

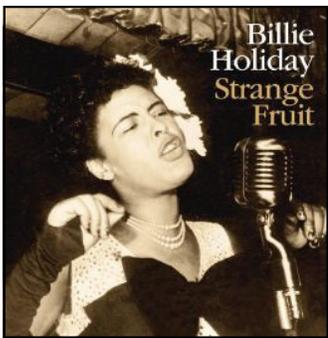
# lessons learned

# Teaching Activism Through Jazz

BY DANIEL BLAKE, PhD.

I have spent my entire professional life as a white person learning about, performing, and teaching Black improvised music. When I first started teaching courses in jazz history, I began by “sticking to the music” without realizing I was applying a Euro-centric principle that separates art from its social context. While part of me intuitively knew this pedagogy was off base, there was a certain comfort in simply teaching the way I was taught. That comfort was shaken irreversibly one night in 2012 when I learned backstage before a show of the tragic and senseless murder of Trayvon Martin. I recall speaking about this with an African American friend and bandmate, who shared with me how the situation made him fear for his young son. I felt at that moment a sudden realization: my ability to play and teach jazz music was a precious gift bestowed upon me by a community that has had to make unspeakable sacrifices. This gift brought with it a *moral obligation* I had best attend to.

As I set about re-educating myself, it became clear that even well-known stories of jazz activism are told in a way that often misses historical continuities with the present. If these continuities were clearly perceived, students would be better positioned to connect their music to a world beset by crisis.



Around the time I learned of Trayvon Martin's murder I became interested in the story of Abel Meeropol, the Jewish-American labor activist who cited the horrific photo documenting the 1930 double lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith as an impetus for writing “Strange Fruit.” The song became perhaps the most famous example of jazz activism

only after Billie Holiday delivered her iconic 1939 recording, which she followed up with regular performances of the song until her untimely death 20 years later. As depicted in the new film *United States v. Billie Holiday* and elsewhere, Holiday's death was almost certainly hastened by FBI agent Harry Anslinger, who weaponized her struggles with substance abuse as a way to silence her. It was Holiday, and not Meeropol, who paid dearly for singing “Strange Fruit.” Her sacrifice plugs directly into the anti-lynching movement forged by Ida B. Wells and other Black women, an important precursor to the Black Lives Matter movement.



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There is also a perverse historical consonance here, given how law enforcement impugns African American victims of police violence as drug addicts, even creating racialized categories like “black identity extremist” to justify the warrantless surveillance of protesters of color. While part of me resonates with Abel Meeropol's virtuous gesture of solidarity in writing “Strange Fruit,” I can also detect in myself a voice of complacency telling me I can write music as a way of “speaking out” while avoiding more active and potentially costly interventions. In the classroom we must be clear

“All White musicians who make a living playing Black music have a moral obligation to speak about racial injustice... If you benefit from being invited into Black culture, your debt, your bill, is bigger than mine at the end of the day.” — Nicholas Payton

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when discussing the example of “Strange Fruit” how it is people of color who too often have to make the real sacrifices. Recent history reminds us that this dynamic has not changed, making plain the need for new innovative strategies for a pluralistic and multi-racial 21st century activism.

Right from the beginning of jazz in New Orleans, musicians have had to forge a new kind of cultural space out of one created for a white patriarchy. I have been thinking about “occupation” as a metaphor for how jazz musicians have refashioned the pop music idiom, especially during the Bebop years. I am not thinking of the violent colonial occupations of the 20th century to which so many communities of color were subjected, but rather the subversive interference into dominant narratives as a form of resistance. This revolutionary impulse is heard in songs like “Hot House” – songs that are joyous yet still contentious, hard for outsiders to really understand. Dizzy Gillespie describes this music as a collective effort to, “create a new dialogue among ourselves.” The true activist vision behind the strategy Bebop musicians undertook is best expressed by Max Roach:

“The black musicians recognized that the royalties were going back to these [white] people... they began to write parodies on the harmonic structures, which was really revolutionary... if you made a record, you could say, ‘This is an original.’”

Refashioning pop tunes as a means to economic self-determination is a brilliantly subversive move. Viewed through a wider lens, the theme of occupation in 21st century social movements most recently resurfaced with Occupy Wall Street in 2011. Much as Minton’s Playhouse was transformed from a bar into an altar of high intellectual achievement, Zuccotti Park was transformed by a multi-racial coalition symbolizing “the 99%” from a neutral green space into an improvised political laboratory. Just as restructuring pop tunes impacted the sampling practices of generations of hip hop artists, the Occupy Wall Street strategy has influenced multiple waves of new activism. While organizations like the

Music Workers Alliance are busy developing solidarity around a fight for fair wages for everyday gigging musicians, the We Have Voice Collective empowers female and gender non-conforming musicians to demand that all jazz institutions create a safe work environment.

Artists are continually innovating new ways to occupy spaces through sound and, most importantly, through dialogue. We must also occupy the classroom with new ideas, so that we can forge a responsive education system for changing times. I am always humbled by the fact that jazz activism began in the streets of New Orleans, and ultimately must return to street level, fueled by the improvising power of the multitudes. As educators, we can harness the power of jazz music to educate a new generation of engaged citizens by allowing its true purpose – one that goes far beyond mere aesthetic beauty – to shine through.

Multi-instrumentalist and composer Dan Blake has developed a wide-ranging career as a contemporary composer, performer, and educator that, “regards tradition as a welcoming playground best approached with a sense of wonder and adventure” (*The Boston Globe*). He has worked with luminaries of jazz like three-time Grammy winner Esperanza Spalding, NEA Jazz Master Anthony Braxton, Julian Lage, and many others.

On March 12, 2021 Dan Blake released *Da Fé* on Sunnyside Records. He also holds a Ph.D. in composition from the City University of New York and is currently on faculty at the New School for Social Research, where he teaches courses on the intersection of music and politics.



**Album order info:** [theaquariansuite.bandcamp.com/album/da-f](https://theaquariansuite.bandcamp.com/album/da-f)  
**Album release concert livestream:** [www.soapboxgallery.org/events/dan-blake-album-release-da-f-sunnyside-records-release-speak](https://www.soapboxgallery.org/events/dan-blake-album-release-da-f-sunnyside-records-release-speak)

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