

Chapter IV: Caesura – The Fire Dwindles

Concerning the culture of black political activism, the 1940s began quite well. Josh White had begun to circuit-ride the North with songs from the chain gang tradition. Concerts and plays were performed in New York on the topic of Southern black poverty. Café Society headlined many black artists and housed a number of active CP members in support of black equality. These existing establishments of the protest tradition influenced white song writers like Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie to perform from the canon of songs folk collectors had accrued over the prior fifteen years.¹ Sterling Brown, who had helped Alan Lomax organize the *Freedom* concert commemorating the 75th anniversary of the 13th Amendment, began writing and speaking about the importance of the black folk song in the identity and progress of black Americans.² Barbara Savage writes of how the effort of African Americans in the Second World War was provided conditionally by black leaders if the federal government would combat racism, which resulted in federally sponsored radio programs of black song like *Freedom's People*.³ However, this progress would not last long; it would eventually be halted by reactionary politicians and the splintering of Afro-American solidarity.

Alan Lomax began a novel radio show in 1940, called *Back Where I Come From*, touting traditional music framed by thematic commentary in between.⁴ Josh White was an interpreter for Leadbelly on the show, following up all of his comments with a more understandable brand of English. Thus, White became the more accessible folk singer that may have been seen more on the level of the listeners. He was more polished too, and would participate in another series of Lomax's called *The School of the Air*. This continued commodification and

1 Woody Guthrie, *Seeds of Man: an experience lived and dreamed*, (New York: Dutton, 1976).

Pete Seeger, *The incomplete folksinger*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972).

2 Sterling Brown, "Negro Folk Expression: Seculars, Spirituals, Ballads, and Work Songs," pp. 243-264.

3 Barbara Savage, *Broadcasting freedom: radio, war, and the politics of race, 1938-1948*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), p. 63.

4 Elijah Wald. *Josh White: Society Blues*, p. 66.

“beautification” of the Southern folk song made it more appealing to middle class white audiences, but began to separate it from its more earthy roots. Since national audiences would much rather see a clean cut gentleman with manners performing, Leadbelly was essentially enveloped by the shadow of Josh White. White and Lomax’s relationship continued to grow, and White would release *Southern Exposure* in the wake of the US involvement in the war and growing tension between the American CP and the government. Since his album, *Chain Gang*, in 1939, White had begun to move away from identifying directly with the Southern black prisoner. Lawrence Gellert had actually accused White of using his song book without permission, damaging any hope White and Gellert may have had at a professional relationship.⁵ His album, *Folk Songs Sung by Josh White*, released in 1944 paved the way for his career at Café Society, where he would headline many acts meant to represent authentic black culture for the upper class. He became quite intimate with the scene and was, hands down, the most prolific folk singer of the community.⁶

Often waxing poetic, he performed the anti-lynching song “Strange Fruit,” written by Jewish teacher Abel Meeropol, and made famous by Billie Holiday. In his book, *Strange Fruit*, charting the history of the song since its conception by Meeropol, David Margolick writes,

Josh White arguably popularized ‘Strange Fruit’ as much as Holiday did. His connection to the material was even more immediate: while leading blind black street singers around the South as a child, he’d actually happened upon a lynching. White never forgot the scene of drunken whites and their rowdy children cavorting as two black men hung from trees; from time to time, he said, the merrymakers jabbed the two victims in the testicles with hot branding irons. White’s version of ‘Strange Fruit’ is intense, almost febrile...⁷

The popularity it had in the night club speaks to the importance political activism still held in the mid-1940s, for many leftists. However, the club was shut down in 1947 after the FBI

5 Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 356.

6 Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 105.

7 David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights*, (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2000), p. 101.

received tips of their association with the CP. “Strange Fruit” was the beginning of an organized effort to appeal for civil rights, by alerting a large majority of the American public to a pressing issue through popular song.



Figure 4: Lynching of Rubin Stacy at Fort Lauderdale, Florida in 1935. Even when *The New York Times* published a story on Stacy’s murder in 1935, Franklin D. Roosevelt refused to support any Anti-lynching legislation for he claimed the South would never forgive him.

