently written in the bureau to be leaked to friendly journalists, spells out a sym-

Press accounts on Barney Josephson portrayed him as quiet and unassuming. He dabbled in sculpture, enjoyed cooking, and decorated his office with works of art and books on philosophy. He often spoke of the racial discrimination he observed and challenged while growing up in Trenton, New Jersey.


...iotic relationship between party and club. "Two swanky night clubs, which have reaped hundreds of thousands of dollars of capitalist money while kidding patrons about the sad state of American democracy, have for years been Communist Party 'fronts.'" The release charged Josephson with posing as a "liberal" while being "ardently pro-Communist" and making many visits to "Red Fascist headquarters," in organizing the club, to solicit support and advice from "high-ranking Commu-
The Daily Worker staff were told to provide Café Society favorable publicity and helped line up the artists who produced the “Left-wing murals”; in return, they and other “Red commissars” were admitted free. “Not only were Reds assigned as entertainers, waiters and captains,” the release states, “but Josephson was advised to use Communist propaganda in shows for the cover-charge customers.”

While some of these details are hyperbolic, there is no reason to doubt the general thrust. The year 1938 was a high-water mark of the Browder-inspired Popular Front, a period when the Communist party was expanding its outreach through popular culture. Josephson’s operation would have fit the mission of the party in those years. The $6,000 loan from friends of his brother is otherwise difficult to explain. On the other hand, the club could hardly have been regarded as a surefire fund raiser. Why put a former shoe salesman with no entertainment experience in charge? And Café Society did in fact lose money until the opening of the uptown branch, according to Josephson. Unfortunately and typically, the bureau’s evidence has been almost entirely excised, making it impossible to evaluate the charges.

This hidden transcript, however, does provide an additional dimension to Hoover’s long-standing suspicion of Josephson. From the first year of its investigation, the FBI pursued the possibility that Josephson might be an alien and therefore subject to deportation. Hoover had used this strategy at the beginning of his career in helping plan and execute the raids on foreign-born American radicals in 1919, during the previous postwar Red Scare. In December 1944, Josephson was placed on the Security Index. A March 1947 memo to Hoover from the Justice Department again raised the prospect that Josephson was a Russian national who had arrived in the United States at the age of one, prompting Hoover to pen a cranky note: “Why hasn’t our supervision spotted this? It seems to me we should be alert to such possibilities and not have to wait for Dept. to give us a nudge and outline investigative leads for us.” After revisiting the records, the New York office conceded that all public records supported Josephson’s native-born status. But six years later, in response to yet another request by Hoover, the New York office reported that the New Jersey’s Bureau of Vital Statistics failed to include a record of Josephson’s birth and that “Barney” was an Americanization of “Barash.” In November 1953, Josephson’s Security Index card finally was changed to reflect the belief that he was not “Native Born,” and he was occasionally identified in subsequent files as Barasch.

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28 Special Agent in Charge (SAC) New York to Director, FBI, Re: Barney Josephson, memo, April 3, 1947, no. 100–48754, “Barney Josephson” FBI File. A cover letter attached to the memo states, “This information was furnished to the Bureau by an [undecipherable] outside source and if the information contained therein is utilized it should be appropriately paraphrased.” This, coupled with the rhetorical flair of the release, suggests it was written to be leaked to sympathetic journalists to generate damaging publicity on Josephson and his operations.

29 Mark Naison, Communists in Harlem during the Depression (New York, 1984), 193–219. Hammond claims that Josephson lost his initial investment within two weeks, and that the club was kept afloat by additional $5,000 investments by Hammond, Benny Goodman, and Willard Alexander, after which it turned a profit. Hammond with Townsend, John Hammond on Record, 207.

30 Theron L. Candle to Director, FBI, Re: Barney Josephson, memo, March 14, 1947, no. 100–48754, “Barney Josephson” FBI File; SAC, New York, to Director, memo, April 3, 1947, ibid.; Director to SAC, New York, memo, March 19, 1953, ibid.; SAC, New York, to Director, April 3, 1953, ibid.; SAC, New York, to Director, Nov. 19, 1953,
A final, more speculative explanation for Hoover’s animus takes us from the hidden transcript of FBI files to the ultrapublic world of 1940s cabaret culture. The determination with which Hoover pursued Josephson through the years stemmed in part from a broader clash in the culture of nightclubs. Café Society’s ambitious, carefully arranged programs and honest customer values expressed a producerist ethos. No other American nightclub of the period could match its array of talent in folk music and jazz. The clubs’ policies and entertainment were specifically designed to create a sense of solidarity; audiences would have their collective consciousness raised, just as artists and employees would benefit from enlightened management and progressive audiences. And audience members got the full measure of their investment both in food and drink and in entertainment.

