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Lisa Barg

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Working behind the Scenes

Gender, Sexuality, and Collaboration in the Vocal Arrangements of Billy Strayhorn

Lisa Barg

In mid-January 1956 Billy Strayhorn flew to Los Angeles from New York to begin a collaborative recording project with pop singer Rosemary Clooney. Although an experienced band singer, having recorded with Harry James and Benny Goodman, Clooney was most closely associated in the pop imagination with a string of hits she cut in the early 1950s for Columbia Records, most notably the Mitch Miller ethnic novelty songs “Come on-a My House” and “Mambo Italiano,” as well as for her featured role alongside Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye in Paramount’s Technicolor blockbuster *White Christmas*.¹

The collaboration with Clooney would be the first of its kind for both Strayhorn and the Ellington Orchestra: not only did it mark Ellington’s first collaboration with a singer for a full-length LP, but for the first time in his seventeen-year relationship with Ellington, Strayhorn was offered full creative autonomy on a major recording project, one that (also among the first) daringly paired a star white female pop singer with an African American jazz orchestra. Even with a band as prestigious as the Ellington outfit, this pairing must have raised a few red flags for executives at Columbia, or at least it would seem so, judging by the evidence of the cover art for the resulting LP, *Blue Rose*. Images of Ellington and Clooney appear on the cover in a split visual space that juxtaposes, collage-like, a large filmic image of Ellington with a much smaller photographic image of Clooney. In the background, placed directly under the title *Blue Rose: Rosemary Clooney and Duke Ellington and His Orchestra*, a grainy, smoke-filled, black-and-white image of Ellington’s face appears as if

1 Clooney also starred in another 1954 Paramount musical, the western parody *Red Garters* (with costars Guy Mitchell and Jack Carson). For a recent discussion of Mitch Miller’s critical role in popular music during the 1950s, see Albin J. Zak III, *I Don’t Sound like Nobody: Remaking Music in 1950s America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 43–75.

Fig. 1. *Blue Rose* LP cover, 1956.

being projected onto a movie screen. He smiles gently, his eyes cast downward toward a brightly colored, pasted-on photographic head shot of Clooney floating in the foreground; she, in turn, innocently gazes outward toward an unseen camera, seemingly unaware of the celluloid Ellington looming behind her. This stylized separation of Ellington and Clooney in the visual field delineates, however satirically, racial and sexual boundaries through a technologically mediated, safe distance.

Yet the LP cover design, with its contrast of Clooney's "in-color" head against the "black-and-white" Ellington, also referenced the real-life "virtual" conditions involved in recording the LP—just one of a set of the unusual conditions surrounding Strayhorn and Clooney's working relationship. At the time, Clooney was pregnant with her second child and was suffering from extreme nausea and vomiting, a situation that precluded her from traveling from Los

Angeles to New York to record the session.² On top of this challenge, the two collaborators had to work under a very tight deadline. As the story goes, producer Irving Townsend initially pitched the idea for *Blue Rose* to Ellington and Strayhorn on January 12 during the opening night of the Ellington Orchestra's engagement at Café Society Uptown. At the end of their initial discussion, "Strayhorn, Townsend, and Ellington had agreed on a basic approach to the album: whatever Clooney and Strayhorn wanted to do."³ However, "whatever [they] wanted to do" was set to begin on January 23—and in New York, not LA. Townsend overcame this obstacle by making use of the then-relatively novel (at least for jazz) technology of multitrack recording: Strayhorn would fly back to New York to direct the session for the instrumental tracks, then travel back to LA to record the vocal overdubbing with Clooney. Originally, Ellington and Strayhorn wanted to title the LP *Inter-Continental* to highlight the bicoastal recording process, but that concept was nixed by Columbia in favor of the more pop-friendly title *Blue Rose*.

With Townsend's plan in place, Strayhorn, armed with records, manuscript paper, and pen, arrived at Clooney's Beverly Hills home on Roxbury Drive, where he stayed for more than a week in her older child's bedroom doing double duty as caregiver and musical collaborator (often simultaneously). Clooney's husband, the director-actor-singer José Ferrer, was abroad working on a film project. In David Hajdu's biography of Strayhorn, Clooney recalled the ensuing mix of musical, personal, and domestic intimacy:

He made me breakfast in bed. We didn't know each other at all before that, and we became incredibly close immediately. I was having a very difficult pregnancy. I was really suffering and he got me through it. I'd say, "Oh God, I'm going to throw up again," and he would say, "Okay, now. It's okay," and he would take care of me. He said "Don't get up, honey," and he'd make me crackers and milk. I felt a bit better one day, and he baked me an apple pie. He cared about that baby. He cared about the fact that I couldn't afford to get tired, and he watched out for me. I would just stay in bed and talk about things. Most of the time, we didn't even talk much about music. We did work on the music, it was like I was working with my best friend. I wanted to do my best for him, and I would do anything he wanted. . . . I was never associated with a man who was so completely unthreatening and uncontrolling *and* so completely in charge.⁴

2 Both Irving Townsend and David Hajdu state that Clooney was pregnant with her fourth child; however, her fourth child, Monsita Ferrer, was born in 1958, nearly two years after *Blue Rose* was released. Her second child, Maria Ferrer, was born in 1956. See Irving Townsend, liner notes, *Blue Rose*, Rosemary Clooney and Duke Ellington and His Orchestra (Sony, 800000JBDV, 1999, compact disc); David Hajdu, *Lush Life: A Biography of Billy Strayhorn* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 147.

3 Hajdu, *Lush Life*, 148.

4 Hajdu, *Lush Life*, 147, 149. As a parting memento of their time together and to thank him for his caregiving, Clooney presented Strayhorn with a Cartier watch with the ironic inscription "To Svengali" (149).

While Clooney's memory conveys her genuine affection and respect for Strayhorn, it is difficult to ignore the troubling histories of race, gender, sexuality, and power that haunt her story of Strayhorn as trusted domestic caregiver. That this tale of white woman served by a caring and "unthreatening" black man takes place in a Hollywood mansion only underscores the close proximity of Clooney's narrative to the racialized and sexualized legacies of the subservient black domestic worker in popular culture.⁵ In this context, the way Clooney narrates her memory of Strayhorn's actions as domestic caregiver coupled with her characterization of Strayhorn's nonnormative masculinity hails Strayhorn's black queer body according to the scripts of historical white affection for gendered asexualized black service.⁶

Yet as a description of her working relationship with her collaborator, particularly as it marks sociomusical practices and the effects of empathy, support, and nurturing, Clooney's memory aligns strongly with a broadly held perception of Strayhorn as collaborator, a perception that pervades the retrospective comments of many other singers (and instrumentalists) with whom he worked. Lena Horne, Strayhorn's lifelong friend and self-described "soulmate," remembered him as a "perfect mixture of man and woman," "very strong," and "at the same time very sensitive and gentle."⁷ Horne first met Strayhorn when he was "sent" by Ellington to "keep her company": "Duke could be very possessive with women . . . so he arranged for Billy to be my chaperone. He assumed that Billy was safe, which I guess he was in the way that Duke saw me, which was as a sex object."⁸ Horne credited her work with Strayhorn around this time as a formative experience in her musical training, helping her to discover her own voice: "Billy rehearsed me. He stretched me vocally. Very subtly. . . . He knew what songs were right for me. He knew my personality better than I did . . . and he wrote arrangements that had my feeling in the music."⁹

I want to highlight the gendered and racialized terrain of these remem-

5 See, for example, Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2001); Ann DuCille, "The Shirley Temple of My Familiar," *Transition* 73 (1997): 10–32; Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

6 I am using the word "nonnormative" here to signal how dominant perceptions of Strayhorn's black masculinity align with what Roderick A. Ferguson calls the racialized logic of "nonheteronormativity," that is, the tangle of pathologizing histories and discourses of difference ascribed to African American cultural formations broadly and, more particularly, to internal variations of black queer masculinity within these discourses/histories. See Ferguson, *Aberations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 13. See also Phillip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers for this journal for her or his insightful comments and suggestions on this critical issue.