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Anti-lynching activism had existed in the NAACP since its founding in 1909, but a 1922 bill had failed in the Senate in the face of a Southern filibuster. A renewed effort in the 1930s spearheaded by NAACP leader Walter White and Representative Joseph Gavagan pressed the anti-lynching “Gavagan bill” through the House in both 1937 and 1940, but it failed in the Senate, again blocked by a Southern filibuster.⁸ “Strange Fruit” affected the consciences of civilians and politicians alike, but it was not enough to engrave federal prosecution of lynching into the law codes of the United States.

⁸ Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), pp. 66-70, 141-165.

White was even gregarious enough to use sex appeal on his white female audience members. In the book on his life, *Josh White: Society Blues*, Elijah Wald quotes Josephine Premice, who saw White at work first hand, “He would have his shirt buttoned, and then he’d unbutton and tease the ladies. He totally enjoyed watching the ladies look at him, and one felt sort for the men they were with. Because women would go crazy....”⁹ Interracial relations had always been a crucial part of equality in America. Blacks were looked down upon but also feared. The Scottsboro case in the 1930s had exposed the white man’s fear of the black body, which threatened to steal his innocent white woman. For White to be able to do this in front of a public audience was a large step in the direction of equal racial relations. Of course, this was in New York, but it still spoke to the changing times and the effect that a moving form of music could have on an audience’s opinions of a person. It is questionable whether white audiences may have really seen White was so accepted by upper class whites, he was not given as inferior a rank as past blues artists had – like Bessie Smith.¹⁰ Wald writes, “At Café Society, Josh was seeing the possibility that this new world of universal brotherhood might be brought to life.”¹¹ A climate of racial equality in a closed off bar in New York was quite promising, even if it was more the exception than the rule in the 1940s.

The dissipation of leftist activism in the late 1940s came not without fights early in the decade by several other black political leaders. A Philip Randolph organized a march to Washington D.C. in 1941 to secure equal access to wartime defense employment for blacks. Randolph had organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in 1925 as a means to defend the rights of the hardworking people of the industry in the North. The march on Washington never occurred though because President Roosevelt agreed to implement an

9 Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues*, p. 113.

10 Sterling Brown, “Blues, Ballads, and Social Songs,” *Seventy Five Years of Freedom [concert program]*, p. 20.

11 Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues*, p. 109.

Executive Order prohibiting discrimination in defense industries, establishing the President's Fair Employment Practices Committee.¹² Although, this was a very Northern movement, it challenged barriers blocking African Americans were being held from federal work.¹³ Legal action did not equate to cultural action though. Despite federal laws prohibiting prejudiced practices, Southern state and local law continued to allow discrimination. Racism was still at large in the American South in the 1940s, and activist groups would have to work at ground level to fight this cancer.

Meanwhile, the long battle between Southern courts and the CP/NAACP effort to give justice to the Scottsboro nine raged on. Despite the fact that Ruby Bates, one of the women claiming she had been raped, admitted that the whole accusation was fabricated, only four of the nine men had been acquitted in 1936. Four others were paroled between 1943 and 1944 after being in prison for over twelve years.¹⁴ This had been mostly through the actions of Clarence Darrow and Samuel Liebowitz, respectively one of America's best lawyers at the time and one put forth by the CP in 1933, who were appointed to the case through the affiliations of the International Labor Defense (ILD).¹⁵ Yet, the final man was not freed until 1950, and by this time the case was quite anticlimactic. However, the CP had continued to stick closely to its cause despite ever increasing attempts by the government to root them out.

Communists and the NAACP were also on bad terms because of some of the CP's union practices. Since the Party needed all the constituency it could collect, it often did not concern itself with weeding out racist members. Many union members were politically and socially conservative, under the influence of the KKK or the Catholic Church.¹⁶ "For

12 Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, p. 136.

13 A. Philip Randolph. *Victory's victims?: the Negro's future*, (New York: Socialist Party, 1943), pp. 1-21.
Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A biographical portrait*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 256-261.

14 Goodman, *Stories from Scottsboro*, p. 370.

15 Goodman, *Stories from Scottsboro*, p. 197.

16 Fraser M. Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States*, p. 156.

example,” writes Fraser Ottanelli, “in the Transport Workers Union, Communists and Communist sympathizers led an Irish Catholic, conservative, and often racist membership.”¹⁷ Indeed, the CP was quite reluctant when it finally ended racial employment discrimination after being pressured by the NAACP, the Urban League, black organizations, and local community leaders.¹⁸ Thus, even the alliance of organizations fighting for the rights of the downtrodden were still in jeopardy as the 1930s wore on, and even when racially allied, workers in the South would continue to rarely find victory.