The war years were a golden age for Manhattan nightclubs; by 1942 some fifty top-notch clubs were grossing more than $85 million a year by offering a multicultural smorgasbord: the Persian Room; Bal Tabarin; Casino Russe; dozens of Latin American clubs offering samba, rhumba, and calypso; and other clubs featuring American folk music of the Deep South, various styles of jazz, European cabaret songs, chorus girls done up in gay nineties’ attire, or circuslike extravaganzas. Along with the large splashy nightclubs were establishments offering a more intimate and sophisticated experience; some had set a precedent for Café Society. Max Gordon had opened the Village Vanguard in 1934, presenting over the next decades a similar mix of social satire, folk music, and blues and featuring several performers associated with Josephson’s clubs. Le Ruban Bleu was inaugurated in December 1937 as a deliberate attempt to import the atmosphere and performance style of Parisian cabarets. Its owner, Herbert Jacoby, had been part of the European cabaret scene and booked exiles from fascism such as Lotte Lenya to perform there and later at the Blue Angel. Opening the following year, Cabaret TAC (for Theatre Arts Committee, a Popular Front group comprising entertainers from theater, radio, and film) offered a variety of left political skits, songs, and dances, drawing mainly on Broadway talent. “It’s gone and happened,” the Daily Worker announced jubilantly. “People everywhere in the progressive, audacious and outspoken theatre have talked about it for so long. . . . But it’s here—the social-minded night club.”

Anticipating another feature of Café Society, during the 1930s the impresario Billy Rose opened a string of successful Broadway clubs, including Casa Manana and the Diamond Horseshoe, that delivered customer value by controlling the cost of food and liquor and replacing cover charges with minimums. Rose, Joe Moss, Clifford Fischer, and before them Nils Granlund all sought to reconfigure the nightclub

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*ibid.* It may have been significant to Hoover that the Josephsons were Jewish. On Hoover’s distrust of “Jewish intellectuals” and FBI anti-Semitism more generally, see Natalie Robins, *Alien Ink: The FBI's War on Freedom of Expression* (New York, 1992), 64–66; and Anthony Summers, *Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover* (New York, 1993), 56–57.

31 On how and why the category of celebrity was constructed in the United States, see Charles Leonard Ponce de Leon, “Idols and Icons: Representations of Celebrity in American Culture, 1850–1940” (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1992).
as a legitimate institution of United States commercial culture: safe, affordable, and attractive for bourgeois tastes and out-of-town tourists.\textsuperscript{32}

A very different nightclub strategy competed with this producerist ethos. It was a model based on proximity to celebrity, and its most celebrated exemplar was the Stork Club. Managed by Sherman Billingsley, a laconic Oklahoman who had made a career of flouting Prohibition, the Stork built its reputation by flattering the very celebrities and arrivistes that Café Society claimed as the objects of its satire. A starker contrast could hardly be imagined. In contrast to the latter's interracial policy, the Stork was strictly whites-only; Billingsley once refused admission to the maharaja of Jaipur, saying, "I don't want none of those colored men in here."\textsuperscript{33} His club offered no entertainment of any sort, save a couple of small and deliberately obscure orchestras that played constantly for dancers. Chorus girls, vocalists, dancers, strippers, magicians, or comedians were unknown. Food and drink were notoriously overpriced. What was offered instead was the spectacle of celebrity.

As a contemporary observed, "The show consists of the common people looking at the celebrities and the celebrities looking in the mirrors, and they all sit popeyed in admiration." Where Café Society patrons sat surrounded by modernist murals lampooning the very saps they ardently hoped not to be, Stork Club patrons immersed themselves in mirrored reflections of themselves as and with celebrities. No longer was the average American's exposure to celebrities limited to the mediating pages of syndicated gossip columns or glossy magazines. One could enter this exclusive world in the flesh, crowd around small tables, and consume the very refreshments and spectacles enjoyed by the most illustrious members of café society. Billingsley became the recognized master of "dressing a room," giving away expensive perfume, champagne, and corsages along with the Stork's best tables in order to ensure that the beautiful and famous would come, be plainly visible to the rank and file, and keep coming back. "You've got to dress your room," he insisted. "People want to go to a place where the best-dressed, best-looking and brainiest people go." Billingsley himself became a second-order celebrity, greeted familiarly by strangers from around the country who devised ploys to impress guests back home with their intimacy with the great man. (Roughly half the Stork's patrons were out-of-town tourists.) Beginning in 1950 and continuing for several years, Billingsley even hosted a CBS interview program that originated in a fourth-floor studio designed to replicate a corner of the nightclub below.\textsuperscript{34}


\textsuperscript{33} Sylvester, \textit{No Cover Charge}, 125. Billingsley's prejudice against people of color was reportedly matched by his anti-union and anti-Semitic views; see Curt Gentry, \textit{J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and the Secrets} (New York, 1991), 329.