7 Hajdu, *Lush Life*, 96.

8 Hajdu, *Lush Life*, 94–95.

9 Hajdu, *Lush Life*, 94–95.

branches not only for the paths of musical meaning to which it directs us but also for how they might align with what film scholar Matthew Tinkcom has called in a rather different but not unrelated context the “queer labor” of gay male artists working behind the scenes in the US film industry.¹⁰ In Tinkcom’s work, this group includes auteur directors, songwriters, arrangers, art directors, and choreographers. Both Clooney’s and Horne’s descriptions of Strayhorn’s practices as a collaborator are a case in point insofar as they resonate with the title phrase of Tinkcom’s book, *Working like a Homosexual*. Tinkcom borrows this phrase from an observation made by Lela Simone, a rehearsal pianist and vocal coach who worked with Vincente Minnelli and the legendary Arthur Freed Unit at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in the 1940s and 1950s. Recalling Minnelli’s working persona in a 1990 interview, Simone explained: “Vincente was not a man who was a dictator. He tried to do it in a soft and nice way. He worked in let’s say . . . I don’t know whether you will understand what I say . . . he worked like a homosexual.”¹¹ Tinkcom argues that Simone’s statement “encourages us to theorize the possibility of a capitalist enterprise accommodating marginalized sex/gender subjects because their labor could enhance a product’s appeal through its differentiated style.”¹²

Working behind the scenes in the Ellington organization, Strayhorn similarly cultivated a “differentiated style,” but under conditions of creative anonymity irrefutably bound to his identity as a black queer subject. As a musician friend quoted in Hajdu’s biography put it: “Billy could have pursued a career on his own—he had the talent . . . but he’d have had to be less than honest about his sexual orientation. Or he could work behind the scenes for Duke and be open about being gay.” While previous critics, most notably Hajdu, have claimed a generalized gay sensibility for Strayhorn, little attention has been given to historicizing this sensibility by considering it in relation to the particular social and material conditions under which Strayhorn worked.¹³ This article explores the “queer position” under which Strayhorn labored in relation to his collaboration with singers and to his aesthetic practices as a vocal arranger. My intention here is not to reify Strayhorn as an exceptional black gay subject in the world of midcentury jazz (or, accordingly, to reproduce an undifferentiated homo/hetero binary) but to describe and analyze specific instances of queer affiliation, affect, and identifications surrounding Strayhorn’s work as an arranger and ask how such instances mark, enact, or embody a sociality of arranging. Strayhorn’s vocal arranging oeuvre is extensive and varied, stretching from his

¹⁰ Matthew Tinkcom, *Working like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

¹¹ Tinkcom, *Working*, 38. In her autobiography, Lena Horne characterized lyricist/producer Arthur Freed and arranger Roger Edens (whom she credits with “discovering” her in 1942) as “men of a certain sensitivity. . . . [A]s long as I worked with them I was treated with great decency and respect” (Lena Horne and Richard Schickel, *Lena* [Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1965], 135).

¹² Tinkcom, *Working*, 36–37.

¹³ David Hajdu, “A Jazz of Their Own,” *Vanity Fair*, May 1999, 189–96.

hip, swinging charts for Ivie Anderson in the late 1930s and early 1940s to lush, ethereal backings for Ella Fitzgerald in the late 1950s. I focus closely on two recordings from this body of work that provide useful snapshots of contrasting working conditions and historical moments. Specifically, I first consider the collaboration between Strayhorn and Clooney on the LP *Blue Rose* and then trace a range of queer historical and aesthetic paths surrounding Strayhorn's celebrated 1940 arrangement of the pop tune "Flamingo."

"Grievin'"

After Strayhorn arrived at Clooney's home, the two collaborators set to work selecting their songs for the LP and, when time and health permitted, rehearsing the arrangements at the piano that, presumably, Strayhorn worked out with the singer over that same week.¹⁴ In addition to haunting versions of Ellington classics such as "Sophisticated Lady" and "I Got It Bad (and That Ain't Good)" and a newly composed Ellington original, the eponymous "Blue Rose" (an instrumental with vocalise), the LP included two original Strayhorn songs from 1939, "Grievin'" and "I'm Checkin' Out, Goom-Bye," along with one Strayhorn instrumental, significantly, a full-band arrangement (of film noir-like proportions) of his great ballad for alto saxophonist Johnny Hodges, "Passion Flower." As Clooney explained it: "Having 'Passion Flower' on there was sort of a wink, an inside thing to those in the know that this was basically Billy's record."¹⁵

The tracks for *Blue Rose* were cut in four sessions: the instrumental tracks were recorded in New York on January 23 and 27, and the vocal overdubs were recorded in LA on February 8 and 11. Of the new arrangements of Strayhorn's two songs, Clooney's version of the blues-based ballad "Grievin'" stands out. Notably, the manuscript for the vocal arrangement—the first and only recording of the song with Strayhorn's lyric—bears a dedication under the title, "For Rosemary Clooney," and Strayhorn made extensive alternations to the 1939 instrumental arrangement, including a newly composed introduction.¹⁶ Strayhorn's new introduction immediately announces the ballad's orchestrally lush stylistic updating in relation to the expressive and formal lexicon of the blues. Harry Carney (baritone sax) states the A-strain of the melody in a slow swing tempo backed by a dissonant-charged, dark plunger mute "wha-wha" chordal texture that unfolds over a truncated blues chorus. A particularly interesting feature of the melody is how Strayhorn maps the conventional two-bar symmetrical phrase structure onto a series of rhythmic displacements that begin

¹⁴ Hajdu, *Lush Life*, 147.

¹⁵ Hajdu, *Lush Life*, 149. And, indeed, only insiders would know that "Grievin'" and "I'm Checkin' Out, Goom-Bye" came off Strayhorn's pen, as these two songs are credited only to Ellington on the original release, a perception emphasized by Irving Townsend in his liner notes (he identifies them as Ellington originals).

¹⁶ The manuscript is housed in the Duke Ellington Collections, Archives Center of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, Washington DC.

9

Vocals

low, Feel-in' blue Feel-in' so Emp-ty with-out

Tenor 1-2; Baritone

Trombone 1-3

12

you why did you have to deceive me. Go and leave me Grie-iv' vin' Where I go

Example 1a. Strayhorn, “Grievin’,” measures 9–16.

on the upbeat to the first full measure with a three-note pattern (two eighths followed by a dotted half note), rising upward C-sharp–D–F. In measures 1–4 the pattern expands melodically with pendular leaps covering a ninth from F to G before descending downward through the tonic triad via an eighth-note triplet figure that leads to A-flat on the downbeat at measure 4. The triplet figure reverses in measure 5 (B-flat–C–D), landing on F, where the melody lingers for the final two measures over an E-flat minor/major seventh (functioning as the dominant) before cadencing in B-flat with the “grievin’” figure, a bluesy half-note pendular leap.

