Nat “King” Cole’s Civil War:
How Pop Music’s Intimate Sounds and the U. S. Military’s Intimate Spaces Ignited Alabama’s Racial Tensions in the 1950s

Joseph M. Thompson
Charlottesville, Virginia

BA, University of Alabama, 2002
MA, University of Mississippi, 2013

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Arts

Department of History

University of Virginia
May 2015

On April 21, 1956, Alabama newspaper *The Anniston Star* published a letter to the editor, criticizing what the writer perceived as the press's unfair characterization of five local white men as "hoodlums" for their recent involvement in an act of racial violence. Mrs. Orliss W. Clevenger, a white resident of Anniston and wife of one of the "hoodlums," wrote indignantly that she could not "understand why when a White does something to a Negro it makes front page for two or three days and why when three Negro men raped that white woman a few weeks ago, there was only one small article about it down at the bottom of the page." With palpable resentment, Mrs. Clevenger decried a local minister for writing a letter of condemnation regarding her husband while failing to pen one denouncement of the accused African American rapists. Surely, the clergyman did not think that her husband's crime constituted a sin worse than the rape of a white woman? Surely, the local paper did not condemn her husband for acting on behalf of the white race? Mrs. Clevenger ended her letter by reiterating her loyalty to her husband and, by extension, her race, writing, "I'm not ashamed of what they did because that is not near so bad as rape." "If we have lost any white friends because of this," she concluded, "I don't think they were worth having anyway!"[1]

At the time, Mrs. Clevenger's husband stood convicted of "disorderly conduct, carrying a concealed weapon and conspiracy to commit assault and battery" for his involvement in the attack on popular music entertainer Nat "King" Cole at the Municipal Auditorium on April 10, 1956 in Birmingham, Alabama. On that night, three of Clevenger's fellow white Annistonians, Kenneth Adams and brothers Edgar and Willis Vinson, stormed the stage and assaulted one of

---

[1] "Writer Charges Bias," *The Anniston Star*, April 21, 1956.
[2] "Four go on trial, attack details told," *The Birmingham News*, April 18, 1956; "Five Anniston Men Are Held In Attack On Negro Singer," *The Anniston Star*, April 11, 1956.
[3] Brian Ward, "Civil Rights and Rock and Roll: Revisiting the Nat King Cole Attack of 1956," *OAH Magazine of History* (April 2010), 21-24; *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998), 95-105. For more on the attack and characterizations of Carter, see Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the*

the world's most popular entertainers in front of a segregated audience of approximately three thousand white concertgoers. Officers from the Birmingham Police Department seized Adams and the Vinson brothers but not before the men managed to knock Cole to the ground, sending him backstage to seek medical attention. Police then arrested Clevenger, along with fellow Annistonian Mike Fox and Birmingham resident, Jesse Mabry outside the auditorium, all of whom waited near a car loaded with "two .22 rifles, blackjacks, and a pair of brass knucks."[2]

These attackers, all members of demagogue Asa Carter's North Alabama Citizens' Council (NACC), targeted Cole in an ultimately clumsy act of hostility towards state expansion, desegregation, and African American musical culture in the postwar era. Back in their hometown of Anniston, the NACC members had witnessed firsthand the power of the federal government and popular culture to alter racial dynamics. Southern politicians courted military expansion as an economic boon to the region, unintentionally bringing the federal state into conflict with local conceptions of regional and racial autonomy. Anniston represented one such site of conflict, and Fort McClellan, the city's local military installation, had desegregated the troops housed there following President Truman's Executive Order 9981 in 1948. Despite the progressive intentions of this mandate, military desegregation inadvertently set the stage for racial conflict, especially at southern bases. The military then threw a spark on Anniston's tinderbox of race relations in 1954, when it opened an expansive Women's Army Corps (WAC) training facility at Fort McClellan. For the working-class NACC, a self-conceived twentieth century Confederate guerilla unit, the housing of African American men and white women together on the base under the auspices of the federal government created an intolerable situation. Furthermore, the NACC's newsletter, *The Southerner*, promoted rumors of jazz music

[2] "Four go on trial, attack details told," *The Birmingham News*, April 18, 1956; "Five Anniston Men Are Held In Attack On Negro Singer," *The Anniston Star*, April 11, 1956.

and miscegenation on the base, only exacerbating the violent imaginations of its readers. Maddened by these local iterations of interracial sounds and sex that seemed to carry the endorsement of the federal state, the neo-Confederate NACC leveled their aim at Cole.

While narratives of the civil rights movement have retold the basic facts of Cole's attack, none have considered the combination of state expansion and popular music detailed here. Additionally, none have analyzed the actual sound of Cole's music for its role in motivating his attackers.[3] Using theories from the field of sound studies to examine Cole's production values allows an access point into the minds of the assailants, as well as his white southern fans. Cole benefited from advances in recording technologies that welcomed soft vocals and deep reverberations to create a lush, intimate sound that earned him legions of white fans and collaborative opportunities with white musicians. In this way, Cole's intimate, interracial sound mirrored Fort McClellan's intimate, interracial spaces and conjured images of interracial sex in the imaginations of the NACC. While these considerations provide new and substantial evidence concerning the attack on Cole, they also speak to broader issues, ones with resonance for the development of the South and the nation across the late twentieth century. Combining the

---

[3] Brian Ward, "Civil Rights and Rock and Roll: Revisiting the Nat King Cole Attack of 1956," *OAH Magazine of History* (April 2010), 21-24; *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998), 95-105. For more on the attack and characterizations of Carter, see Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); "Southern History, American Fiction: The Secret life of Southwestern Novelist Forrest Carter," in *Rewriting the South: History and Fiction*, ed. Lothar Honnighausen and Valeria Gennaro Lerda with Christoph Irmscher and Simon Ward (Tubingen: Francke, 1993) 286-304; Daniel Mark Epstein, *Nat King Cole* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 251-256; Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 114-119; Leslie Gourse, *Unforgettable: The Life and Mystique of Nat King Cole* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 176-180; James Haskins, *Nat King Cole*, with Kathleen Benson (New York: Stein and Day, 1984), 138-140; Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-64* (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 51-56; Jeff Roche, "Asa/Forrest Carter and Regional/Political Identity," in *The Southern Albatross: Race and Ethnicity in the American South*, ed. Phillip D. Dillard and Randal L. Hall (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1999), 235-274; Gary S. Sprayberry, " 'Town Among the Trees': Paternalism, Class, and Civil Rights in Anniston, Alabama, 1872 to Present" (PhD dissertation, University of Alabama, 2003); " 'Interrupted Melody': The 1956 Attack on Nat 'King' Cole," *Alabama Heritage* 71 (Winter 2004): 16-24; Nick Tosches, *Unsung Heroes of Rock 'n' Roll: The Birth of Rock in the Wild Years Before Elvis* (New York: Harmony Books, 1991), 36-37.

factors of government expansion, racial integration, and recording technologies demonstrates the unintended consequences of military buildup and African American music as provocations for racism and antistatism in the Sunbelt South.[4]

Asa Carter, Fort McClellan, and the Threat of Miscegenation

Anniston, Alabama's experiences with the disorienting effects of the post-World War II economic and population boom typify the struggles faced by industrial cities throughout the South in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The population of Anniston, the seat of Calhoun County, increased by 5,543 to reach 31,066 residents between 1940 and 1950. The entire county recorded a 25.6 percent increase over the same ten-year period, boosting its population to 79,539, while neighboring Cherokee and Cleburne counties, which lacked industrial cities, lost population at the rates of 11.5 and 12.7 percent, respectively.[5] Employers like Kilby Steel and the Anniston Army Depot provided steady work to the generation of southerners who left their mules in the fields and the uncertainties of agricultural labor for the regular paychecks of industrial employment.[6] The migration of whites and blacks from the countryside to the city increased the possibility of interracial contact and conflict in the Deep South. Political discourse and policy only heightened the potential for racial unrest, as President Truman embraced a stronger civil rights platform in 1947 and desegregated the armed forces by executive order in 1948. Notably, the ideological fringes had helped animate such executive action, as Henry Wallace's unsuccessful run for president pushed from the Left and the Dixiecrats from the Right. On the streets of Alabama's cities, African Americans met local conservative policy with direct

---

[4] Joseph M. Thompson, "Sounding Southern: Popular Music, Antistatism, and the Creation of the Sunbelt South, 1940 - 1994" (PhD Dissertation, University of Virginia, in progress).