Political activism to overcome unconstitutional enslavement practices continued as long as the CP could support anti-peonage efforts. In 1940, the ILD created the Abolish Peonage Committee, which soon began gathering information in an effort to indict bosses of peon camps like William Cunningham.¹⁹ Roughly thirty people escaped their enslavement in his camps to give testimony of the brutal practice of being owned by Cunningham based on a debt or contract. After the ILD’s tiring effort to have the Federal Justice Department hear the case, Cunningham was not found guilty. In 1941, however, the Georgia case *Taylor v. Georgia*, a peonage case that was earlier found in the camp boss’s favor went to the US Supreme Court and was overturned in favor of the peons. This effectively ended contract law in Georgia, in legal terms. As the 1940s continued, Florida and Mississippi followed suit.²⁰ Thus, progress was made in the South in the 1940s, but as the CP dwindled, so too did its offshoot activist groups.

On the eve of the US’s entry into the Second World War, the federal government was quite concerned over national security. The House Committee on Un-American Activities

17 Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States*, pp. 156-157.

18 Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), pp. 265-266.

19 Daniel, *Shadow of Slavery*, p. 176.

20 Daniel, *Shadow of Slavery*, p. 188.

(HUAC) was formed in 1938 to investigate “subversion” on American soil like Nazis, the KKK, and American Communists. Congress passed the Smith Act in 1940, making it a crime to advocate the overthrow of the government.²¹ The CP was against entering the war since the Soviet non-aggression pact had been established between Hitler’s Germany and their Communist allies in Russia. After the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June, 1941, however the CP supported the US war effort, and was back on good terms with the federal government. During the war, the NAACP was willing to work with the CP, and have them politically uplift the black cause. However, following the US’s victory in World War II in 1945, and the start of the Cold War with the Soviets in the late 1940s, the CP began to lose favor with the government, until conservative paranoia would eventually drive them underground. Ultimately, this curbed the formerly growing relations between blacks and the CP in the United States.²² Despite the good that the CP had done to expose songs of black protest and to fight legal battles for African Americans, they would be routed out of the nation’s culture because they were seen as “un-American.”

The Southern NAACP increased its membership eight-fold during World War II, and the CP and blacks really began to work together for social change beyond Scottsboro. The Supreme Court decision, *Smith v. Allwright* in 1944, ruled entirely by Roosevelt justice appointees, overturned the white primary, allowing blacks to vote for Democratic candidates. Thus the old guard conservative Democrats in the South were soon shaken, “against the backdrop of a rejuvenated NAACP, a deepening identification of southern blacks with the national Democratic party, and the transformation of the Supreme Court.”²³ It had become more and more apparent that the observations of Patricia Sullivan were coming to a head,

21 Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States*, p. 205.

22 Kate Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: reading encounters between Black and Red, 1922-1963*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 208-251.

23 Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, p. 148.

“two divergent streams of southern thought and politics engaged each other in the national arena.”²⁴ Thus, white bigotry in the American south was being overcome in national politics, but in reality it still existed in the way blacks were treated personally. The scar tissue of slavery was yet to fade.

In 1946, two African Americans were lynched in Georgia. One of the men was a United States soldier, who had returned from World War II only ten months prior.²⁵ Once again, Southern racism would not stop with the organization of a CP/black coalition in the American South. It would not stop simply through the publication and release of black work songs. The feeling that had been founded on fear that blacks might overcome submission and become the equals of whites – which had existed since slavery – was still alive and well.

Anti-Communism continued on a national level, while racial violence continued in the South. In 1950, Vincent Harnett’s newsletters on many people’s personal involvement with “red” activities were compiled into a book called *Red Channels*.²⁶ In an effort to expose the most “dangerous” leftists in America, many famous people from Hollywood and New York were included as a means of blacklisting and even arrest. Josh White’s listing noted that he was a member of ten suspect organizations, “ranging from the Communist Party to the New Theatre League, American Relief for Greek Democracy, and the Veterans against Discrimination of the Civil Rights Congress.”²⁷ Although he had not played in Café Society for five years, he was suspected of actively participating in organized Communist activity. Josh got a call from Theodore Kirkpatrick about an interview concerning these matters. While at the interview, Alvin W. Stokes, HUAC specialist on Communist influence in the black community, questioned him as well. In order to clear himself of charges that could end his

24 Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, p. 105.