With her signature warm, sensuous, yet light sound, Clooney delivers the lyric in a stylish, rhythmically subtle, yet straightforward manner, backed for the first two vocal choruses (AA) by riff figures that respond in rhythmic unison. These riff figures are derived from rhythmic and melodic features described above (e.g., repeating triplet pattern, pendular contour, blue notes) and appear throughout the arrangement in various guises. By far the most dramatic incarnation occurs in the third vocal chorus after the bridge: the texture thickens, with reeds and brass playing the riff figure in unison behind Clooney as she pleads, “Every day, every night, how I pray that you’ll treat me right.” The emotional tension spills into the next bar as the riff figures give way to a trombone trio playing a half-note chromatic step for Clooney’s climactic ultimatum: “You will regret and you’ll cry some, / If I die from grievin’,” a moment that itself suddenly morphs into an expressive, improvisatory rupture in the form of a particularly memorable (and perfectly timed) wailing, coloratura trumpet solo by Cat Anderson. While Anderson’s solo is truly astounding, the full force of his blowing on this chorus depends, nevertheless, on the sonic backing that frames or, more accurately, propels him.

Directly after Clooney intones the “grievin’” figure at the cadence, the full

27

Vocal

day... ev'ry night... how I pray... that you'll treat me

Alto 1-2; Tenor 1; Baritone

Trumpet 2-4

Trombone 1-3

30

right. You will re-gret and you'll cry... some, if I die from grie-ie vin'.

Example 1b. Strayhorn, “Grievin’,” measures 27–34.

band lurches upward in unison through a syncopated, chromatically inflected, two-bar climb, a kind of sonic launching pad for Anderson. As the trumpet part takes off, the reeds and brass choir continue in the upper register, but now in an extravagant call-and-response pattern punctuated by a chromatically rising and rousing, full-throated, rhythmic ostinato based on a variation of the riff figure (a tied-quarter-note triplet ostinato, which we first hear sung in the B section of the melody). With Anderson’s trumpet climbing higher into the stratosphere for the final jaw-dropping measures of his solo, the backing instrumental choir intones fragments from the first half of the melody.

The collective dramatic force of Anderson’s chorus is so startling that we might conclude it actually overwhelms Clooney, as if stealing her emotional spotlight through an affect of improvisatory combustion. But such an interpretation would only be possible if we ignore the larger expressive and musical arch of the arrangement. Here, Anderson’s solo functions theatrically, amplifying—quite literally—the feeling that Clooney authorizes in the lyric of the preceding climatic vocal chorus. This blues-saturated emotional transference might also be heard as a kind of phallic excess beyond the racialized and gendered proprieties of Clooney’s vocal persona. Formally, Strayhorn weaves Anderson’s solo chorus into a quasi-through-composed architecture that unfolds the latter part of the arrangement and leads the modulation, moving the song as if through sheer propulsion, from B-flat to D-flat.¹⁷

Taken as a whole, the foregoing discussion of form, style, and sonic affect in Strayhorn’s vocal arrangement for “Grievin’” suggests how the practices of

¹⁷ Cootie Williams’s trumpet solo in the original 1939 recordings does not modulate.

composers/arrangers, singers, and players collaboratively refashion from within the formal and affective layers of a song. Strayhorn conceived the process of arranging as a kind of cotext: “You really need to write something you think fits his sound and is *your* sound, too—a combination of what you do and what he does.”¹⁸ Strayhorn’s notion of sonic fit implies that tailoring an arrangement around the technical abilities and stylistic persona of a singer (or soloist) creates a comfortable space for a performer to discover or imagine “her space” within the music; in other words, it is a fit that facilitates rather than dictates and thus helps to facilitate effective improvisations. From this perspective, it is possible to hear Strayhorn’s elaborate, blues-tinged arrangement as enabling a sonic space for Clooney to fashion a new vocal persona, one that she understood as helping her to break free from the limiting racial and sexual codes of the 1950s novelty song (an argument that can, of course, also be extended to most, if not all, of the other arrangements on the LP). Indeed, in her 1999 autobiography, *Girl Singer*, Clooney associated the experience of collaborating on *Blue Rose* with artistic self-discovery and empowerment. Her comments on the subject arose in the context of recalling a memorable evening she spent with Billie Holiday just a few months after the Strayhorn-Ellington session:

Billie said it wasn’t work to do a song she could feel—the only kind of song she would do—and I felt “Blue Rose” and all the songs on that album in a way I could never feel “Come On [a my House].” I wasn’t in a position to change my material, and had I been, I might not have had the confidence to do it. Now I did.¹⁹

In terms of vocal persona, Clooney’s sound on *Blue Rose* aligns with the hipper, jazz-influenced, mainstream, and white big band singers of the day such as Peggy Lee and Frank Sinatra. Yet as I noted earlier, Clooney had already cut a few sides in the early 1950s (including a Columbia disc with Frank Sinatra) in which we can also hear this stylistic orientation (and in fact some critical assessments of these sides compared Clooney to Ella Fitzgerald).²⁰ Beyond these larger stylistic references and associations, however, I am also interested in what it meant for Clooney to “do a song she could feel” in relation to the specific working conditions and set of constraints surrounding her collaboration with Strayhorn. The sociality of the arranging process on *Blue Rose* required forms of intimacy improvised within both domestic/private and public/professional

¹⁸ Quoted in Stanley Dance, *The World of Duke Ellington* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 30.

¹⁹ Rosemary Clooney with Joan Barthel, *Girl Singer: An Autobiography* (New York: Broadway Books, 1999), 154. Following the birth of her daughter Maria in the summer of 1956, Clooney officially registered Billie Holiday as Maria’s godmother. Interestingly, Clooney refers to the song “Blue Rose” in her autobiography as “a new number Billy [Strayhorn] wrote especially for me” (153).

²⁰ See, for example, Will Friedwald’s discussion of Clooney during this period in which he argues that Clooney’s greatest affinity is with “the great male icons of the jazz-and-pop mainstream: Sinatra, Bennett and, most of all, Crosby” (*Jazz Singing: America’s Great Voices from Bessie Smith to Bebop and Beyond* [New York: Da Capo, 1996], 415).

spaces and across lines of gender, race, and class. How then might we connect such forms of improvised intimacy to the collaborators' personal engagement with the affective registers of specific song arrangements?