[5] "1950 Census of Population: Advance Reports," Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, October 4, 1951, http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/41028710p8.pdf.

[6] For more on the correlation between the modernizing South and the concomitant rise of Jim Crow segregation, see Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, 1999).

action in the early 1950s, epitomized in the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott and Autherine Lucy's attempted desegregation of the University of Alabama in February 1956.[7]

Asa Earl Carter emerged from this postwar milieu as a particularly vehement and conspicuously Confederate-themed voice of racial conservatism. A native of Oxford, Alabama, a town four miles to the south of Anniston, Carter turned eighteen years old in 1943. Just after graduating from Oxford High School, he enlisted in the Navy in June 1943 and served for three years in the Pacific Theater. During his enlistment, Carter received training in radio communications and following the war briefly continued his education in journalism at the University of Colorado on the G. I. Bill. After working as a radio announcer in Colorado and Mississippi, Carter returned to his native Alabama in 1953, where he began hosting a radio talk show sponsored by a white supremacist organization, the American States' Rights Association (ASRA), on Birmingham's WILD 850 AM.[8]

A form letter from the summer of 1954 soliciting and thanking supporters for their financial support of Carter's radio program and the ASRA reveals an intense passion for a strain of white supremacy that couched racist beliefs in the language of patriotism and religiosity. Safeguarding against any potential critiques of racial or political bias, Carter wrote, "Our organization is unique in that it has no ax to grind, except America's, Christianity's, and, the preservation of the race, without which neither America nor Christianity will survive." With the

---

[7] See Kari Fredrickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 133-149; Sprayberry, " 'Town Among the Trees,' " 123. For more on the evolution of the South in the post-WWII era, see Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980: The Story of the South's Modernization* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press and The Littlefield Fund for Southern History, The University of Texas, 1995), 1-37; Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000; London: Smithsonian National Museum of American History); *Remaking Dixie: The Impact of World War II on the American South*, ed. Neil R. McMillen, intro. Morton Sosna (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi); J. Mills Thornton III, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 2002).
[8] Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 114; Roche, "Asa/Forrest Carter and Regional/Political Identity," 238-239.

passage of *Brown v. Board* hanging over the state, he warned that the "NAACP recently raised ten million dollars to enforce its action of school integration this fall." Carter then connected this commitment to his cause with Christian devotion, claiming to spend five minutes each night in prayer, "asking for humbleness," that God might show him the proper methods of combatting the looming evil of school desegregation. With characteristic humility, Carter signed his letter, "Yours for the death of Communism and the protection of our race."[9]

Empowered with the extensive reach of mass communications, Carter, then known as "Ace," became the most recognized voice of reactionary white resistance to the stalwart civil rights efforts of Birmingham's African American community. This platform allowed him to rouse support against what he perceived as an unjustified intrusion of the federal government into individual liberties and racial purity on behalf of African Americans. Carter's reasoning linked communism to school integration and integration to the "amalgamation" of the races, throwing gasoline on the fires of racial hatred and white paranoia. Twice a day, five days a week, for nearly two years, Carter took to the airwaves with his rhetoric. White Alabamians that subscribed to such ideologies could tune in across the northern portion of the state, once at half past noon and later at 6:30 p. m., finding justification for their anger over the mandates of *Brown v. Board*. They could hear their fears confirmed about the threat of Communist plots and interracial sex while reveling in the vicarious rebellion of Carter's anti-government diatribes that denounced "the dictatorial civil rights legislation."[10]

---

[9] American States' Rights Association, Incorporated, Papers, 1954-1956, Tutwiler Collection, Department of Southern History, File 416.1.1.1.1, Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts. In actuality, the NAACP reported earning $89,593.90 in 1954 through subscriptions to *The Crisis* and membership campaign drives. See *The Year of the Great Decision: NAACP Annual Report, Forty-sixth Year, 1954* (New York: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1955), 78.

[10] Ibid. For more on the linkage between Communism and the massive resistance, see Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969); George Lewis, *The White South and the Red Menace: Segregationists, Anticommunism, and Massive Resistance, 1945-1965* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004); Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and*

Ultimately, Carter's jeremiads proved too extreme for Birmingham, and the station pulled his show in 1955, when his verbal attacks began to include Alabama's Jewish business community and the National Conference of Christians and Jews as targets. Although Carter worked diligently for the ASRA and the emergent Citizens' Council movement, both of which held close ties to Alabama's political and economic power structures, even the segregationist business leaders of Birmingham could not abide the radio personality's denunciation of Jews. Carter failed to grasp or chose to ignore the willingness of white Alabamians to criticize Jews so soon after the Holocaust. Furthermore, to question the whiteness of Jews was to expose the cracks in the very construction of race and reveal a hole in the racial logic of the professional class's version of white supremacy. As the booming postwar economy lifted previously marginalized ethnicities into the mainstream, Carter's white working-class audience found themselves relegated to the same social class previously reserved for racial and ethnic minorities, a trend that only fueled their race and class resentments.[11]

Carter's firing from WILD came as a shock for the thirty year old ideologue. As a young man from a dairy farm near Fort McClellan, he had joined the military likely because it was the thing to do, a rite of passage into the masculine culture of the Deep South in wartime. But whatever his initial reasons for joining, global war left Carter, a veteran of Okinawa, searching

---

Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006, Third Edition (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 19-23; Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948-1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004). For recent analysis on the emergence of rightwing media outlets, see Nicole Hemmer, "Messengers of the Right: Media and the Modern Conservative Movement" (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2010).

[11] John Bartlow Martin, *The Deep South Says "Never"*, foreword Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (New York: Ballatine Books, 1957), 107-108; Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 114; McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-64* (Urbana, Chicago, and London: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 47-48 Roche, "Asa/Forrest Carter and Regional/Political Identity," 239. For more on the social whitening of European ethnics, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Ethnics and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1990); Ieva Zake, "Anticommunist White Ethnics in Search of True Americanness: Ideas and Alliances in the 1950s-1970s, *Journal of American Studies*, 4, 3 (November 2013): 1065-1080.

for stability in a world that seemed chaotic and without reason. In 1954, he told an FBI informant that he had even "attended about 35 Communist Party 'tactical' meetings in which he learned disruptive tactics" and how to "infiltrate other organizations." At that point, he wanted to form "an anti-Communist league in Birmingham, a high-type organization of educated people, if possible, and people with good reputations." The informant claimed that Carter intended to instruct the Ku Klux Klan in the Communist Party's methods, presumably in terms of organization and propaganda.[12] Speaking to a group of Mennonite ministers in 1957, Carter articulated his vision for violence in the battle against school desegregation and couched his argument in terms of his disenchantment with World War II. To these ministers, Carter lamented that he did not know why he had fought in the Pacific, but he knew what he was fighting for on the home front.[13]

Carter's vitriol attracted a very particular following. His incendiary denunciation of Jews had cost him potential alliances with the Birmingham's middle and upper classes, as well as his radio outlet by 1955, but he developed a loyal following among other demographics. Carter discovered that white working-class males, much like him, who had moved off the farm, fought in a war across the globe, and returned to potential cuts in racial privilege, were searching for a cause. Like him, they moved from the farm to jobs in the postwar industrial and service sectors. Like him, they yearned for something to stabilize life during an era of rupture, as the civil rights movement threatened to dismantle racial hierarchies and an increasingly cosmopolitan popular

---

[12] FBI Asa Carter Investigation, File 1726.2.19, Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts. Somewhat surprisingly, Carter's communist affiliations never returned to haunt him in public. In an attempt to create leverage against Carter, the NAACP tried unsuccessfully to track down his Communist Party affiliations after Dr. Allan Knight Chalmers wrote to Roy Wilkins and Thurgood Marshall with the tip on April 14, 1956, four days after the Cole attack. Chalmers to Wilkins and Marshall, April 14, 1956, NAACP Administration Papers, 1956-1965, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. For the reply, see Wilkins to Chalmers, April 20, 1956, NAACP Papers.