25 Laura Wexler, *Fire in a Cane Break: the last mass lynching in America*, (New York: Scribner, 2003), pp. 1-7.

26 Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues*, p. 177.

27 Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues*, p. 178.

career or even land him in prison, he wrote an article for the *Negro Digest* entitled “I Was a Sucker for the Communists;” he testified before the HUAC about actions of his fellow leftists; and he went through with the interview with Kirkpatrick.²⁸ By taking these actions so abruptly, he set the standard for suspected Communists explaining their pasts in order to pledge their patriotism. Thus, anyone who did not must have had something to hide. Unintentionally, White had assisted in the further unraveling of the CP and all of the assistance to the black community the Party had provided.

White’s giving away of some of his former associates and stepping away from the CP represents the shift in the basis of the American left in the early 1950s. Because many people did not want to be imprisoned or blacklisted, they moved away from more radical organizations like the CP. In doing this the sharp theme of protest present in the left and its representative musicians, like Josh White, was mellowed to where it was not as offensive to rich conservatives. Audiences did not like to hear that their selfish subscription to consumerist capitalism was part of the reason for the state of the impoverished. The indirect oppressors were the very people who would listen to the music once it appeared on the radio and in concert halls.

Not only White severed his links from the CP in the late 1940s and early 1950s; many blacks were taking to this trend of finding new outlets to establish protest movements. The American Negro Theater, established in 1940, closed in 1949, but many of its members – Ossie Davis, Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, and Alice Childress – began the Committee for the Negro in the Arts. This all black founded organization continued a trend towards renewed black-run activist groups. Without the CP there to direct blacks necessarily towards class issues, it became easier for middle and lower class blacks to work together. The Southern

28 Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues*, p. 184.

Negro Youth Congress had begun in 1937 and continued to work for civil rights throughout the South.²⁹ Although it had been started by a black Communist, it was continued by non-Communists and Communists alike, until it was forced to disband in 1948; the point was that it was a black activist group in the South. Anticommunism accentuated by McCarthyism began to rout out any possible link between public activism and the CP in the 1950s. Thus, black grassroots groups began to spring up in the South and North alike to replace the hole left by a dying CP. The NAACP even began to bar Communist activity from affecting its authoritative policy in 1950, in an effort to dissociate from a red flagged organization which they claimed had little concern for black, but only workers.³⁰

Emergent leaders in the 1950s included Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King Jr. Although not all of these leaders sought the use of music as their means of protest and move to racial equality, they all essentially wished to better the state of affairs for black Americans. Malcolm X was jailed in 1938 and in 1954 emerged from prison a member of the Nation of Islam, intent on changing society for blacks in America through disciplined action and organization. Although Malcolm X wished to divorce black movements from the religion of slave masters, he would come to support movements of all types in America that worked for the improvement of blacks' situation. In 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks refused to give her seat up to a white passenger and in doing so provoked a court action that would eventually desegregate public transit in 1956. This was not without the unified support of many black workers that regularly took the bus, who chose to walk in a protest of the public transit system influenced by Park's action. Meanwhile, Josh White continued to sing the same protest songs Communists had pressed to the fore of leftist culture despite his

²⁹ Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, p. 181.

³⁰ Wilson Record, *The Negro and the Communists*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1951), pp. 264-267.

admonishment of the CP. His songs still spoke to the plight of the Southern black man and of a movement that had begun over thirty years before.³¹

Folk songs became vehicles of protest to a large audience as more singers like White performed them in large concert halls in the 1950s. Though his repertoire remained quite similar to what it had been in the 1940s, White had become a pop icon with magazines like *Ebony* writing about him.³² Then in 1955 and 1956, he released two albums successively, *John Henry* and *Josh at Midnight*, on which he widened the audience of listeners to chain gang inspired songs sung by a persona representing a hard luck diligent worker. On the cover of both albums, he was pictured stripped to the waist, partially for sex appeal, but this also revealed a primal image of the black man in his basest form – White’s album covers were quite protest focused, often featuring images of the oppressed, but strong black man (see **Figure 5**).³³ Much like the front cover on Gellert’s *Negro Songs of Protest* 20 years earlier, the picture of a muscular black man could be an image for the entire black race. The songs sung on the album could be thought of as emanations from a struggling race at large. Although some of the gritty, base feeling had been lost in production, White’s albums were interpretations of original authentic worker protest. On *John Henry*, songs like “You don’t know my mind” were standouts also appearing in Gellert’s private collection; “John Henry” was the old ballad sung by railroad workers; and “Free and Equal Blues” was a composition by a Broadway lyricist meant as protest.³⁴ Thus, borrowing from the work songs of the past, performers like White reinvented the protest song and could market it on a relatively wide scale. *Josh at Midnight* included blues; “Number Twelve Train” was sexual blues written by Josh

31 Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues*, pp. 240-257.