To return again to the example of the blues ballad "Grievin'," for Clooney, the choice of this song may have been guided by her ability to "feel" the song (a choice itself guided by Strayhorn's own sense that the song would fit her well). The lyric ("I") expresses the pain of a lover dealing with an unfaithful and callous partner, a theme that animates another song on the LP, Strayhorn's poignant, slow-tempo, dissonant-tinged arrangement of Ellington's "I Got It Bad (and That Ain't Good)." Although generic with respect to the thematic conventions of pop-jazz ballads (and blues), both songs would have had a particular personal resonance for Clooney and thus could have provided a vehicle for her to address difficult personal feelings surrounding her life circumstances. During this period, Clooney struggled to maintain the heteronormative image of, in her words, "the perfect Fifties Wife" in the face of her husband's flagrant philandering (which began shortly after their honeymoon) and intimidating temper tantrums—all while she paid the bills and worked tirelessly to support their rapidly growing family.²¹ Her pregnancy during the *Blue Rose* collaboration led to the second of five children born between 1955 and 1960 (all of whom she was left to support after she and Ferrer first split up in 1961).²²

As noted above, *Blue Rose* also signaled a new direction in Strayhorn's career with respect to his partnership with Ellington. Handing Strayhorn the creative reins for the project amounted to a kind of peace offering from Ellington following several years of estrangement between the composing partners. Strayhorn's decision to separate from Ellington was precipitated by frustration over his uncredited creative labor and "accumulations of grievances, from copyright issues to artistic conflicts," a situation Clooney seemed to have been aware of, given her comment about the inclusion of "Passion Flower" as a covert tactic to mark Strayhorn's largely uncredited public authorship.²³ In fact, just a few days before Strayhorn would meet Ellington and Townsend at Café Society Uptown to discuss the project, Strayhorn went to the club with a small group of friends to celebrate his homecoming to New York after a liberating extended trip to Paris. While in Paris, Strayhorn visited his former longtime partner, pianist Aaron Bridgers, and spent many evenings at the vibrant, gay-friendly jazz bar the Mars Club, where Bridgers worked as the staff pianist and where Strayhorn was treated as a celebrity by the city's expatriate gay cabaret subculture.

21 Clooney, *Girl Singer*, 131 ("I wanted to be married, to have babies. Mrs. José Ferrer wanted to sit by his side and listen to him talk, even though Rosemary Clooney was paying the bills" [131]).

22 Clooney offered the following account by a reporter of the divorce court drama: "Weeping uncontrollably on the witness stand, singer Rosemary Clooney, thirty-three, today accused her husband, actor José Ferrer, forty-nine, who fathered her five children, of 'having affairs with other women since the beginning of our marriage' and 'violent acts of temper'" (Clooney, *Girl Singer*, 186).

23 Walter van de Leur, *Something to Live For: The Music of Billy Strayhorn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 115; see also Hajdu, *Lush Life*, 113–14.

Returning home to New York from Paris meant leaving behind the transforming cultural energy, communal support, and warm admiration he found in the city of lights for professional uncertainty and reckoning. Strayhorn's difficult feelings about his return can be gleaned from Hajdu's account of his homecoming party at Café Society Uptown. With a group of friends, including his soon-to-be-boyfriend Francis Goldberg, Strayhorn "bought a few rounds in salute to Bridgers, and charmed the group with droll descriptions of the Mars Club."²⁴ At one point, he noticed a bill plastered on the wall advertising the upcoming January 12 Ellington engagement. As narrated by a musician friend, Strayhorn responded sardonically: "'Well, I'll *have* to come to see Duke Ellington—and hear all those Billy Strayhorn songs,' after which he looked around the tiny little club, . . . puffed on a cigarette and quipped 'If there's room for them.'"²⁵

In recounting these stories, I do not mean to suggest that we can unproblematically impute (auto)biographical meaning into the music or claim a reified homology between the social and musical. Nor am I simply pointing to the generalized affective power of songs to sonically embody or project personal feelings and fantasies—although I do believe that is always a potential function of songs. What I am arguing is that such specific everyday life circumstances and contexts acted as a constellation of social "texts" (among others) that framed their collaboration and, as such, played a role, however ineffable, in the selection of songs and in shaping the arranging process, specifically along paths of cross-gender projection and identification. Sometimes these paths emerged through creative directorial advice given during the vocal overdubbing.²⁶ When Clooney was recording Strayhorn's other original number, a charmingly "retro" arrangement of the up-tempo swinger "I'm Checkin' Out, Goom-Bye," she recalled Strayhorn's direction for realizing the lyrics, with their lighthearted yet pointed message to a deceptive lover, this way: "He told me not to do it angry. He said, 'Just because you're leaving the other person, it doesn't mean you're angry. You're in charge. You're leaving, because you're the strong one. You might even come back. Who knows?'"²⁷ But what

24 Hajdu, *Lush Life*, 145. Hajdu quotes here an unidentified "black gay musician familiar with the Paris scene" who likened Strayhorn at the Mars Club in Paris to "a miniature, black Noël Coward" (145).

25 Hajdu, *Lush Life*, 145.

26 The mediating role of multitrack technology in Strayhorn and Clooney's collaboration in the recording studio is also at issue here but is beyond the scope of the present study. For an account of the recording studio as an intermundane space of "deadness" in which human, nonhuman, and other entities collaborate, see Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut, "Deadness: Technologies of the Intermundane," *TDR: The Drama Review* 54, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 14–38.

27 Hajdu, *Lush Life*, 148. In her autobiography, Clooney also recalls how Strayhorn helped her overcome extreme nerves around the overdubbing sessions in LA: "I want you to imagine you're living in New York and you've got a really hot date and you're ready to go," Billy said to me through his big square glasses. "You're a beautiful woman, looking into the mirror and combing your hair, and there's Duke Ellington and there's no band. The radio is playing the record, and you just sing along with the orchestra, and we overhear it" (Clooney, *Girl Singer*, 153). See also a similar account in Hajdu, *Lush Life*, 148.

does this gendered improvisatory field of intimacy and identification have to do with the larger set of queer issues that I raised at the outset? It is to this question that we now turn.

“Flamingo[s]”

The musical transformation of “Grievin” from its original 1939 instrumental incarnation to Clooney’s 1956 vocal version not only is a story of formal and stylistic change but also indexes to some extent the evolution of Strayhorn’s and Ellington’s working relationship. For while Strayhorn wrote the tune, it is Ellington who is credited for the larger part of the 1939 arrangement, an effective but largely conventional swing-band arrangement. As Walter van de Leur points out, during Strayhorn’s first two years with the organization, his creative partnership with Ellington tended toward a division of musical labor in which Ellington worked out the instrumental sections and Strayhorn the vocal sections.²⁸ However, this situation changed rapidly. In 1941 Strayhorn cocomposed and arranged many of the songs for the celebrated black Popular Front “revusical” *Jump for Joy*.²⁹ And by 1942 he was responsible for all the vocal arranging and was supervising a roster of singers, including Ivie Anderson (who had been with the orchestra since the early 1930s), Herb Jeffries, Kay Davis, Marie Ellington, and Joya Sherrill.³⁰

To the extent that Strayhorn’s work during this period revolved around creating arrangements to showcase singers for the legendary Blanton-Webster band, his work as a vocal arranger—and the work of the singers he collaborated with—was viewed largely as “commercial work,” a devalued category under which the contributions of women in jazz (especially singers) have historically been marginalized.³¹ At once central to the orchestra’s commercial appeal yet operating at the margins, Strayhorn negotiated a similar, but in no way identical, gendered field of power as that which structured the position of many of the singers with whom he collaborated.

Notably, Strayhorn’s vocal arrangements during this period were rarely recorded, and only a few made it into the Ellington book. One that did stick, and in a big way, was Strayhorn’s 1940 arrangement of the Ted Grouya / Ed-

²⁸ Van de Leur, *Something to Live For*, 32.

²⁹ Van de Leur, *Something to Live For*, 61–63.

