

Music: Women and Jazz (Hazel Scott)

This Black Woman Was Once the Biggest Star in Jazz. Here's Why You've Never Heard of Her.

Hazel Scott was a piano prodigy who wowed the worlds of music, TV and film. But when she stood up for her rights, the establishment took her down.

By Louisa Rinehart

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On a rainy September morning in 1950, jazz pianist Hazel Scott stood in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee [HUAC] hoping to clear her name.

The publication "Red Channels" had accused Scott — along with 150 other cultural figures — of communist sympathies. Failure to respond would be seen as an admission of guilt. But her appearance at HUAC had a greater purpose than personal exoneration. She believed she had a responsibility to stem the tide of paranoia that gained momentum by the day.

She told the committee's members, "Mudslinging and unverified charges are just the wrong ways to handle this problem." With the same poise she brought to the stage as a musician, she testified that "what happens to me happens to others and it is part of a pattern which could spread and really damage our national morale and security."

Chin up, shoulders back, she warned against "profiteers in patriotism who seek easy money and notoriety at the expense of the nation's security and peace of mind," and that continuing down this road would transform America's artists from a "loyal troupe of patriotic, energetic citizens ready to give their all for America" into a "wronged group whose creative value has been destroyed."

Speaking with a voice that simultaneously conveyed clarity and nuance, strength and warmth, she knew what she was doing. She had been rehearsing for this moment her entire life.

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Born in Trinidad, Scott was raised on music. Her whole family played and her mother, Alma, an aspiring concert pianist, taught music to help make ends meet. Unbeknownst to her family, Hazel Scott absorbed everything she heard until one day she woke her grandmother from a nap by playing a familiar hymn on the piano, two-handed and with perfect pitch. Her grandmother woke thinking, not wrongly, that she was witnessing a miracle.

Scott's arc was fixed in the stars from that moment on. At three years old, she played parties, churches, and gatherings. But economic opportunity was hard to come by, and when her parents' marriage fell apart in 1923, her mother decided she and Scott would emigrate to New York City.

Scott grocery shopped, prepared meals, and handled the household's money. When word got around that, in her house, a child paid the bills, a gang of white teenagers broke in and demanded money. Scott refused to give them any. They beat her black and blue, and Scott still refused to turn over the cash. Finally, as police sirens grew nearer, the boys ran off with her blood on their hands.

Another time, Scott was playing near the trench being dug for the subway line that would become the A train when, according to Scott, a white girl from the neighborhood who she had been playing with told her to "Turn around so that I can brush you off and send you to school." When she did, the girl pushed her into the trench.

The workmen who rescued Scott had the unmistakable look of "fear and guilt" in their eyes. "They, too, were white," Scott later wrote in her journal. "They had witnessed the horrible act. They were involved and they resented it and me."

Scott resolved never to be so naïve again — nor did she allow the incident to dictate her life.

She kept playing piano, kept stunning audiences, and impressed one person in particular. The story sounds more like legend than fact, but several sources, including Scott's journal and the accounts of the parties involved, confirm it.

German-born, wearing a meticulous goatee and a pocket watch, and steeped in the traditions of European classical music, Juilliard founder Frank Damrosch was the very model of high culture in New York City. As such, his blood began to boil when he heard someone in the audition room improvising over Rachmaninoff's "Prelude in C Sharp Major." Marching down the hall to confront

the blasphemer brash enough to attempt such a thing, he heard the ninths being substituted with the sixths. It was sacrilege, he thought, until he saw who was playing.

Since eight-year-old Scott's hands couldn't reach the piece's intervals, she played the sixths to make it sound the way she intuitively knew it should. No one taught her how to do this. She wrote: "I was only reaching for the closest thing that sounded like it, not even knowing what a sixth was at that age."

When she finished, the auditions director whispered, "I am in the presence of a genius." Damrosch agreed and Scott was admitted to Juilliard. But her real education wasn't in the classroom. It was in her living room.

In New York, Alma quickly became a successful jazz musician and befriended some of the Harlem Renaissance's brightest stars in the process. In turn, they shone on young Hazel. She sat beside ragtime legend Fats Waller — whom she called "Uncle" — at the piano, while his hands strode syncopated rhythms across the keys. Piano legend Art Tatum became a close family friend and mentor to Hazel, advising her to dive deep into the blues.

Hazel Scott at the age of three or four.

Meanwhile Hazel's mother, Alma, bought a brownstone on West 118th Street, opened a Chinese restaurant on the ground floor, and taught herself to play tenor sax. Her circle widened. Lester Young and Billie Holiday came over after hours. Young and Alma traded turns playing sax in the living room when she and Holiday weren't gossiping in the kitchen. Holiday became like a big sister to Hazel, taking her under her wing as Hazel ventured out into the life of a working musician. In an article she wrote for *Ebony*, Hazel Scott recalled how, once, when "wondering where I was going and what I was doing, I began to cry." Holiday then "stopped, gripped my arm and dragged me to a back room." She told Scott, "Never let them see you cry" — a piece of advice Scott followed forever.