32 Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues*, p. 235.

33 Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues*, p. 243.

34 Josh White, *The Story of John Henry and Ballads, Blues and Other Songs [sound recording]*, (New York: Elektra Records, 1955).

and “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho” was a slave spiritual about an Old Testament hero.³⁵

Received by a wider audience than the songs of Gellert as a result of technological improvements, these songs were portrayed in the spirit of protest. White would be dressed as a worker might be and sing with angst in his voice; he was not the cleanly image the Golden Gate Quartet presented, as is clear from his album covers. As his popularity continued to rise as the 1950s wore on, more and more people heard his music, and therefore more heard the spirit of black protest in the powerful form of song. Combining spirituals, chain gang songs, and his own style of blues, White’s form of protest was a popular melding of the black historical consciousness. He usually presented himself singularly, as one man singing ballads of the sorrows of being a black worker. In the words of Elijah Wald, who wrote the biography *Josh White: Society Blues*, “To [Josh White], ‘folk’ was not a stylistic straitjacket, but a category that could encompass virtually anything that moved him. What mattered to him in a song was that he could believe in it and communicate what he found in it to his listeners.”³⁶

35 Josh White, *Josh at Midnight* [sound recording], (New York: Elektra Records, 1956).

36 Elijah Wald, *Josh White: Society Blues*, p. 297.



Figure 5: (Top left) Cover from the Josh White album *Josh White* (1958). While White is holding guitar here, it is given the appearance of being some sort of weapon, which symbolically it is. White looks as if he is striking out against something or someone. (Top right) Cover from White's *Chain Gang Songs* (1958) gives the impression that he is assuming the persona of a chain gang convict while singing these compositions. (Bottom left) From the back cover of White's *Josh at Midnight* (1956). (Bottom right) From the cover of White's *The Story of John Henry and Ballads, Blues and Other Songs* (1955). As opposed to the cover of Gellert's album, White pictures a smiling forced laborer. Though the message here may be that the state of the black worker is progressing, it might also suggest as the picture of White himself does that the oppressed can laugh at their oppressors.

Josh White, *The Story of John Henry and Other Ballads, Blues and Other Songs*, (New York: Elektra Records, 1955).

Josh White, *Josh at Midnight*, (New York: Elektra Records, 1956).

Josh White, *Chain Gang Songs*, (New York: Elektra Records, 1958).

Josh White, *Josh White*, (New York: Decca, 1958).

Stefan Wirz, *Josh White Discography*, (December 24, 2004),

<<http://www.wirz.de/music/whitefrm.htm>>

Thus, despite anticommunist sentiments and reactionary attitudes of the post-WWII era, protest music found its way into popular culture in several ways. Not only were people listening to albums by Josh White, but an entire blues culture, inspired by chain gang work songs, had sprung up in society. Recording artists like Muddy Waters, James Cotton, Buddy Guy, and Albert King were all inspired by the traditions of ballad singers and work songs from prison culture. As the fan base grew for this music, the message was often diluted since not everyone wished to hear songs about hard life on a penitentiary farm.

By the end of the 1950s, protest music had made its way into popular culture; proletarian blacks had begun to organize movements for political change and racial equality; and blacks and whites had begun to associate more in music clubs. Work songs of black prisoners were partially responsible for all of these changes. Had Gellert, Lomax, Odum, and even the abolitionists not collected these forms many years before, they would not have been available to artists for recording. Thus, the long process of releasing the folk form of black protest music to the general public came to bear fruit with many albums in the late 1950s pertaining to racial inequality and impoverished conditions. This was despite anticommunist sentiments and shifts in the US federal government back to the right. Wholesome American culture allowed music originating from black inmates into the popular arena at the cost of the music's edginess being mollified by obliging performers who were willing to move to a more moderate political attitude. Though the message was often clouded in commodification, it would become quite clear in the 1960s.