³⁰ Hajdu, *Lush Life*, 97. While Strayhorn and Kay Davis were good friends, he wrote little for her due to her role as Ellington’s vocalise specialist.

³¹ See, for example, Laura Pellegrianni, “Separated at ‘Birth’: Singing and the History of Jazz,” in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, ed. Nicole Rustin and Sherrie Tucker (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 31–47. It is also worth mentioning here that, as van de Leur reminds us, in taking on work that Ellington had neither the time for nor the interest in, Strayhorn’s creative labor made it possible for Ellington “to realize his goals,” namely, ones that we now identify with the extraordinary pieces he composed for (and with) the legendary Blanton-Webster band of this era (*Something to Live For*, 63).

mund Anderson pop song “Flamingo” for the baritone crooner Herb Jeffries.³² “Flamingo” was a hit for Ellington in 1941 and a career-making song for Jeffries, who in an oft-cited remark proclaimed: “That’s the bird that brought me. Most people come to this planet by stork; I came by Flamingo, and Duke Ellington delivered me.”³³ Strayhorn recalled:

I think what really clinched the vocal chores for me was when Herb Jeffries came with the band [in 1939]. He was singing in a high tenor range, and I asked him whether he liked singing up there. He said he didn’t, so I wrote some things for him that pulled his voice down to the natural baritone he became after “Flamingo.”³⁴

As in the case of his collaboration with Clooney, these comments convey the ways in which Strayhorn’s arrangement for Jeffries facilitated a space for him to refashion a vocal persona, one he understood as more natural, conveying a more authentic self. “That’s the kind of thing he did with the singers in the band,” Jeffries remembered. “He’d work very, very closely with you, and he sensed what your strengths were. Then he picked songs and did arrangements to bring out the best in you.”³⁵ As do Clooney’s, Jeffries’s comments index a social aesthetics for arranging in which the scripts of musical and personal identification work in tandem. Strayhorn’s collaborations with Lena Horne that I discussed briefly at the outset can also be considered in this light. Strayhorn coached, accompanied, and arranged for her, “applying,” in Hajdu’s words, “his gift for musical empathy to the artist he loved so.”³⁶

Of all the vocalists on the Ellington roster in the early 1940s, Strayhorn felt a special affinity for Jeffries, who, like Strayhorn, was an avowed Francophile. The two friends enjoyed conversing in French, particularly in public spaces in which such displays of sophistication could speak back to and trouble US racist culture and stereotypes: “There was a tremendous amount of discrimination, and you could show a certain amount of sophistication by the mere fact that you could speak a language that the next white person couldn’t. Strayhorn

32 According to Hajdu, the tune was “discovered by Ellington’s friend, Edmund Anderson, a businessman, who added the lyrics” (*Lush Life*, 86). Jeffries, however, claimed the song was given to him by the composer Grouya himself, a little-known figure then working in the music-publishing division of MGM, in hope that it would get a hearing from Ellington. As he narrates it, Jeffries put the song on his dressing-room table, where Strayhorn later discovered it and, within earshot of Ellington, began playing the song at the piano. Ellington liked what he heard and instructed: “Whatever you’re playing, make a chart of it.” Jeffries also claimed that Grouya contacted him after “Flamingo” was charting to complain that his words had been altered, thus suggesting he had a hand in writing the lyrics. See Herb Jeffries, interview, *San Diego Union-Tribune*, December 13, 1993; see also Stuart Nicholson, *Reminiscing in Tempo: A Portrait of Duke Ellington* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999), 226.

33 “Herb Jeffries,” <http://www.herbjeffries.com>. The Ellington Orchestra recorded “Flamingo” on December 28, 1940, at Victor Studios in Chicago, a date that marked the end of a grueling year of cross-country travel, playing mostly one-nighters.

34 Mark Tucker, ed., *The Duke Ellington Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 500.

35 Hajdu, *Lush Life*, 97.

36 Hajdu, *Lush Life*, 96.

and I both felt this showed you weren't that lowly person, that Amos 'n' Andy character that everybody thought you were."³⁷

The registral placement and reorientation of Jeffries's voice in Strayhorn's arrangement of "Flamingo" also performs "a certain amount of sophistication," one that can be fully grasped only by hearing how Jeffries's voice interacts and fits in with the musical contexts that surround it—that is, by considering the aesthetics of the arrangement as a whole. As van de Leur brilliantly details in his analysis of "Flamingo," Strayhorn's arrangement extends considerably and transforms the original pop song through the addition of new material in the form of elaborate introductory, transitional, and modulatory sections.³⁸ These additions and revisions exemplify Strayhorn's innovative approach to pop tune arrangements in which "carefully worked out introductions, transitions, and codas" are used as "structuring elements to secure the internal logic of an orchestration."³⁹ Indeed, my discussion of Strayhorn's arrangement of "Grievin'" pointed to these types of "structuring elements" but also emphasized the role of affect and style—both of which are crucial elements at play in Strayhorn's arrangement of "Flamingo." The introduction for "Flamingo" is a case in point. Strayhorn's newly composed introduction supplies a sonic modernist orchestral gloss on the essential generic topos of the song: Latin-tinged, tropical exotica in the "dreamy" romantic mode. A solo trombone intones the "flamingo" call, a three-note figure encompassing an octave leap upward and a minor third down, echoed languidly by the trumpet.

In the next few bars, a chromatically moving theatrical "curtain-rising" passage is answered by a jarringly dissonant swift series of parallel moving saxophone chords. These chords outline notes that are sounded in the closing gesture that directly follows, a repeated, tonally ambiguous, low-register brass chord (F minor over D, or dominant tritone substitution). As van de Leur observes, the closing dissonant passages as well as the "flamingo" call heard in the initial bars serve an expository function: the intervallic design and rhythmic profile of the "flamingo" call form "one of the arrangement's unifiers," while

37 Jeffries quoted in Hajdu, *Lush Life*, 73–74. Along with that of his white gay American counterparts, Strayhorn's Francophilia also functioned as a sign of queer affiliation. In remembering his attraction to Strayhorn, for example, Aaron Bridgers explained: "We had the same favorite musicians, especially Tatum and Teddy Wilson. And we both loved the French classical composers. I had always had a love for all things French, and I discovered that Billy did too" (66). In a different but not unrelated context, the black gay poet, novelist, and literary critic Melvin Dixon recalled of his Francophile-oriented college education in the early 1970s: "Most men who studied French were gay; so there was a connection there, and my best friends were Francophiles, and I guess, it was a way to establish one's sophistication and sissyness and all that" (Jerome de Romanet, "A Conversation with Melvin Dixon," *Callaloo* 23, no. 1 [2000]: 84–109). On queer Francophilia and Euro-modernist composers, see Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

38 Van de Leur, *Something to Live For*, 38–43. The following discussion of "Flamingo" is indebted to van de Leur's insights. As he specifies, the new material adds nearly a third to the model.

39 Van de Leur, *Something to Live For*, 67.

The image shows a musical score for the introduction of "Flamingo" by Duke Ellington, measures 1-8. The score is for Alto 1-2; Tenor 1-2, Baritone, Trumpet 1-3, and Trombone 1-3. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The tempo is marked "Allegro". The score features complex dissonant harmonies and a "Flamingo" solo section starting at measure 6. The solo section includes a trumpet solo and a trombone solo, both marked with a forte (f) dynamic. The solo section ends at measure 8, marked with a piano (p) dynamic.

