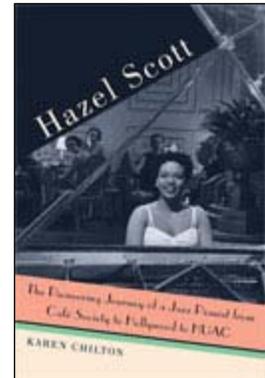


Q&A with Karen Chilton, author of *Hazel Scott: The Pioneering Journey of a Jazz Pianist, from Café Society to Hollywood to HUAC*

You can listen to this interview on our University of Michigan Press Author Podcast page at: <http://www.press.umich.edu/podcasts/index.jsp>

University of Michigan Press: Tell us a bit about your book, and why you decided to write about Hazel Scott.

Karen Chilton: Hazel Scott was a prolific American artist, a jazz pianist who fused her classical training with her love for boogie-woogie and became a popular sensation with her style of “swinging the classics.” Initially, I was interested in writing a book about black women expatriates, and in my research on that subject, I stumbled across Hazel Scott’s name in a book of interviews of American expatriates living in Paris. I read her essay and became really intrigued. So I dug deeper and found out more about her background, her music and her marriage to Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., the first black congressman from New York. What I found was a fascinating life story of a child prodigy whose breakout success at age 19 at New York’s first integrated nightclub, Café Society, made her an international star in the late 1930s and throughout the 40s. In addition to her unique style of playing, her views on major issues of the day—integration, civil rights, women’s rights, democracy—inspired me to write her biography...particularly when I realized that she had been so under recognized and overlooked down through the years. When you discover just how much she accomplished in her 40 years in the entertainment industry, it was and still is difficult to grasp how an American artist like Hazel Scott has been essentially written out of history. I hope that this book helps to reignite an interest in her legacy as an artist and activist.



UMP: How did she influence other musicians, and what sort of groundwork did she lay for future performers?

KC: During her heyday in the 40s, Hazel Scott was admired for her showmanship. She was a vivacious performer who knew how to excite an audience. She used all of her assets to present a great show—her sensuality, her beauty, her charm and sharp wit. Although she was often criticized for her very presentational performance style, accused of being less serious, less adept than her female counterparts, she stuck to her own program. Played what she wanted to play, how she wanted to play it. Her ‘swinging the classics’ was a fan favorite that helped her develop a huge following, particularly at Café Society where she was the premier headliner since the club’s beginnings. She was one of a handful of women instrumentalists who had some measure of success in the male-dominated world of jazz music. Her contemporaries—Mary Lou Williams, considered the best of all the women musicians, Marian McPartland, Dorothy Donegan, among others—I think, all of them set a fantastic example for future performers, especially women. Through their dedication to the music, their prowess, their high standard of excellence, their integrity, their achievements, they demonstrate to us all what is possible.

UMP: Hazel Scott was incredibly talented—almost destined for greatness and fame—and she also associated with some of the major musicians of her era, such as Billie Holiday. What was the major breakthrough in her career? And who were some of Scott’s musical influences?

KC: Early in her career, Hazel had the benefit of her mother, Alma Long Scott, who was a saxophonist and bandleader of an all-woman orchestra, The American Creolians. She was often quoted as saying that her mother was the single biggest influence in her life. Because of her Alma’s close associations with other musicians on the scene, their home became a “mecca for musicians,” as Hazel called it. She sat at the side of prolific pianists Fats Waller and Art Tatum, who helped cultivate her natural gift. Saxophonist Lester Young was also a family friend...Billie Holiday, who was very close to Alma, made it her business to help in every possible way to move Hazel’s young career along. She was responsible for Hazel’s debut at Café Society. When she cut her own run at the club short, she pressured the club’s impresario Barney Josephson to hire Hazel as her replacement. Although he didn’t know who Hazel was, he took a chance on her on because of Billie’s endorsement alone. That night in 1939 marked a major breakthrough for them both. Josephson told Hazel after her performance, “Hazel you have a home here for life.” He went on to make her the club’s headliner and acted as her manager for a period of time. It was a very productive relationship.

UMP: Hazel was married to the Congressman and civil rights leader Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. How did her marriage to Powell affect her career?

KC: Hazel married Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. in August of 1945, after establishing herself as one of the most popular nightclub acts in New York, performing in five Hollywood films, and touring all over the world. Soon after they were married, however, Powell asked his wife to stop playing in nightclubs. He was concerned what his congregation would think of him having a wife who “performed were whiskey was sold.” Hazel thought this was the height of hypocrisy. After all, he met her in a nightclub. Not to mention, they began their affair while Powell was still married to his first wife, Isabel Powell, a former Cotton Club dancer. Perhaps, this request on his part was a way to smooth things over with his Harlem constituents as well as his congregation, all of whom were privy to the adulterous affair, and now that his standing was at all time high as their congressional representative. Hazel acquiesced to his request, left Café Society after seven years and gave up nightclubs. She turned her attention to the classics and pursued a concert career, which of course, presented its own set of challenges.

UMP: What makes Hazel Scott a force still to be reckoned with today?

KC: Her accomplishments are noteworthy—she trained at the prestigious Juilliard School at age 8, hosted her own radio show at 14, made her Broadway debut at 18 and became a breakout success at Café Society by the time she was 19. But perhaps more importantly, it’s not only what she accomplished, but when. The late 1930s and early 40s were extremely difficult times in American history, particularly for African-Americans who, in addition to the Great Depression and the impending war, were suffering through pervasive racism in the South and the North. How Hazel Scott, still a teenager, was able to break through these seemingly impenetrable barriers and to become one of the

nation's most popular 'crossover' artists, performing solo all over the world and with some of the most prominent orchestras, while making a name for herself among New York's upper echelon of jazz musicians, would give popular artists today a stellar example of what it meant to be a pioneer, a trail blazer and an original.

###

Read more about *Hazel Scott: The Pioneering Journey of a Jazz Pianist, from Café Society to Hollywood to HUAC* at <http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=197245>