Among the Stork’s elite regulars were two men instrumental in engineering the demise of Café Society: J. Edgar Hoover and Walter Winchell. In fact, the Stork Club was where Hoover regularly fed his bits of derogatory information to favored journalists, the sort of material whose publication in 1947 and 1948 deposed Josephson from his club. The two men enjoyed a wonderfully symbiotic relationship, with the FBI director exchanging privileged gossip for the columnist’s favorable publicity. One wonders what Hoover made of the fact that one of his most-hated targets, Eleanor Roosevelt, chose Café Society for perhaps her only foray into a nightclub, later inviting the Golden Gate Quartet, who were performing during her visit, to the White House. “If only I could get the Roosevelt boys to bring their mother!” Billingsley told a reporter. Café Society’s interracial policy also would have inflamed Hoover, who was shocked by a visit to the Cotton Club, ironically the very nightclub that had prompted Josephson to establish his own. “Not only were there black and white musicians, there was a black and white couple dancing—a black man with a white woman,” recalled a woman who accompanied Hoover there.35

Leon Josephson’s 1947 contempt conviction set in motion the events that quickly ended his brother’s involvement in the clubs. Barney was targeted by syndicated columnists, particularly Westbrook Pegler, in what he later described as a campaign of “innuendo” and “guilt by association.” Beginning in December 1947, Pegler wrote a series of columns exposing the political missteps of the Josephsons. One took rival columnist Ed Sullivan to task for including a benign mention of an evening at Café Society on which Helen Keller was present. “It may seem incredible that Mr. Sullivan is so ill-read that he had not learned that the Josephsons, who own both places, were cited in the recent reports of the Committee on Un-American Activities,” he scolded. “The committee was told that Leon Josephson was a Communist who went abroad on a fraudulent American passport and got counterfeit Americans passports for Gerhardt Eisler and others. . . . There is further strong testimony concerning Bernard Josephson. So there was no news value to justify this propaganda concerning this resort and these persons.”36

A reporter from Life confided to Josephson that he had been assigned to take photographs of a room at Café Society Uptown where Soviet spies reportedly passed secret information. According to Josephson, the reporter was so shocked by the request that he eventually convinced the editor to drop the story. Another friend told Josephson that a prominent lawyer and mutual friend had refused to drop into the club for a drink because he had heard the FBI was photographing everybody who patronized it. The owner tried to fight back, taking out a full-page ad in Billboard magazine, with the following one-line caption in small print: “My head is bloodied


36 New York Journal American, Dec. 9, 1947, p. 3. See also ibid., Dec. 12, 1947, p. 3; and ibid., June 12, 1948, p. 3.
but not bowed—Barney Josephson.” But business declined sharply, and after losing $90,000, Josephson sold the clubs in the spring of 1949 and found himself “out of the nightclub business and flat broke.” Soon afterward his second wife left him because of his “connection” to Leon, and he was denied his passport to travel to Paris to investigate the possibility of opening a nightclub in France.37

Likewise, Lena Horne’s Café Society education would have unexpected consequences. Less than a year after opening at the cabaret, Horne traveled to Hollywood. She starred in Cabin in the Sky and Stormy Weather after signing the first long-term studio contract won by an African American (a contract that Josephson urged she break and renegotiate, which Horne did), and she seemed poised for unprecedented stardom. But when a political chill settled over the culture industries, particularly Hollywood, beginning in 1947, Horne’s activities and friendships on the left returned to haunt her. She had been close to Robeson, she had done benefits for left causes and was on record for her support of the Hollywood Independent Citizens Committee, the Joint Anti-Fascist Committee, and W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson’s Council on African Affairs. For this she was listed in 1950 by Red Channels, a magazine distributed to radio and TV stations to help them keep track of political undesirables. Horne was attacked by the Hearst newspaper columnist Jack O’Brien and banned from radio and television for a time. “For the second time in less than a decade, some force outside myself had reached out and arbitrarily, whimsically, stopped my career just at a moment when it might have gone on to something new,” Horne wrote later.38

The Stork Club, by contrast, bustled on as ever. January 1949 saw the “Bop at the Stork Club” reception sponsored by Capitol Records for the purpose of bestowing “stature” on bebop while simultaneously enabling the nightclub to “cash in” on the expected publicity. Through the 1950s the Stork provided as apt a symbol of the cultural politics of the McCarthy era as Café Society had earlier for the Popular Front Left. Just as Josephson’s cabaret had been intended as a congenial setting for raising consciousness and funds, the Stork Club helped cement mutually beneficial relationships that were crucial to Cold War red-baiting. It was where Winchell first met Joseph McCarthy in 1950 before going on to serve as one of the senator’s most loyal and effective media champions. Winchell was also an early partisan of Roy Cohn, touting him to a skeptical Billingsley and, he claimed, introducing him to McCarthy—again at the Stork Club. While Café Society’s public transcript was dominated by the club’s resistance to racial segregation, the Stork’s single most pub-