Example 2a. Strayhorn, “Flamingo” (1941), introduction, measures 1–8.

the complex dissonance foreshadows the “tonal ambiguity Strayhorn explores in the arrangement.”⁴⁰

Along with Strayhorn’s sophisticated harmonic palette, his penchant for creating intricate introductory, bridging, and modulatory design in arrangements has typically been read as a sign of Strayhorn’s French-accented modernist classicism. “The rich modern harmonies of the introduction,” writes Mark Tucker, “betray the taste of someone who admitted a fondness for Ravel and Debussy.”⁴¹ Along similar lines, van de Leur credits the song’s arrangement specifically with bringing a new classicism to the Ellington sound, one that departed radically from the conventions of vocal arranging of the time: “[The] liquidity of its caesura-less arrangement, its structuring elements, the sophisticated modulations and integrated introductory, transitory and closing sections . . . make ‘Flamingo’ unique in the jazz writing of its time.”⁴² Van de Leur’s insights echo Ellington himself, who proclaimed the arrangement “a turning point in vocal background orchestration, a renaissance in elaborate ornamentation for the accompaniment of singers.”⁴³

I would like to extend these comments about Strayhorn’s signature classicism in a queer direction, first along a path suggested by Tinkcom’s model of

⁴⁰ Van de Leur, *Something to Live For*, 38.

⁴¹ Mark Tucker, “Duke Ellington 1940–42,” liner notes, *The Blanton-Webster Band* (RCA Bluebird, 1986).

⁴² Van de Leur, *Something to Live For*, 42. See also Hajdu, *Lush Life*, 86–87.

⁴³ Quoted in Nicholson, *Reminiscing in Tempo*, 226.

“queer style enhancements.” As mentioned earlier, Tinkcom argues that the opulent and glamorous camp stylizations of Freed Unit production numbers for the classic MGM film musicals (what he calls “camp encodings”) constituted an “extra-added labor” on the film’s narrative texts, one that indexed the “emerging presence of queer metropolitan subcultures in shaping mass taste and aesthetic sensibilities.”⁴⁴ Tinkcom rethinks the visual and sonic stylistic markers of camp—artifice, excess, and performance—from the perspective of production. Camp thus functions for Tinkcom both as a form of queer labor *and* as affect/style, a coupling of social and aesthetic modes that shows “how queer subjectivity emerges within the dynamics of capitalist cultural production for audiences that extend well beyond queer male subcultures.”⁴⁵ Insofar as Strayhorn’s creative labor as a vocal arranger was in fact the arena in which he would most explicitly have been required to negotiate his ideas and sensibility with the popular song as commodity, Tinkcom’s theory has special pertinence. However, questions arise in applying Tinkcom’s model of the Freed Unit’s camp sensibility to the differently located affective world of Strayhorn’s “style enhancements” in an arrangement such as “Flamingo.” Put another way, are the lavish camp stylizations (or “encodings”) created by a privileged group of white gay male artists working for big-budget Hollywood musicals a relevant point of comparison for hearing—queerly or otherwise—Strayhorn’s African American jazz-based classicisms? Yes and no. Certainly there was a considerable amount of traffic (and cultural resonance) between New York-based entertainment (e.g., Broadway and Harlem revues) and Hollywood staff composers and arrangers, but this traffic gravitated toward de facto white-only routes.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, an argument can be made for a camp hearing, or perhaps a queerly signifyin’ one, of Strayhorn’s sophisticated and elaborate orchestral gloss on the popular song’s cliché romantic tropical tropes. In the A strain of the vocal chorus, this comes through the lilting melody, the beguine-like beat in the staccato brass accompaniment, and the modal sound created by major/minor mixture. Also notable here is the affect of Strayhorn’s stylized orchestral additions, such as the opening “flamingo” trombone call passage, with its dramatically held half-diminished-seventh sax chord on the downbeat and exaggerated trumpet echo, and an almost over-the-top moment of word painting that occurs in the opening bars of the bridge—also in the form of an echo that

44 Tinkcom, *Working*, 36–37.

45 Tinkcom, *Working*, 36–37.

46 On this point, while Tinkcom does clearly acknowledge white racial privilege in his analysis of the camp aesthetics in the MGM Minnelli / Freed Unit, he does not fully explore how this racialized environment might figure into his analyses of camp, gender, and sexuality. For a historically nuanced discussion of racism in the Freed Unit, see Donald Bogle’s account of arranger Phil Moore’s struggles at MGM during this period in *Bright Boulevards, Bold Dreams: The Story of Black Hollywood* (New York: Random House, 2005), 224–32. For an excellent history of the practices and cultural meanings associated with the symphonic jazz arranging tradition, see John Howland, *Ellington Uptown: Duke Ellington, James P. Johnson, and the Birth of Concert Jazz* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

Example 2b. Strayhorn, “Flamingo” (1941), bridge, measures 17–24.

references the melodic contour of the opening echo. As Jeffries croons through an octave leap the first two words of the line “The wind (sings a song to you as you go),” the saxophone section sounds an undulating “wind” motive that sweeps rapidly upward, lingers for a half measure, then languidly drops back down (shown in ex. 2b). Another stylized highlight comes through the ethereal, erotic, yet restrained affect of Jeffries’s vocalise during the arrangement’s most formally breathtaking addition, an elaborate thirty-bar transition section that moves through a series of complex modulations derived from the source song’s material.⁴⁷ This part of the arrangement, which does not appear in Strayhorn’s written arrangement, arose spontaneously during the recording session when Strayhorn directed the singer to improvise: “Do that ‘Oh, oh’ in there, and do that modulation down through it.”⁴⁸ Even Lawrence Brown’s trombone solo receives a sensuous vocal embroidery as Jeffries interjects the “flamingo” call in the middle of his chorus, as if whispering in the ear of the listener.

Taken together, the song’s sophisticated harmonic design, complex architecture, programmatic simulations, dreamy “Oh, oh” vocal stylizations, and exotic signifiers would seem to resonate with some of the sonic idioms of

⁴⁷ Van de Leur, *Something to Live For*, 39.

⁴⁸ Van de Leur, *Something to Live For*, 39.

camp—minus the strings—showcased in Freed Unit / MGM production numbers, as well as the ways in which such stylistic discourse served the demands of the Hollywood fantasy industry.⁴⁹ Yet a theory of camp from the perspective of production such as Tinkcom's always depends on the potentially problematic claim of ironic intent, and, as Lloyd Whitesell has recently argued, "stylistic extravagance does not need to be ironic to count as queer."⁵⁰ I want to put aside the question of camp affect for the moment to pursue a different story of queer affiliation between film musical production number and Strayhorn's arrangement of "Flamingo," one that places the arrangement onto the stage of a minor Hollywood studio.