[13] United States Federal Bureau of Investigation Asa Earl Carter Investigation Files, File 1726.2.2, Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

culture brought the world to north Alabama through television and movie screens. Carter recognized this constituency as a potential base for his politically minded version of the Klan. He made this dream a reality by allying with the Citizens' Council movement that proliferated across the South in the wake of *Brown v. Board*.

Beginning at Indianola, Mississippi in 1954, the Citizens' Councils created the middle-class, Chamber of Commerce-type face for white supremacy. Within these organizations, white middle and upper class businessmen, professionals, and politicians could voice their hateful opposition to desegregation by couching their arguments in terms of states' rights and the ostensible biological incompatibility of the races. By 1956, Councils across the nation claimed as many as 300,000 members in the fight against what they viewed as the Second Reconstruction. These organizations spanned the states of the former Confederacy, providing white parents a collective voice through which to lament the projected apocalyptic effects of the *Brown* rulings. The Citizens' Councils found legitimation and respectability through their political affiliations with the likes of Virginia's Senator Harry F. Byrd and Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina. Through such political connections and their distance from visible racial violence, the Councils maintained a veneer of respectability and left the dirty work for the working-class whites like Carter and his followers.[14]

Much of the Council movement's success arguably hinged on its mobilization of Confederate memory, and no one excelled at this form of propaganda more than Carter. Following his dismissal from WILD, Carter organized the North Alabama Citizens' Council

---

[14] McMillen, *The Citizens' Council,* 11. Other estimates on the councils' membership numbers range up to 500,000. See John M. Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag: America's Most Embattled Emblem* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 139. For more on the roots of the movement and its connection to the conservative political culture of the late twentieth century, see Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007).

(NACC) based out of Birmingham in October 1955 and incorporated the group in early 1956. His organization initially affiliated with the statewide network Alabama Association of Citizens' Councils (AACC) organized in 1956 and headed by Sam Englehardt, an upper class landowner, ASRA board member, and Alabama state senator. Engelhardt led the Central Alabama Citizens' Council, the most successful of councils in the state, which he ran out of a motel on the outskirts of Montgomery, fittingly on Jefferson Davis Highway. Despite their solidarity in opposition to integration, Carter's extremism towards Jews clashed with Engelhardt's more mainstream vision for the Alabama councils.[15] Engelhardt argued, "We can't fight everybody because we believe that this is basically a battle between Christianity and atheistic communism. We admit Jews to membership if they're Christians." During February and March of 1956, as the Montgomery Bus Boycott maintained momentum and Autherine Lucy attempted to desegregate the University of Alabama, Carter pulled in recruits from the working-class neighborhoods of Birmingham and found an eager audience for his extremist ideals on his home turf of Calhoun County.[16]

The Anniston Citizens' Council formed on February 17, 1956 and held its first organizational meeting on February 22 at the downtown VFW Hall. One hundred and fifty members registered in the first week of its existence, and the Anniston council busied itself with establishing its agenda and leadership, with council secretary and Carter associate, Joe Adams, and temporary chairman, W. H. Keown, vying for the top position. Perhaps attempting to establish the council's independence, Adams claimed that his organization held no ties with the NACC but the near-constant presence of Carter in Anniston in the early months of 1956 and the details of the Cole attack suggest otherwise.[17]

---

[15] Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 114-119; McMillen, *The Citizens' Council*, 42-55.
[16] Engelhardt quoted in Martin, *The Deep South Says "Never"*, 108.
[17] "Citizens' Unit Slates First Rally Saturday," *The Anniston Star*, February 23, 1956; "Citizens' Council First Rally Set At VFW Hall Saturday Night," *The Anniston Star*, February 24, 1956.

Indeed, Carter spoke to a cramped audience of five hundred whites at a membership rally on February 25, 1956, espousing his usual rhetoric of race baiting and anti-Communism, while calling for the impeachment of Governor Jim Folsom if he failed to enforce school segregation. Carter also used the opportunity to take aim at the businessmen and professionals that comprised Alabama's legislature. Taking a thinly veiled shot at the wealthy and politically connected Engelhardt, Carter stirred the pot of white class resentment, a theme that resonated with the working folks of Calhoun County. In his estimation, politicians "will do anything to stay in office. We must have men of principle in office, be he carpenter or machinist."[18]

Besides playing to his audience's class identity, Carter's idiosyncratic blending of popular culture and propaganda relied on two flashpoints to raise this specter of miscegenation: Fort McClellan and black music. Located only six miles north of Anniston, Fort McClellan, original founded as Camp McClellan in July 1917, had served as a massive training site for white and African American soldiers during two World Wars and even hosted experiments in interracial housing for officers as early as 1942.[19] Carter, along with his various accomplices, cut an intense swath of organizing in early 1956, mobilizing councils in Calhoun County by

---

[18] Quoted in "A. Carter Is Speaker To Council," *The Anniston Star*, February 26, 1956.

[19] For remembrances of the military's experiments in integration at Fort McClellan, see the biography of Mississippi governor William Winter, who spent time at the fort, Charles C. Bolton, *William F. Winter and the New Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 49, 55. African American soldiers offered their own take to *The Anniston Star*, recalling the entrenched racism they faced at the base, including treatment worse than the German POWs housed at the fort. For these recollections, see "Segregation heightened soldiers' awareness," *The Anniston Star*, November 1, 1984. For period accounts of the murder of a white street car conductor by black soldier Edgar Caldwell following World War I and the racial unrest this act stirred, see "Negro Soldier Kills Conductor and Badly Injures Motorman Of Anniston Streetcar Sunday," *The Anniston Star*, December 16, 1918; "Caldwell Is Held Without Bail For Murder," *The Anniston Star*, December 19, 1918; "Cecil Linton Killed By Negro," *The Lineville Headlight*, December 20, 1918; *The Anniston Star*, July 30, 1920; Transcript of *Edgar C. Caldwell v. the State of Alabama*, Appeal from Calhoun County Circuit Court. Anniston's history with military installations stands punctuated with acts of racial violence that predate the World Wars. The most notorious remains the "battle of Anniston" which began on November 25, 1898 and resulted in at least fifteen deaths of U. S. soldiers when black and white troops fired on each other in the city streets following months of white harassment of black troops by the white soldiers and townspeople. For details surrounding the racial violence during Anniston's Spanish-American War era installation named Camp Shipp, see Grace Hooten Gates, *The Model City of the New South: Anniston, Alabama, 1872-1900* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1978), 140-143, 178-180; Sprayberry, " 'Town Among the Trees,' " 51-57.

preying on the racial fears, as well as the gender and class insecurities, of working whites. The alleged weakening of the "Anglo-Saxon" race through "mongrelization" served as the overriding themes of his hate-mongering tactics. Furthermore, the NACC's newsletter, *The Southerner*, spoke to the role that Fort McClellan and black music played in this miscegenation. Informed by a legacy of racial conflict in association with African American soldiers at the fort, working-class whites waited expectantly for confirmation of their worst fears.

The February edition of *The Southerner* reported alleged interracial mixing between African American men and white women at Fort McClellan within the context of black music and dancing. The article begins by positioning the federal government as an enemy of white southern mores, stating, "not by choice of the people, but through dictatorial executive order, the government quite some time ago, integrated our armed forces, and consequently, the military bases." Carter, who functioned as editor of *The Southerner*, the NACC Executive Secretary, and the article's most likely author, goes on to indict President Eisenhower's civil rights advisor, Max Rabb, a Jewish attorney, as "the mouthpiece of the mongrelizers to the President's ear," as the culprit for starting Fort McClellan down the slippery slope to racial amalgamation. The article claims that the government's plan for integration "was not subtle, but it was quiet," bemoaning the arrival of white WAC troops and the encampment of African American male soldiers. Allegations of interracial sex stemmed from the desegregation of social functions at the base. "Alcoholic beverages flow freely at the dances," the article condemned. With sneering insinuation, the author continues, "as the evening wears on, one can hear the music rising in tempo, the beat growing into a jungle throb, the courtesies growing more lax, until the woman is accorded no visible respect."[20]

---

[20] "Fort McClellan," *The Southerner: News of the Citizens' Council*, February 1956, 3. The February edition is housed at the Alabama Room Archives, Anniston-Calhoun County Public Library, Anniston, Alabama. All other