37 FBI to Passport Division, U.S. State Department, Re: Barney Josephson, memo, April 16, 1951, no. 100-14312, “Barney Josephson” FBI File. It is worth mentioning (as the club’s other chroniclers rarely do) that Café Society Downtown continued in operation through 1959, when it became One Sheridan Square. Artists such as Josh White, George Kirby, Sarah Vaughan, and the Golden Gate Quartet continued to appear there after Josephson sold the club. The room was refurbished in 1955 after floundering for two years. See newspaper clippings, Café Society Downtown, Billy Rose Theatre Collection (New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Lincoln Center, New York, N.Y.). Likewise, the Uptown was given an opulent renovation by Max Gordon and Herbert Jacoby, co-owners of the Blue Angel, but the establishment, christened Le Directoire, failed; see Gavin, Intimate Nights, 85–86.

38 Horne and Schickel, Lena, 118–19, 252–53; Buckley, Hornes, 208–9, 218–19.
lic moment came after allegations by Josephine Baker that she had been snubbed and denied service there, an incident that became a national *cause célèbre* in 1951.39

Would J. Edgar Hoover have taken such interest in Café Society if its owner had not been the brother of a noted Communist? Clearly not. Would Barney Josephson have remained on the Security Index and under FBI surveillance for some twenty years in the absence of evidence linking him to criminal activity if Café Society had not violated cultural values important to Hoover? More difficult to say, but doubtful. Culture probably did matter. For his part, Hoover was right: although Josephson never acknowledged it publicly, his clubs provided the terrain on which popular culture melded with the Communist party of the Popular Front. But in its impact on the future of radical politics, the Josephsons’ Old Left must be judged a virtual dead loss. Targeted by the national security apparatus presided over by Hoover and,

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for a time, McCarthy, the remains of the party were not only routed; their defeat provided the means by which the legacy of the New Deal was effectively and perhaps permanently tarnished. Like Horne, many people associated with the club as performers or guests were blacklisted or barely avoided that fate: Ivan Black, Zero Mostel, Paul Robeson, Abel Meeropol, Lillian Hellman, Budd Schulberg. Called before HUAC, Hazel Scott and Josh White blamed Josephson for their flirtations with the Communist Left.\textsuperscript{40} Café Society's cultural politics, on the other hand, persisted through the career of many of its artists, including among the singers Holiday, Horne, and Big Joe Turner; among the solo acts Josh Brown and Hazel Scott; among the comedians Imogene Coca and Zero Mostel; among the pianists Teddy Wilson and Art Tatum. We can trace the symbolic influence of Café Society from the highly public integration of major league baseball in 1947 through the musical expropriations and collaborations at the heart of rock 'n' roll and the integrated phase of the civil rights movement. In this sense Café Society's cultural politics outstripped the legacy of its orthodox politics.\textsuperscript{41}

Tempting as it is to disentangle cultural and orthodox politics, the case of Café Society suggests that it may be more important to distinguish between different varieties of cultural politics. Culture can serve as the terrain for political action that is conscious and intentional. This was true of Café Society, the Stork Club, and, to choose a celebrated example, the 1926 strike by movie projection operators at the Lafayette Theater in Harlem sparked, according to the social critic Harold Cruse, not by "police brutality, or high rents, or bad schools—but the impact of the developing American cultural apparatus on the economics, the politics, the creative and social development of the black community." When crowds thronged the Savoy Ballroom on 135th Street, they may have defied the color line in the same way as did Café Society's patrons downtown, but they were motivated by a quest for pleasure, not social significance. Without an awareness that they were defying a social taboo, that the taboo was embedded in institutions, and that a strategy was necessary to challenge those institutions, their dancing posed no threat to the status quo and should not be considered a form of politics. The Savoy could be a fertile ground for politics, as in 1943. That spring the police department closed it on the grounds that white servicemen had contracted venereal disease from women to whom they were directed while at the ballroom. In August, after a white police officer shot a black soldier in uniform, Harlem witnessed a full-blown insurrection. On October 22, after lobbying by religious organizations and liberal groups, the dance hall was reopened. There is politics, and there is pleasure; the two are not incommensurable, but surely politics demands more of its participants than does pleasure.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{40} Denning, \textit{Cultural Front}, 338.
\textsuperscript{41} On the persistence of Popular Front culture after its apparent rout by the forces of anticommunism, see \textit{ibid.}, 463--72.
\textsuperscript{42} Harold Cruse, \textit{The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual} (New York, 1967), 81; Stowe, \textit{Swing Changes}, 163.