This story begins on January 3, 1941, the day the Ellington Orchestra kicked off a West Coast tour with a seven-week gig at the Casa Mañana ballroom. Thus also began Strayhorn's extended encounter with white and black Hollywood from 1941 to 1942. "He got into the whole exotic trip of the West Coast," Jeffries remembered. "It was a kind of mecca to us—all the glamour. . . . Strayhorn bought into all that."⁵¹ Adding a crucial personal depth to his Hollywood adventure was the close companionship of Lena Horne, who herself was famously "discovered" during this period by arranger Roger Edens. In fact, according to Horne, Strayhorn encountered Edens at Horne's home in 1942 around the time that Horne was cast in her first big starring role in the Vincente Minnelli / Freed Unit black-cast musical *Cabin in the Sky* (which is also significant for featuring the Ellington Orchestra).⁵² While the artistic culmination of Strayhorn's "glamour" year came earlier, in the summer of 1941 through his work on *Jump for Joy*, sometime during the last two months of that year Strayhorn's arrangement of "Flamingo" was given filmic realization as one of five Ellington "soundies" produced by the Hollywood-based company RCM, which was then managed primarily by the songwriter Sam Coslow (of Cotton Club fame).

A short-lived phenomenon of the early 1940s, soundies were three-minute

49 A particularly resonant example from the classic MGM film musical archive here would be Leo Arnaud and Connie Salinger's arrangement for Tony Martin's crooning of Nacio Herb Brown's "You Stepped Out of a Dream," the Busby Berkeley-choreographed "dream number" in the hit 1941 backstage musical *Ziegfeld Girl* (with the starring female triumvirate Lana Turner, Judy Garland, and Hedy Lamarr). The film was released in April 1941 just as "Flamingo" was charting.

50 Lloyd Whitesell, "Musical Glamour and Queer Aesthetics at MGM," unpublished paper. As an alternative to camp, Whitesell develops a theory of glamour as a distinctly queer aesthetic mode through a focus on the Freed Unit arrangers Roger Edens and Conrad Salinger and outlines a valuable typology for analyzing representations of glamour based on "the blending of four qualities: 1) sensuousness, 2) sophistication, 3) elevation, and 4) restraint." I am grateful to Professor Whitesell for sharing this work with me.

51 Hajdu, *Lush Life*, 93. See also Bogle, *Bright Boulevards*, 213–24, 246–50.

52 This meeting is implied in the following quote in Horne's autobiography: "Strayhorn was often in California and we were very, very close. Roger Edens frequently dropped over in the evenings usually with a couple of people from M-G-M music department" (*Lena*, 157). For critical accounts of Ellington's role in *Cabin in the Sky*, see, for example, Krin Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); and Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

low-budget performance films made for coin-operated automated viewing machines—or “visual jukeboxes”—primarily under the trade name Panorams. RCM and other film production companies marketed soundies in reels containing eight different film segments, which together formed a Soundies Miniature Revue. Customers paid ten cents per soundie but had no choice as to which of the eight possible segments—or part of the revue—they would see. Like jukeboxes, Panorams operated in entertainment spaces such as bars and amusement parlors and could also be found in the lobbies of upscale hotels and theaters.⁵³

Klaus Stratemann’s detailed commentary on the Ellington soundies, all of which were directed by Josef Berne, categorizes “Flamingo” as the “exotic dance number” in Soundies Miniature Revue no. 1049 (seventh position), sandwiched between two patriotic numbers (this reel also featured Ellington’s “Bli-Blip” from *Jump for Joy*, with Marie Bryant and Paul White).⁵⁴ The “exotic dancing” is delivered by Janet Collins and Talley Beatty in two quasi-narrative dance sequences set in a generic Afro-Caribbean “tropical” mise-en-scène. This secondary footage is intercut with Jeffries and the Ellington Orchestra performing “Flamingo” on a studio-constructed “nightclub” stage. Stratemann, along with virtually every other source on this soundie, identifies Collins and Beatty as “two members from Katherine Dunham’s famous black dance troupe.”⁵⁵ Although Janet Collins, who would a decade later become the first African American prima ballerina to be hired into the corps of the New York Metropolitan Opera ballet, probably was not dancing for Dunham at the time the soundie was filmed, she had performed in her company for a brief period that year. Talley Beatty, however, was in fact a principal dancer with Dunham and one of a number of gay male members of her troupe, a group that included Dunham’s frequent onstage partner Archie Savage, who was also associated with the queer interracial social circle around Carl Van Vechten.⁵⁶

According to dance historian Susan Manning (by way of George Chauncy), the Dunham Company was a center for gay life in Harlem during the 1940s and 1950s. Gordon Heath, a black gay actor, for example, characterized Dun-

53 The initials in RCM stand for its three founders: James Roosevelt, Sam Coslow, and Gordon Mills. The screen in the Panoram machine measured twenty-two by twenty-five inches and was placed at eye level. It was encased in a seven-foot-high walnut Art Deco-style cabinet. The speakers, which used RCA sound reproduction technology, were placed below the ground-glass screen, and the movies themselves were back-projected off two mirrors. Daniel Egen has estimated that at the “height of popularity, there were approximately 4,500 Panorams operating commercially” (*America’s Film Legacy: The Authoritative Guide to the Landmark Movies in the National Registry* [New York: Continuum Books, 2010], 348).

54 Klaus Stratemann, *Duke Ellington: Day by Day and Film by Film* (Copenhagen: JazzMedia, 1992), 180–85.

55 Stratemann, *Duke Ellington*, 180–85. The set for “Flamingo” was also used in several of the other Ellington soundies, for example, “Hot Chocolate (Cottontail).” Moreover, Collins and Beatty appeared in two other soundies that featured black theater dance numbers taken from (or based on) contemporaneous Dunham productions. See also Patricia Willard, “Dance: The Unsung Element of Ellingtonia,” *Antioch Review* (1999): 405–6.

56 Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 157.

ham's productions as "the highest prancing camp in the business." Manning argues that Dunham's particular amalgam of techniques from classical ballet and modern dance with black Atlantic vernacular and Africanist dance forms "presented legibly queer images for gay spectators."⁵⁷ She develops her argument with reference to the types of images and movements featured in Dunham's early 1940s breakthrough program *Tropics and Le Jazz "Hot,"* which premiered at the Windsor Theatre in New York to critical and popular acclaim. The middle section of this work, "Tropics" (subtitled "Shore Excursions" and set in Martinique), featured Dunham dancing in her celebrated "Woman with Cigar" role; one critic described the scenario thusly: Dunham "meets dockhand and flirts with him and his companions."⁵⁸ The dockhand in question was danced by the aforementioned Archie Savage. Through their association with Dunham's troupe during this period and through, as I describe below, the influence of Dunham's work (as evidenced in aspects of dance technique, the scenario, and the costuming), Beatty and Collins's work in the soundie's dance sequences links up to this queerly inflected choreographic discourse of stylistic and stylized fusion.⁵⁹ On this point, my reading of the soundie as a scene of collaboration brings together bodies, sounds, and movements that make legible a historical network of black gay cultural production and artists' affiliation.⁶⁰

Yet a queer reading of the dance sequences is perhaps most convincingly secured through its placement in and interaction with Strayhorn's arrangement. Indeed, the larger visual, choreographic, and sonic assemblage in the soundie, as well as details of editing work, actually heighten the arrangement's registers of stylistic extravagance and classicisms discussed previously. For example, in the second vocal chorus, we see a series of striking close-ups of Jeffries and Ellington initiated through a frontal close-up of Jeffries as he croons the "flamingo" call. The camera then cuts quickly to a close-up of Ellington: he smiles, eyes sparkling, gazing admiringly at Jeffries. Our gaze replaces Ellington's as the camera cuts back to Jeffries for the line "For it's you I rely on, and a love that is true"; the dramatic visual frontality of this image, coupled

⁵⁷ Manning, *Modern Dance*, 157.