The Southerner even offered photographic proof of the alleged crimes in which an interracial crowd, ostensibly from the fort, pose innocently around a piano, where an African American man sits at the bench. The women wear conservative dresses and cardigan sweaters, while the men wear suits, some with ties, and face the camera rigidly, conscious of its presence. This scene, the article argued, constituted a mere "pause from an animalistic 'be-bop' exhibition." *The Southerner* article also included three more pictures of the supposed debauchery, one of a "joking session" and the other two of "dance scenes."[21] The April/May edition offered a full-page image of three African American men, with two of them dressed in U. S. Army uniforms, posing for the camera alongside two white women in civilian dresses. On the left, the man in civilian clothes stands with his arms around one of the women, as if posing for a prom picture. On the right, a man in uniform ignores the camera, looking at his four companions. The remaining uniformed man and woman embrace in an interracial kiss. Emblazoned under the picture stands the text, "THIS, IN ALABAMA! - STORY INSIDE." The accompanying story added salacious, rhetorical flourish. While the picture may have seemed to show the couples innocently "embracing in a dance," the article assured readers that they actually performed "a dance of death for the white race, for Christianity, for our freedom."[22]

---

editions reside in the Asa Earl "Ace" Carter Publications Collection, 1956 and undated, File 1265. 1. 1, Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

[21] Ibid. This edition of *The Southerner* also contains articles on the role of black music on the Ed Sullivan Show as a means of forcing integration on the general public, as well as the story of Helen Canfield Peck, a white upper class Chicagoan, who married African American writer Frank Marshall Davis after attending a class on jazz music.

[22] "Back Cover Picture," *The Southerner*, April/May 1956, 7-8. This same picture was used on a flyer soliciting funds for the American Nationalist Party, bearing the title, "THIS IS INTEGRATION -- EISENHOWER STYLE." The accompanying text identifies the image as coming from Fort McClellan, with a short article in a similar tone as that of *The Southerner*. However, this text focused on the detrimental effects of integration on the enlistment numbers, despite the highest levels of pay ever offered by the military. One could order reprints of the tract for a small fee by sending money to a Post Office Box in Inglewood, California. It seems that the narrative of Fort McClellan held potential resonance beyond the South and foreshadows the appeal of Carter's propaganda techniques across the Sunbelt South that developed in speeches for George and Lurleen Wallace. See James W. "Jimmie" Morgan Papers, File 266.25.2, Birmingham Public Library, Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

In August, Herbert L. Phillips wrote an article for *The Southerner* that corroborated the previous accounts of Fort McClellan. According to Phillips, the military had recently defended its record on integration by denying the interracial mixing between men and women, and he too questioned the validity of the photographs. However, Phillips confirmed to readers that, if not these exact scenarios then similar ones occurred at the fort. A Private from Mississippi in the National Guard's Thirty-first "Dixie" Division, Phillips relayed his astonishment, declaring, "I expected the military to be integrated but I never expected to walk into the Wac Service Club right there on the base and see negro regular army soldiers dancing as close as possible to white Wacs."[23] Here, federally mandated, heterosocial integration created an opportunity for interracial sex to the soundtrack of African American musical styles, making Fort McClellan the site of United States' impending downfall as imagined by Carter. Even as the region's continued embrace of military spending anchored its economy, this persistent federal presence resulted in clashes between the government's increasingly liberal racial policies and Carter with his bevy of white supremacists.

While the Army assured the public that stories of interracial socialization at Fort McClellan remained apocryphal, white WAC troops reinforced a positive image of the military's presence to the citizens of Anniston. The military created the WAC during World War II and stationed white and black women at Fort McClellan in 1943, a year after the corps' creation. Following the war, the Army maintained the WAC, training and housing female recruits at Fort Lee, Virginia.[24] The Army completed construction of the WAC's new barracks and training

---

[23] Herbert L. Phillips, "Military Withholds Many Facts on Negroes at Fort McClellan," *The Southerner*, August 1956, 5. Apparently, the Army reported that the pictures of African American soldiers and white women were taken in Europe. Phillips also claimed that eight African American soldiers held him and thirteen other white soldiers at knife point while cursing the state of Mississippi and the white men from there.
[24] "Wacs Take Over Soldiers' Work At Ft. McClellan, Do An Excellent Job," *Birmingham Age-Herald*, May 14, 1944, Alabama Textual Materials Collection, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama, accessed January 20, 2014, http://digital.archives.alabama.gov/cdm/ref/collection/voices/id/3454. For

facilities at Fort McClellan in May 1954. On September 27 of the same year, Army Chief of Staff Matthew B. Ridgway arrived for the dedication of the seven million dollar facilities that would train the enlistees in a variety of clerical and medical occupations. *The Anniston Star* provided photographic coverage of the dedication ceremonies and featured staged vignettes of the women drilling, relaxing in their rooms, singing around a piano, and attending etiquette class.[25] The juxtaposition of these pictures, smiling white women marching in uniformed formation one moment and sewing in their rooms the next, created an image of white femininity in service to the state that offered an appealing image for residents of the nearby city. These women must have appeared as the living embodiment of those in need of protection from the sexual degradation predicted to accompany integration.

The federal government's efforts at interracial and heterosocial integration at Fort McClellan created a target for the racist ideologies of the NACC and exemplifies the unintended consequences of the military Keynesianism that defined the Sunbelt South. By courting investment in the form of military spending during and after World War II, southern politicians like Alabama's Lister Hill and John Sparkman could channel the stream of federal spending that began during the Great Depression without the taint of the New Deal's social programs.[26] While Anniston proved ahead of the game in this respect, wooing military investment since the 1890s, the opportunity for increased federal largesse during wartime and in the midst of the Cold War made Fort McClellan a seemingly permanent fixture within the lives of Annistonians. The federal government had transformed Anniston's base from a National Guard camp into a U. S.

---

more on the use of women troops in World War II, see Mattie E. Treadwell, *The Women's Army Corps* (Washington, D. C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1954).

[25] "3rd Army Chief, General Truman, Lauds WAC Facility," *The Anniston Star*, May 23, 1954; "WAC Ready To Dedicate Giant Center Tomorrow;" "WAC Has Vital Role In Uncle Sam's Army;" "Rules Given On Joining WAC," *The Anniston Star*, September 26, 1954.

[26] Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 93-111.

Army basic training site, expanded its infrastructure, and, in the process, created the potential for gender and racial conflict. For Carter, Fort McClellan provided a local, visible representation for the perceived offenses of the faceless federal government, supplying a target for his attacks and inadvertently putting him at odds with the economic strategy of the Sunbelt South.

In short, geographical context matters, even on the relatively minuscule scale of the six-mile difference between Fort McClellan and Anniston. Carter, though based in Birmingham at the time, was undoubtedly shaped by the same racial and class resentments that motivated the Adams brothers and other members of the Anniston Citizens' Council on the ground in his home county. This intersection of federal policy and local racist ideology erupted onto the stage with Nat "King" Cole. In the minds of his attackers, Cole embodied everything that integration at their hometown military base made them hate: the potential for interracial sex and African American musical cultures. Indeed, the imagined cohabitation of African American male troops and white WACS persisted in the minds of white Annistonians long before Cole ever ventured near Birmingham on his 1956 tour. Cole simply presented the perfect combination of sound and style to animate the violent racial imaginations of his attackers.