While still a child, Hazel Scott played piano for dance classes and churches. At 13 she joined her mother's jazz band, Alma Long Scott's American Creolians. When she outgrew the gig, her mother secured her a spot playing piano after the Count Basie Orchestra at the posh Roseland Ballroom. Watching Basie bring the house down, Hazel turned to Alma and said, "You expect me to follow this?" Stage fright or no, she played what would become her signature boogie-woogie style. The crowd adored her. From there, she took flight.

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At the time, the majority of jazz clubs were segregated. Even the famed Cotton Club in Harlem, where Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway headlined, had a "colored" section. Blacks and whites almost never shared the stage. But in 1938, a shoe clerk from Trenton, New Jersey, opened a different kind of club.

Cafe Society was "the wrong place for the Right people" according to founder Barney Josephson. He once said, "I wanted a club where blacks and whites worked together behind the footlights and sat together out front." It was there that Holiday performed "Strange Fruit" for the first time and became a legend, and it was there that Holiday got Scott her first steady engagement.

When Holiday canceled a standing engagement three weeks early, she insisted Scott take her place. By the end of the run, Scott was Cafe Society's new headliner. Only 19 years old, she inherited the bench previously occupied by piano greats like Meade Lux Lewis, Albert Ammons, and Pete Johnson. But as *The New York Amsterdam News* reported, "Hazel more than holds her own, and demonstrates a style all her own."

As it turned out, not only was Scott a brilliant pianist, she also had a hell of a voice: deep and sonorous, comforting yet provocative — the sort of singing style that makes you want to embrace the sublime melancholy that is love and life and whiskey on a midwinter's night.

And, she was beautiful. She wore floor-length ball gowns on stage and gazed out into the audience with almond-shaped eyes that seemed to communicate a deep knowledge of everyone they fixed upon. Like watching a painter paint or a sculptor sculpt, when Scott sang, you saw the song traveling through her, taking shape before emerging from her lips. And when she played her boogie-woogie, she grinned ear to ear, looking like self-possessed joy manifested. She was, in a word, irresistible.

Audiences flocked to see her. Fan mail flooded in. Josephson decided to open a second Cafe Society location, uptown for a swankier audience, with Scott as the marquee performer. New York's finest showed up in droves, including First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who dropped in one evening for "some entertainment and relaxation," as one reporter wrote. After the show, Mrs.

Roosevelt asked Scott to join her for a late supper. Because she had already changed from her evening wear to streetwear, Scott begged off the invitation.

"I'm inviting you," said Mrs. Roosevelt, "not your clothes."

How could Scott refuse?

She was the reigning queen of jazz, a friend to some of the most famous names in the country, and all at just 22 years old.

Hazel Scott had conquered New York. Hollywood was next. But in a motion picture industry where people of color were usually restricted to playing maids, cannibals, or buffoons, was there room for Hazel Scott?

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Nine black soldiers march down a hill to the sound of piano and drum. They are upright, dignified, ready to fight and die. Their sweethearts line the road, waving handkerchiefs and bidding their fellows goodbye. It's 1943, and the question on the backlot is, "What should these women wear?"

The scene is from "The Heat's On," a patriotic 1943 musical. Scott is performing a rah-rah number called "The Caissons Go Rolling Along." In conceptualizing the scene, the director intended to dress the women in what Hollywood assumed all black women would wear: dirty aprons.

Scott wasn't having it. Her contract always included final script and wardrobe approval, ensuring she'd never play or look the fool. She told the choreographer she wanted that protection extended to the extras who shared her stage.

"What do you care?" said the choreographer. "You're beautifully dressed."

"The next thing I knew," wrote Scott, "we were screaming at each other and all work had stopped. ... I insisted that no scene in which I was involved would display Black women wearing dirty aprons to send their men to die for their country."

Neither side relented, so Scott went on strike. For three days, the studio begged and pleaded for her to return to set. But Scott would not be moved. The more the clock ticked, the more money it cost, a fact of which Scott was well aware. Finally, the studio caved to Scott's demands, and the women appear in the film wearing particularly fetching floral dresses.

Though she won the battle, Columbia Pictures was far from conceding the war. In the minds of producers who were used to dictating to African-Americans — particularly to African-American women — Scott's public victory was more than they could stand. In the next two years, she was

given small parts in two more second-rate movies. After that, she was finished with motion pictures.

"I had antagonized the head of Columbia Pictures," wrote Scott in her journal. "In short, committed suicide!"

She packed her bags and headed back east — where love was about to sweep her off her feet.