⁵⁸ Manning, *Modern Dance*, 145. Manning specifically argues here for a reading of Dunham's "Woman with Cigar" in terms of queer eroticism (157–58).

⁵⁹ It is highly unlikely that Dunham had a direct hand in the choreography. While she was on the West Coast during this time, having just finished a cross-country tour of *Cabin in the Sky* (in fact, Ellington is reported to have attended a November performance of the LA run), the fees that would have been incurred for both the Ellington Orchestra and Dunham were almost certainly beyond the limited budgets of soundie productions, and, in any case, the sequences themselves were not substantial enough to require her participation or presence. The choreography may have come out of a nightclub act that Collins and Beatty toured during the early 1940s (they billed themselves as "Rea and Rico DeGard" to pass as Latino). Also in evidence here is the influence of Lester Horton's technique on Collins's dancing (she trained in modern dance with Horton). I am grateful to Susan Manning for sharing this and other insights with me (Manning, private communication, July 11, 2011).

⁶⁰ Indeed, just after the war, Strayhorn and Beatty would meet again at the black gay salon gatherings held in the home of Dorcas and Frank Neal; these encounters led to several postwar collaborations (including Beatty's starring role as Carribee Joe in the Ellington-Strayhorn collaboration *A Drum Is a Woman*, broadcast on CBS in 1959).

Fig. 2. Stills from "Flamingo," 1941. *Above left*, Ellington gazes at Jeffries; *below left*, Jeffries, frontal close-up; and *above*, Collins and Beatty's pas de deux.

with Jeffries's suave crooning and handsome, urbane visage, gives a special charge to this part of the arrangement, amplifying the aura of sophistication and exotic-romantic fantasy.

At the bridge, the camera crosscuts from its close-up on Jeffries to Collins: she is clad in an ornate, ruffle-laden Caribbean dress and bandana and is balancing a large tray of fruit with one hand. On the plain white backdrop behind her we see a somewhat menacing shadow of a giant flamingo. In sync with Jeffries's octave leap on the words "the wind," Collins arches her back and sweeps her arm melodramatically over her head, heightening the already theatrical affect of the wind motive. The camera pulls back to reveal a tiny and bare patch of "beach" upon which we see Beatty dressed as a native "sailor" or dockhand replete with head wrap, a striped shirt with a pattern of circular cut-outs, and loose cropped white pants. In the dance sequence that ensues, the longest and most substantial of the two, Collins and Beatty perform an erotic barefoot pas de deux. The first part of the sequence lasts from the bridge through the intricate "Oh, oh" modulatory/transition section: in it they dance slowly around each other, with undulating, swaying hip movements and other choreographic gestures associated with Afro-Caribbean and African American vernacular and theater dance. At one point, Collins lifts the billowy, sheer white "picnic" cloth off the ground and wraps it seductively around her body as she writhes and undulates in a kind of brief Salome-esque veil dance.

For the trombone solo, the choreography shifts stylistic gears, and the two dancers present an extended ballet sequence: Beatty executes a series of quick turns (*chaînés*) around Collins punctuated by delicate jumps (*sissonnes*) and leg extensions, while Collins continues her undulating hip movements. The two dancers then perform variation-like exchanges of turns, jumps, and leg extensions such as attitude and arabesque. As the trombone solo moves toward the cadence, Collins and Beatty slowly drop to their knees, arching their torsos back to the ground in an extreme limbo position. This ends the sequence, and the camera crosscuts back to the performance just as Johnny Hodges stands to take his solo.

Conclusion: *Blue Rose* (Again)

The director's choice to visually showcase Hodges's solo in the "Flamingo" soundie is of particular significance to my project for several reasons. First, it points to a crucial difference between mainstream Hollywood arranging practices and those of African American swing bands: the centrality of solo improvisation. Second, along with Strayhorn's songs, the string of ballads he wrote for Hodges throughout his career stand out as his most intimate, intense, and certainly most sensuous lyrical statements. The close collaborative relationship between Hodges and Strayhorn was established almost immediately after Ellington hired Strayhorn in 1939: that spring he composed the gorgeous ballads "Day Dream" and "Passion Flower" as well as "A Flower Is a Lovable Thing." Interestingly, Strayhorn and Hodges left the Ellington organization for

roughly the same period in the early 1950s; *Blue Rose* would mark the return of both artists to the Ellington fold, announced with stylized abandon in Strayhorn's dramatic, noir-tinged new arrangement of "Passion Flower" (followed some seven months later by the extraordinary recording of "Ballad for Very Sad and Very Tired Lotus Eaters"). The queer affective registers I have explored with respect to "Flamingo" have something in common with Strayhorn's ballads for Hodges, which similarly bear titles and call forth sounds that evoke the sensate world (and pleasures therein) of exotic objects and the utopian spaces of dreams and fantasy.⁶¹

In this context, I would like to close by considering again the title for the Strayhorn-Ellington-Clooney LP, *Blue Rose*. I would argue that it also radiates toward this queer affective register, although in a way that—like Strayhorn's "differentiated style" itself—accommodates the intended commercial appeal of the title, with its play on Rose(mary), "blues," and associations of the blue rose flower with ideas of feminine elegance and mystery.⁶² But as a desired or sought-after yet unattainable natural object, the blue rose also holds an intriguing symbolic history as a figure for fantasy and the impossible.⁶³ Here it bears pointing out a symptomatic tension between the absenting of Strayhorn from the LP's cover image, and thus from the public face of the collaborative project, and his sonic presence behind this (the) scene(s). My reading of Strayhorn's arranging for Clooney (and for Jeffries) suggests ways in which such a simultaneous absenting and presence can be productively linked to his "queer position" in the Ellington Orchestra and to his arranging practices. Strayhorn's sexual identity required that he work behind the scenes, a space from which his voice facilitated spaces and created contexts for other voices to be heard, to discover new vocal personas and new ways of sounding and being. As I have shown, these contexts and spaces merged the personal and musical across scripts of race, gender, and sexuality. To be sure, a critical element in the art of arranging revolves around cultivating skills of musical sensitivity and empathy in collaborative music making; yet for Strayhorn, as with any number of gay male artists working behind the scenes, this talent for sonic empathy in collaborative efforts was profoundly shaped by and through his dissident sexual identity.

61 The historic affiliations of these qualities with a gay sensibility were not lost on Strayhorn's posthumous critics, who, however, explicitly construed this sensibility in homophobic terms as a kind of dangerous, perverse, feminized excess vis-à-vis Ellington. I examine these issues in more detail in my article "Queer Encounters in the Music of Billy Strayhorn," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 771–824.

62 The title may also have evoked associations with another blue flower pop song from the period, "Blue Gardenia," which was the title song for Fritz Lang's 1953 film noir (arranged by Nelson Riddle and sung in the film by Nat King Cole). The song was also recorded by Dinah Washington in 1956 for her critically acclaimed LP *The Swingin' Miss "D"* (arr. Quincy Jones).

63 To give one midcentury example, in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (which debuted onstage in 1944 and was made into an MGM film in 1950), the blue rose symbolizes the various forms of "difference" embodied in the misfit character Laura Wingfield; these include her retreat into a fantasy world of small glass animals and popular songs, her disability, and her extreme fragility, shyness, and inability to conform to heteropatriarchal social expectations.