Nat "King" Cole Versus the Confederacy

While Carter and the Citizens' Councils spent the mid 1950s organizing against black music and racial integration, Nat "King" Cole was building his reputation as a household name in postwar popular culture and functioning as a living antithesis to white supremacist conceptions of the future. Born Nathaniel Adams Coles in 1919 at Montgomery, Alabama, Cole and his family moved north in 1924, along with thousands of other African American families, seeking respite from the oppressive racial environment of the Deep South. The Coles family, led by the deeply religious patriarch Reverend Edward James Coles, settled in the Bronzeville

section of Chicago. Drawn more to the provocative rhythms and melodies of jazz than to his father's Baptist church, the young Cole absorbed the sounds that emanated from the South Side clubs like the Grand Terrace Cafe, including the music of his hero, Earl Hines. Cole, who dropped the "s" from his surname upon entering his musical career, cut his first sides as the pianist in his older brother's combo, Eddie Cole's Swingsters in 1936. He soon formed his own group, King Cole and His Swing Trio, and began recording in 1938.[27]

Cole toured for six years with his trio, backing established singers, and cutting endless sides that balanced instrumental numbers with his own vocal performances. While enjoying success on the jazz/race charts, Cole struck crossover pay dirt in 1943 with his original composition "Straighten Up and Fly Right," which reached number three on the pop charts the following year and became a favorite of the Tuskegee Airmen. This newfound fame also brought collaborative endeavors with white musicians, moving Cole into recording sessions with Johnny Mercer and onto bills with the likes of Buddy Rich, Les Paul, and Frank Sinatra, who would become a close friend. Cole followed his first hit with other tunes that would enter the canon of American popular music like "The Christmas Song" and "Route 66," both recorded in 1946, with the latter reaching number eleven on the *Billboard* pop charts. He scored an unlikely hit in 1948 with the impressionistic "Nature Boy," and in 1950, recorded the number one pop hit, "Mona Lisa," originally performed by Charlie Spivak in the Alan Ladd movie, *Captain Carey, U. S. A*. By 1953, Cole was grossing $2.5 million a year for his label, Capitol Records, leading music industry folk to dub the then-new, iconic Capitol Records building in Los Angeles, "the house that Nat built."[28]

---

[27] Haskins, *Nat King Cole*, 13-21; *Straighten Up and Fly Right: A Chronology and Discography of Nat "King" Cole*, comp. Klaus Teubig (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1994), 3-24.
[28] Epstein, *Nat King Cole*, 115, 119-120, 133-144, 231, 241; Gourse, *Unforgettable*, 107-124; Gene Lees, *You Can't Steal a Gift: Dizzy, Clark, Milt, and Nat* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 239; Teubig,

Importantly, these hits relied on Cole's singing talents and his appearance as a respectable entertainer. At the strategic urging of his second wife, Maria, Cole changed his personal style slightly in the late 1940s as his visibility increased. He ditched the zoot suits and chain wallets that marked him as an African American road musician and embraced the neatly tailored clothes that Maria suggested. This change in sartorial style only helped to broaden the mainstream appeal of his already and always conked hair and composed, suave stage presence. The image conscious Maria also arranged for the Coles to purchase an ivy-covered, brick home in the all-white, middle/upper class Hancock Park neighborhood of Los Angeles in 1948. The Cole's purchase of the Hancock Park home led to their most threatening experience with white supremacy before the Birmingham attack. Upon hearing that an African American couple bought the home, the Hancock Park Association filed an unsuccessful civil suit to keep them out, and the Coles functioned as a test case for the Supreme Court's ruling in *Shelley v. Kramer* that outlawed restrictive covenants. Shortly thereafter, a vandal posted a sign in their yard that read, "Nigger Heaven."[29]

Cole's bourgeois image reflected his changing sound. As songs like "Nature Boy" and "Mona Lisa" garnered the most commercial return, Cole relegated his prodigious talents as a jazz pianist to take a backseat to his vocal performances, drawing the ire of jazz purists and critics in the process. Syrupy strings and Latin percussion crept into his recordings by the early 1950s, adding sentimental and "exotic" touches that made him the perfect soundtrack for the postwar, suburban living room or tiki bar. This transition meant that Cole spent less time cutting Earl

---

Straighten Up and Fly Right. As television blossomed into the U. S.'s preferred entertainment medium, Cole also landed musical guest spots on the Ed Sullivan and Steve Allen Shows. He even ventured into acting roles on shows like the *Lux Video Theater* on CBS in 1952 and starred in the film short, *The Nat King Cole Story*, in 1955.

[29] Epstein, *Nat King Cole*, 177-182; Haskins, *Nat King Cole*, 56-57, 77-83.

Hines-inspired piano licks and more time standing in front of his band, crooning in a velvety baritone, mellowed by the ever-present Kools that would kill him in 1965.

Influenced by the vocal approaches of Billie Holiday and Frank Sinatra, Cole crafted a technique that utilized the microphone to create closeness through lyrics sung at low volume backed by music softened through the use of reverb chambers and room mics. His most popular hits like "Mona Lisa," "The Christmas Song," and "Nature Boy" all placed emphasis on Cole's voice through the central placement of the vocal tracks in the mix. In contrast to the "pure jazz" recordings of "Straighten Up and Fly Right" or "Route 66," which balanced the levels of vocals with instruments, Cole's pop hits placed him in an intimate juxtaposition with the listener. This technique reveals itself most conspicuously in a song like "Mona Lisa." On this tune, the vocal stands out in front of the accompaniment, and places the singer fully present in the room with the audience.[30] Cole may have gotten his kicks on the open road of Route 66, but he got paid for the smooth sounds that charmed the white middle-class audience in their postwar suburban living room. He may have met resistance moving into Hancock Park, but Cole entered white homes every time the needle hit the groove on his growing catalogue of Capitol releases.

Sound studies scholar Peter Doyle offers a theoretical approach that helps to explain the aural effects of Cole's sound. Doyle's work concerns the ways that recording techniques of popular music have manipulated sound to create spatial imagery through the use of reverberant effects in early roots music, rock and roll, and jazz. He argues that the "spatialities" of reverberant effects stand inseparable from "interpersonal relations, which in turn involve powerful social forces beyond the studio - in particular, tensions around class, racial and sexual politics." Doyle explores the ways in which these reverberant effects alter or reflect socio-political forces at work between musician, engineer, and audience. Through manipulation of the

[30] Nat "King" Cole, *Unforgettable: Songs By Nat King Cole*, Capitol H/T/SM-357, T-946, 1954, 33 1/3 rpm.

recording environments, particularly with the introduction of reverb, musicians created the sound of their interiority, a "sense of self," that would later find appropriation in the jazz and rock and roll recordings of the post-World War II era. Indeed, the ubiquitous reverb effects that created the interior space of the genre defining recordings of southern rock and roll and blues artists also created "an imagined 'shared' space, occupied by both listeners and performers." This use of reverb functioned as an "atmos-spatial" recording technique, creating the intimate spaces heard through postwar jazz magnetic tape recordings by artists like Patti Page, Miles Davis, and Nat "King" Cole.[31]

The intimate spaces of recorded sound, as heard on Cole's pop hits, offers a suggestive point of scrutiny concerning his effect on the subjectivities of his southern audiences. Contrary to the rigid racial divisions that marked the physical southern landscape, Cole and his audience broke the aural boundaries of Jim Crow through the interracial space created in the recording techniques. Since the advent of electrical recording, pioneering engineers like Bell Labs' Joseph P. Maxfield had worked to create what he called "the illusion of the presence of the artist." Cole and other crooners of the mid-twentieth century benefited from electrical recording's technological innovations like the condenser microphone, the reverb chamber, and the acoustically treated studio. Through these technological advances, producers and engineers could craft an artist's "presence" by recording a close vocal track in an acoustically "dead" space, while the accompaniment was recorded with reverberation.[32] The very present, "dead" vocal track compresses the proximity between the vocal performer and the audience by contrasting with the live instrumentation that boundlessly reverberates with atmos-spatial

---

[31] Peter Doyle, *Echo and Reverb: Fabricating Space in Popular Music Recording, 1900-1960* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 2, 6-7, 92.

[32] Maxfield quoted in Susan Schimdt Horning, *Chasing Sound: Technology, Culture, and the Art of the Studio Recording from Edison to the LP* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 35.

distance. These recording techniques created an intimate sound for Cole's music. Within the context of the Jim Crow South, an intimate sound by an African American singer invoked nightmares of interracial mixing for racial conservatives. For the NACC, this nightmare had already become a reality at Anniston's Fort McClellan.