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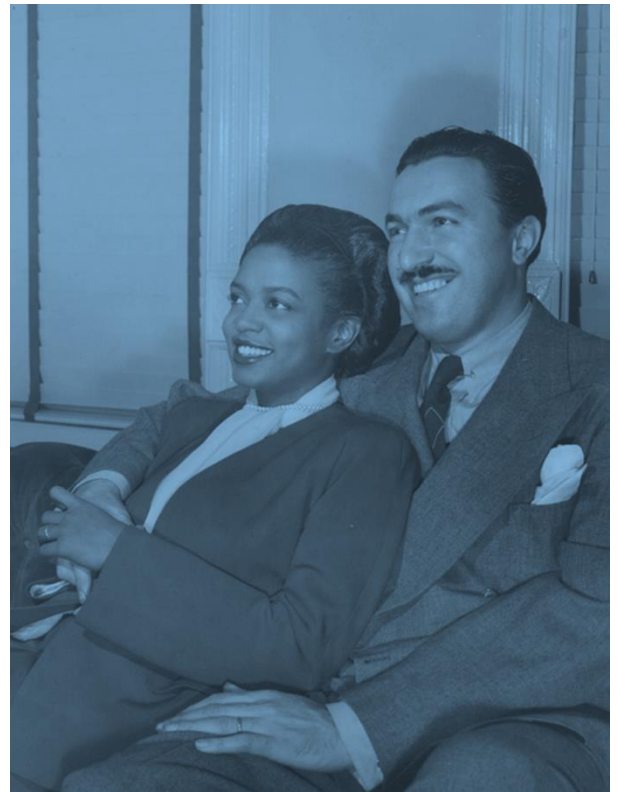
Scott was once again wowing crowds at Cafe Society, when she caught the eye of a young politician. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., soon to become New York's first African-American congressman, pulled Josephson aside, and asked for an introduction.

"Are you really interested in Hazel," said Josephson, who considered Scott a daughter, "or are you just screwing around?"

Congressman Adam Powell and wife, Hazel Scott, pose for a White House Christmas greeting, circa 1946.

Powell assured him of his sincerity, Josephson made the introduction, and their romance caught fire — despite the fact that Powell had been married to nightclub singer Isabel Washington since 1933. For the next year, Scott and Powell pursued their love with reckless abandon, damned be the consequences. In 1945, he married Scott 11 short days after his divorce was finalized.

Her career in Hollywood dead, Scott started touring, winning rave reviews at concerts across the country and fighting discrimination throughout. In November 1948, she refused to play a sold-out show at the University of Texas because the audience was segregated, despite the anti-Jim Crow clause in her contract, which allowed her to cancel the booking without forfeiting her pay. And in February 1949, she sued a restaurant in the tiny town of Pasco, Washington, after she and a companion were refused service because, as the proprietor put it, "We don't serve coloreds." Scott won \$250 in the suit, and donated the proceeds to the NAACP.



Scott was making around \$75,000 a year during this time — making her one of the most successful musicians in the country, black or white. After five years' continued success, Hollywood could ignore her no longer. In 1950, she came to break the color barrier on the small screen.

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Scott sits at the keys of a grand piano in an elegant white gown. With a backdrop of Manhattan behind her, she looks like the urban empress she had become.

"Hello," she coos, "I'm Hazel Scott."

Broadcast on the DuMont Network, *The Hazel Scott Show* was the first television program to have an African-American woman as its solo host. Three nights a week, Scott played her signature mix of boogie-woogie, classics, and jazz standards in living rooms across America. It was a landmark moment. As a passionate civil and women's rights activist, the show symbolized a triumphant accomplishment. As a career musician, her program took her to professional heights known by few, assuring her place in the pantheon of America's greatest performers. To be sure, Scott had arrived at the success she had sought since playing that first simple tune in Trinidad as a three-year-old.

And then, just like that, it all came tumbling down. "Red Channels." HUAC. Another star tainted by a whiff of Communism.

Hazel defends herself before the House Un-American
Activities Committee, September 1950.

When she stood in front of HUAC, it only made sense to speak truth to power, to stand up for what she believed in. She believed herself the embodiment of the American dream, and she spoke in its defense. In an unwavering voice she told the committee, "the entertainment profession has done its part for America, in war and peace, and it must not be dragged through the mud of hysterical name-calling at a moment when we need to enrich and project the American way of life to the world. There is no better, more effective, more easily understood medium for telling and selling the American way of life than our entertainers, creative artists, and performers, for they are the real voice of America."



But they did not hear her, did not believe her. And she in turn underestimated the power of fear, never having bent to it herself.

One week after her testimony, DuMont canceled *The Hazel Scott Show*. Concert appearances became few and far between. Even nightclub gigs were hard to come by.

Exhausted and unraveled, Scott went to Paris on what was to be a three-week vacation. Her sojourn extended to three years. To her, Paris became "the magic of looking up the Champs-Élysées from the Place de la Concorde and being warmed by the merry madness of the lights." It was also "a much needed rest, not from work, but from racial tension."

She played across Europe and in North Africa and the Middle East. Crowds still loved her, still swooned over her swinging classics. But it was not the same. Her spotlight had dimmed, and would never again shine on her the way it had in her halcyon days.

Eventually, Scott returned to America and slipped further into obscurity. In 1981 she passed away at 61 from cancer. Her albums are hard to come by now and her name never appears where it should, beside Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, and others who we think of when we think of jazz. But for a while, she led them all, until a country twisted by fear pushed her past the point from which even she, the force of nature that she was, could [not] return.