In this way, the creation of an intimate interracial space through music acted as a force of political mobilization for Carter and his followers. Barry Shank argues that music provides "one of the central cultural processes through which the abstract concept of the polis comes into bodily experience." Music forces reflexivity onto listeners, asking them to identify with it or not, building likeminded constituencies in the process.[33] To push this theory a step further, just as listening experiences create political communities based on positive identification with certain sound aesthetics, political communities may also coalesce in the "silence" left behind. In essence, as the middle-class, white concertgoers of Birmingham entered into an intimate space with and indeed identified as part of a community with Cole, they triggered the resentment within Carter and his working-class NACC who recoiled at the interracial attraction. Cole's presence in Birmingham, in combination with the sound and image that he created, acted as the catalyst that sparked a backlash of violence by Carter's men. By March 25, 1956, when advertisements began appearing for Cole's April 10 show in the city, his entire career and sound had put him on a crash course with his attackers.[34]

Carter and his followers not only were imbued with the moral righteousness inspired by racial conflict in their own historical moment, but they also reckoned back to the Civil War to inform their most radical of Citizens' Councils. Every edition of *The Southerner* begins with a

---

[33] Barry Shank, "The Political Agency of Musical Beauty," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (September 2011): 833.
[34] *The Birmingham News*, March 25, 1956. The notion that seemingly insignificant civil rights events have caused violent white reactions that in turn foment an increase in visible African American activism, see Michael J. Klar, "How *Brown* Changed Race Relations: The Backlash Thesis," *The Journal of American History* 81, no.1 (June 1994): 81-118.

biographical profile of a Confederate general, including Nathan Bedford Forrest, Joseph Wheeler, John Singleton Mosby, J. E. B. Stuart, and John Bell Hood, highlighting their bravery in the face of overwhelming odds and praising their guerilla tactics. Along with a portrait of the generals, an illustration of Civil War troops charging under the Confederate battle flag in full color accompanies most editions. The Lost Cause heroes Robert E. Lee and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson remained notably absent from the NACC's pantheon. Subscribers to *The Southerner* eschewed such sanitized leaders for cavalry raiders and those that carried out racial violence in the postbellum era such as Forrest and his establishment of the Ku Klux Klan. In essence, the Confederacy of the NACC imagination had little to do with states' rights or debates over federalism. This Confederacy unashamedly fought for the cause of southern white supremacy. For the Anniston branch of the NACC, Cole presented nothing less than an assault on their conceptions of race, class, and masculinity constructed from this appropriation of the Confederate legacy.[35]

In the minds of Carter and his followers, their state, their race, and their region stood in need of defense from the degrading effects of this popular culture invasion. Furthermore, the ostensibly oppressive federal government had militarized their hometown with a force of integrated troops and threatened the sexual purity of the WACs. The editorial vision on page two of *The Southerner*'s first edition proclaims, "No other section in any land has earned for its inhabitants the meaning that is embodied in the term 'Southerner.' Through his veins flow the fire, the initiative, the stalwartness of the Anglo Saxon." Working-class pride fills the column's language, with the editors, Carter and Jesse Mabry, an accomplice in the Cole attack, relishing the envy they hear when outsiders describe the "Southerner" as a red neck, wool-hatter, cracker, and hillbilly. They continue, relating this working-class white southern exceptionalism to music,

[35] See *The Southerner*, February, March, April/May, August, September/October, 1956.

stating that the "Southerner," "exults in the high whine of the fiddle's bow that calls up the sound of the fierce Scot blood that sounded the bagpipe of battle and lamented in the ballads of yore."[36] For twenty-five cents per copy, white Annistonians could imbibe this mythmaking, reading about the collusion between the federal government and the communists, the miscegenation at Fort McClellan, and the central role of black musical cultures to it all.

Less than two weeks before the attack on Cole, Anniston reporter Cody Hall, nephew of the Pulitzer Prize-winning, anti-Klan journalist, Grover Hall, took notice of Carter's antipathy towards African American music and set out to survey the average Annistonian opinion on the subject. According to Hall, Carter claimed that the Anniston Citizens' Council was then asking the city's "drug stores and restaurants . . . to remove 'rock and roll' records" from their jukebox. Kenneth Adams led the initiative and described the "animalistic" beat and "Negro origin" of the music as detrimental to the community. Anniston's jukebox owners refused, and Hall quotes several high school and college-aged residents who found the idea asinine. A week before the attack, African American newspaper *The Birmingham World* also made note of Carter's efforts to remove rock and roll records and took the opportunity to illuminate the growing rift between the NACC and Engelhardt's more mainstream councils. When asked about Carter's campaign, Engelhardt simply replied, "we don't recognize Carter's group." When pressed for his opinion on rock and roll, Engelhardt stuck tightly to his script, repeating, "Our sole aim is the preservation of racial segregation" to three separate questions.[37]

A week later, on the day of the Cole attack, Tommy Smalls, a New York disc jockey and record storeowner, entered into long distance debate with Carter and commented that blacks had

---

[36] *The Southerner*, February 1956, 2.

[37] Cody Hall, "Opposition To 'Rock'n Roll Meets Cool Reception Here," *The Anniston Star*, March 29, 1956. A similar article followed the next day, picked up from the UP. It also mentions Carter's campaign. See "Disc Jockey Defends 'Rock'n Roll Hits," *The Anniston Star*, March 30, 1956; " 'Rock and Roll' Fighter Finds No Help In Ranks," *The Birmingham World*, April 3, 1956.

little to do with the popularity of rock and roll. Instead, Smalls pointed out that the blame, if Carter truly needed someone to castigate, rested with white artists like Bill Haley, Kay Starr, Pat Boone, and Carl Perkins. He claimed that a friend in Birmingham had checked the white jukeboxes and found them filled with these artists. In fact, this friend reported that the "only Negro artists with records were King Cole and Sara Vaughn singing sweet songs, not rock and roll."[38] Indeed, while Carter fretted over the volatility of rock and roll, youth culture, and racial boundaries, Cole slipped into the intimate spaces of white southern homes with the grace and "sweet songs" of a professional crooner, planting what proved to be an incendiary presence in the process.

As Carter, Adams, and the various sects of the NACC continued their battle against black music, Cole embarked on his tour of the South on April 1, beginning in San Antonio, Texas and playing every night along the trek to Birmingham. The tour filled seats across Texas and Louisiana, grossing $110,000 in its first week. On the night of April 10, 1956, an audience of over three thousand white Alabamians filed into the Birmingham Municipal Auditorium to hear Cole, along with white singer June Christy, and British dance band Ted Heath and His Orchestra.[39] With his conked hair, black skin, tailored suit, suave delivery, and backed by a white orchestra, Cole must have appeared as a Reconstruction era nightmare to the neo-Confederates.

Wayne Ledbetter, a twenty-seven year old Naval officer, was stationed at the Naval Air Station at the Birmingham Municipal Airport, where he helped train Naval Reserve pilots from December 1953 to June 1956. A fan of Cole's music, particularly the singer's "pure" voice, Ledbetter was assigned to attend the concert as part of his shore patrol duties. Dressed in his

[38] "Whites, Not N. A. A. C. P. Foster Rock And Roll," *The Birmingham World*, April 10, 1956.
[39] Advertisement for Cole concert, *The Birmingham News*, April 10, 1956; "Nat Cole Attacked in Alabama; Kidnap Plot is Uncovered," *JET*, April 26, 1956.

Navy uniform, Ledbetter cut a conspicuous presence among the civilians in suits, ties, and Sunday dresses. Even the mayor of Birmingham, Jimmy Morgan, attended the concert. Recalling the details of that night, Ledbetter states that he can "remember there was a group of men in the back of the hall. I could've reached out and touched two or three of them." The group advanced towards the stage during Cole's third song, "Little Girl." In his recollection, the attackers, which he believes numbered between six and eight, "were moving at a pretty good clip." As the men approached the stage, Ledbetter heard one yell, "Let's get that nigger," a comment the eighty-six year old insists he will never forget.[40]

Of the group that rushed the stage, only Annistonians Kenneth Adams and Willis Vinson managed to reach Cole, knocking both him and his microphone backwards over his piano bench, going down "like a bowling pin" as one anonymous audience member remembered it.[41] Police moved to the fray. The curtain fell. Cole escaped to backstage and the Ted Heath Orchestra launched into "God Save the Queen," while Birmingham Police Officers subdued Adams, Vinson, and his brother Edgar. Taking them outside, the officers arrested Mabry, Fox, and Clevenger. While newspaper coverage praised the swift action of the officers, Ledbetter remains skeptical of their timing. For days before the attack, the police received numerous anonymous tips that an incident was planned for the Cole concert. Indeed, testimony later proved that the attackers organized their assault at Adams's Anniston filling station, where he also sold racist literature like *The Southerner*, and anticipated for an estimated one hundred and fifty white supremacists to merge at the auditorium that night with the intent of disrupting the concert and

---

[40] Wayne Ledbetter, oral history interview with the author, conducted February 7, 2014. This recording and its transcript are saved in the author's records as JTOH Ledbetter 2.7.14. For more firsthand accounts, see Cody Hall, "Stunned Local Group Sees Attack On Nat Cole," *The Anniston Star*, April 11, 1956.
[41] Hall, "Stunned Local Group Sees Attack On Nat Cole," *The Anniston Star*, April 11, 1956.

possibly kidnapping Cole.[42] As Ledbetter recalls, "There were several police officers maybe two on each side [of the stage]," but the "policemen made no move whatsoever," as the attackers approached. "Thinking about it, you know, this many years later," he continued, "surely they saw the guys coming down the aisle. They were well up involved in the act of pummeling the guy before the policemen made any move. That's why the next day, when I was reading the paper and they were praising the Birmingham police for taking such quick action, I couldn't believe what I was reading." Ledbetter's account suggests that while the Birmingham Police presented the necessary force to stop a serious threat, the officers likely let the assailants get in a few licks before stopping the attack.[43]

The white audience, comprised mostly of young people, erupted into an ovation that lasted more than five minutes, begging Cole to return. One attendee reportedly yelled, "Tell him to come back out so we can apologize." Cole did return briefly to acknowledge the positive audience response but declined to complete his concert for the white crowd. He then boarded a plane bound for Chicago that night to recover. Cole skipped the next dates through Georgia and the Carolinas, rejoining the tour in Norfolk, Virginia. The day after the attack, Cole commented that continuing to perform in the South "will do a lot of good for integration." Trying to quiet the storm, Cole stated, "I'm not a political figure or some controversial person. I'm just an entertainer and it's my job to perform for people." As to his ability to battle Jim Crow, Cole suggested with some annoyance that "The Supreme Court is having a hard time integrating

---

[42] "Cole Attack Planned Here, Police Charge," *The Anniston Star*, April 12, 1956. For initial contemporary coverage of the attack, see "Five Anniston Men Are Held In Attack On Negro Singer," *The Anniston Star*, April 11, 1956; "Six held in attack on Negro singer; police study charges," *The Birmingham News*, April 11, 1956; "Police say 150 were in on plan to attack entertainer here," *The Birmingham News*, April 12, 1956.
[43] Ledbetter interview.

schools, so what chance do I have to integrate audiences."[44] For Cole, entertainment meant earning a living and doing so as an admired black entertainer constituted his commitment to the civil rights struggle. "Those people, segregated or not, are still record fans," Cole contended. Sounding like a mid-century Booker T. Washington, he argued, "When you've got the respect of white and colored, you can ease a lot of things . . . I can help to ease the tension by gaining the respect of both races all over the country."[45]

Other noted African American performers and civil rights leaders refused to show sympathy for a man who would perform in the Jim Crow South. Louis Jordan, Cab Calloway, and Dinah Washington all criticized Cole, with Washington declaring, "I'm from Alabama and I'm gonna stay from there." Thurgood Marshall pronounced, "All Cole needs to complete his role as an Uncle Tom is a banjo."[46] In an ironic twist that Asa Carter could appreciate, Harlem nightclubs the Shalimar, Jock's Place, Brownie's Shocase, and the Ebony Lounge, among others, removed Cole's records from their jukeboxes and DJ Tommy Smalls refused to play him. Under such intense criticism from his peers, Cole publicly joined the NAACP as a lifetime member a few weeks after the attack. Although he had financially contributed to the Montgomery bus boycott, fought residential segregation in the courts, and played numerous benefit shows for the NAACP, the actions of a small band of radical segregationists from Anniston, Alabama forced Cole on the defensive within African American communities. In late May, Cole penned a letter to the editor in *Down Beat*, defending his history as a contributor to the civil rights struggle and

[44] "Police say 150 were in on plan to attack entertainer here," *The Birmingham News*, April 12, 1956; "Four go on trial, attack details told," *The Birmingham News*, April 13, 1956; "Nat King Cole Ignores Critics, Continues Tour Of South," *The Birmingham World*, April 20, 1956; Epstein, *Nat King Cole*, 256.
[45] "Nat Cole Attacked in Alabama; Kidnap Plot is Uncovered," *JET*, April 26, 1956.
[46] "Cole Incident Starts Debate On Jim Crow Shows, Stars Take Sides," *JET*, May 3, 1956; Marshal quoted in Epstein, *Nat King Cole*, 259.

announcing his newly official affiliation with the NAACP. The polemical racial climate of 1956 offered no quarter for Cole's politics of respectability.[47]

Although the attackers were convicted, all received fines, and none served jail time. Despite this legal slap on the wrist, the court of public opinion severely criticized the attackers and the Citizens' Councils in general. White Alabamians from Birmingham and Anniston rushed to Cole's defense and to the condemnation of the attackers. An editorial in *The Anniston Star* expressed shame that five of the city's men took such a prominent role in the "hoodlumism" in Birmingham.[48] Thanks to the attack, even chapters of the NACC began to defect from Carter's organization. By April 20, the Roebuck, Woodlawn, and Eastern Section Councils, all Birmingham chapters of the NACC, voiced condemnations of the Cole attack and announced official breaks with Carter and his organization. Only a few disillusioned citizens like Mrs. Clevenger defended the attackers in the pages of Anniston and Birmingham's newspapers, all expressing shock at what they viewed as the fracturing of white solidarity.[49] Thanks to this link between the attackers and the Councils, as well as the deluge of negative publicity, political and social histories of the Cole incident consider the attack as the beginning of the end of the Alabama Citizens' Councils. Such works also give the impression that the NACC had focused

---

[47] "Cole Joins NAACP Following Criticism," *The Anniston Star*, April 25, 1956; "Cole Denies Shunning NAACP; Reveals Donation of Check," *JET*, May 3, 1956; "Chords and Discords," *Down Beat*, May 30, 1956.

[48] "Hoodlumism Is Rebuked," *The Anniston Star*, April 11, 1956. Even this condemnation defended the need for the less radical Citizens' Councils, as long as the NAACP worked for the "disruption of friendly relations that have existed between the white and the colored races here in the South for many generations." Steeped in the white South's cultural nostalgia of paternalistic race relations, the columnist, most likely the *Star*'s owner Col. Harry Ayers, held "no admiration" for Cole or the rock and roll "so-called music," but he defended the right for others to enjoy it and believed the current black music would pass away, "although the Negro spirituals will last forever." William R. Morgan, Pastor of Anniston's Trinity Lutheran Church also penned a rebuke of the attack. See, "Deplores Cole Incident," *The Anniston Star*, April 12, 1956. Similar, albeit less conservative, defenses of Cole typify white reactions in Birmingham, with citizens calling the attack "shameful" and "abhorrent." One native of Birmingham believed such incidents provided fodder for Communist propaganda against U. S. democracy. See "Voice Of The People," *The Birmingham News*, April 13, 1956. "Voice of the People," *The Birmingham News*, April 14, 1956.

[49] "Councils talking break with Carter," *The Birmingham News*, April 18, 1956; "Eastern Citizens Council Splits," *The Birmingham News*, April 20, 1956; "Why not blame sponsors of Cole?," *The Birmingham News*, April 24, 1956; "Defends Cole Assailants," *The Anniston Star*, April 17, 1956.

on Cole for months leading up to the attack.[50] Certainly, Alabamians experience the weakening of the Citizens' Councils by the end of 1956 but not without radicalizing the already violent fringe and turning Cole into a symbol of their battle against integration.

The chronology of Cole's appearance in *The Southerner* remains important to this radicalization and speaks to the impact that his image and sound created on his attackers. Cole's presence in Carter's publication did not agitate Adams, Vinson, and their accomplices. In fact, Carter did not start emphasizing Cole and his relationship to white women until after the Birmingham attack. The March edition of *The Southerner* denounced rock and roll concerts at the city auditorium but made no mention of Cole or his upcoming show. Not until the combined April/May edition do the editors begin their defamation of Cole, writing about the concert in a post facto defense of their members. Two articles appear in this edition, one by *The Southerner*'s editor (Carter) and the other a reprint from the *American*, a California press, in attempt to prove the broad base of this opinion. The *American* article includes two photographs, one features a young white boy shining Cole's shoes and the other shows Cole signing autographs for a group of white women, captioned "Cole and Your Daughter," perhaps invoking a reference to Cole's "Little Girl," the song he performed during the attack. A photograph of Cole with Rosemary Clooney and June Christy accompany Carter's article, baring the caption, "Cole and His White Women."[51]

Carter's signature class resentment drips from the article, casting the attackers as victims of an abusive police force that served the upper class concertgoers. Carter claimed that as police led one attacker from the auditorium, the man, "his face beaten bloodily . . . looking back toward

---

[50] McMillen, *The Citizens' Council*, 53-57; Sprayberry, " 'Interrupted Melody': The 1956 Attack on Nat 'King' Cole," *Alabama Heritage* 71 (Winter 2004): 16-24; " 'Town Among the Trees,' " 140; Ward, "Civil Rights and Rock and Roll: Revisiting the Nat King Cole Attack of 1956," 21-24; *Just My Soul Responding*, 95-105.
[51] *The Southerner*, April/May, 1956.

the fur bedecked crowd of Cole admirers, resplendent in their dinner jackets, their white-puttied, flabby faces angry and pouting." In this depiction of the attack, Carter romantically portrays the NACC's attackers as part of a lineage of resisters willing to fight in defense of their race and culture. "The young man's work hardened hands twisted violently in the 'cuffs and he spat out . . . 'white trash!' " toward the audience, and the words "rang over the heads of the crowd and bounced back through time." He continues by likening the attacker to the "Saxon Chief," the "Basque," and to Nathan Bedford Forrest, all of whom fought against the allegedly degenerating forces of racial mixing.[52]

In light of this revisionist account, Cole appears less as a victim and more as an instigator, however unwittingly. Put simply, Cole represented the defeat of segregation. Cole stood on Alabama soil, as the living incarnation of a future in which skin color failed to determine destiny. A black man could attain wealth, talent, respectability, and proximity to white women, all while eliciting the applause of middle and upper class white southerners. Far

[52] Ibid. *The Southerner* continued railing on the Cole incident in the August 1956 edition, as well. While other historical treatments of this incident remain correct in their assertions that the NACC dissipated by the end of 1956, Cole created a rallying point of resurgence for this organization just before it disbanded. Besides featuring articles on Cole, editions of *The Southerner* from August through October include the addition of advertising spaces, where business from Birmingham, Anniston, and their surrounding suburbs could express their monetary support of Carter and his agenda. Fifty-nine businesses and individuals, predominately dry cleaners, gas stations, grocers, and electronics repair shops, bought space in Carter's publication in a cross section of the business types that constituted the service economy of the postwar South. Perhaps unfulfilled in their newfound leisure time or emasculated through service work, the men that sponsored the NACC found an outlet for their aggressions in the vehement racism espoused by Carter. See *The Southerner*, August, September/October, 1956. Carter would go on to work for Wallace as speechwriter throughout the 1960s. With rhetorical flourishes that echo *The Southerner*, Carter most notoriously penned Wallace's 1963 inaugural address in which the young governor touted, "In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny . . . and I say . . . segregation today . . . segregation tomorrow . . . segregation forever." Rather than imagining that Carter's brand of white supremacy disappeared, we do well to look for it in its various disguises from the 1950s onward. See, Eskew, *But for Birmingham*, 115; "Inaugural Address," (1963), accessed March 6, 2014, http://web.utk.edu/~mfitzge1/docs/374/wallace_seg63.pdf. For more on Carter's Klan, see Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 106-109; McMillen, *The Citizens' Council*, 55-56; Roche, "Asa/Forrest Carter and Regional/Political Identity," 239. Kenneth Adams went on to conduct numerous acts of racial violence during the civil rights movement, most famously as the leader of the 1961 attack on the Freedom Riders while they stopped in Anniston. See Phil Noble, *Beyond the Burning Bus: The Civil Rights Revolution in a Southern Town*, foreword William B. McClain, intro. Nan Woodruff (Montgomery, Alabama: NewSouth Books, 2013); James Peck, *Freedom Ride* (New York: Grove Press, 1962); Sprayberry, " 'Town Among the Trees,' " 239-250.

from the Uncle Tom of Marshall's description, Cole presented a radical image for a constituency already primed to fear the very future he embodied. The NACC would offer mild protest to other rock and roll concerts that toured through the city, including a show on May 20, 1956 that featured Bill Haley and His Comets, Bo Diddley, Big Joe Turner, and the Platters. Led by Jesse Mabry, a small band of segregationists marched with signs in front of the Birmingham Municipal Auditorium.[53] Yet no other artist would provoke the violent reaction that Cole did. Far from arriving at the wrong place at the wrong time in doomed serendipity, Cole represented the most radical image and sound possible to a group who rooted their identity in the Confederacy. He lived better than the working-class white men of Calhoun County, Alabama and dared to flaunt his affluence to a paying audience of approving whites.

The criticisms that Cole received also radicalized his civil rights activity to a degree. Yet, rather than taking to the streets in marches and sit-ins as so many African Americans did, Cole stuck to his strategy of respectability, taking direct action via a primetime television slot. From the fall of 1956 through the summer of 1957, the consummately smooth entertainer hosted "The Nat 'King' Cole Show" on NBC, a pioneering move as the one of the first African Americans to have his own network program. Along with fellow crooners like Mel Torme and Tony Bennett, Cole hosted black artists Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, and, most significantly, Mahalia Jackson. A favorite of the civil rights movement, particularly Martin Luther King, Jr., Jackson's appearance on Cole's show made an overt statement in favor of racial equality and the dismantling of Jim Crow. Like his willingness to serve as a test case for residential desegregation, as well as continuing to tour after the Birmingham attack, Cole pushed the boundaries of race by winning over white and black audiences alike. However, Cole's television

---

[53] "Rock 'n' Roll show scheduled," *The Birmingham News*, May 13, 1956; "Pickets walk, have company," *The Birmingham News*, May 21, 1956. Mabry's protest was met with a counter-protest by local teenagers, holding signs that read, "Rock and roll is here to stay."

experiment ultimately failed due to a boycott by stations in the South and an inability to garner sponsorship, in spite of its ranking as the number one variety show in 1956.[54]

"May I come and sing to you / All the songs I would like to bring to you?" Cole sang these lines to start many of his television shows, a theme song that doubled as an invitation to watch him and his entertainment business peers dazzle the average viewer with their talents and grace. Although Cole's television show added the visual element, the singer had sung songs in white homes for years prior to television's arrival. We can imagine that Cole's attackers knew this, or at least inferred it upon entering the Birmingham Municipal Auditorium on the night of April 10, 1956. There, among the Magic City's white middle and upper classes, the Annistonians fumed in disgust as the crowd applauded for the black man in a white man's position. Having barely stomached African Americans in uniform dancing with white women in their hometown, the men could accept no more. Black soldiers might possess the security and authority of the federal government within the confines of Fort McClellan, but Cole would enjoy no such protection. The confluence of Anniston, Alabama's local racial aggressions with the act of intimate, interracial listening embodied by Nat "King" Cole ignited an act of violence that radicalized two embattled constituencies. The experiences that brought them together reveal that such historic incidents never just happen. Cole, Carter, and the NACC met on the grounds laid out for them by popular culture, the nation's new embrace of a global military mission rooted in southern political support, and the legacy of racial violence in a small, industrial Alabama city.

---

[54] Bob Pondillo, "Saving Nat 'King'Cole," *Television Quarterly* 35, no. 3-4 (Spring/Summer 2005): 8-16; "Steal Away-Mahalia Jackson and Nat King Cole," Emeless, November 29, 2006, accessed March 3, 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-O5hz5KnSdc. The song selection speaks to Cole's alliance with the civil rights struggle as well. Out of the vast catalogue mastered by these musical giants, Cole and Jackson chose to duet on "Steal Away," a spiritual with the double entendre message of not only seeking refuge in Jesus Christ but also grasping the freedom promised to African American citizens by the principles of human liberty.

They fought over the competing visions of a black man that looked forward to the future and white southerners that clung to the past in violent defiance.