

“Play real pretty for the people”: Louis Armstrong, Sammy Davis Jr. and Racial Politics in Hollywood’s Post-War Jazz Musicals’

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The Jazz Singer in 1927 both cemented the place of jazz in Hollywood cinema history through the introduction of sound, and pointed to the theme of racial politics through which narratives of jazz would be drawn. The film’s association of jazz with African-American culture as a representation of American cultural identity, and the issues of appropriation and performance that surround jazz via Jolson’s blackface performance illustrate the uneasy mix of music, genre, race and American identity in the relationship between jazz and the musical. In the post-war era, jazz permeates Hollywood cinema, suggesting America’s underbelly in narrative dramas of drug addiction such as *The Man with the Golden Arm* (Otto Preminger, United Artists, 1955) and across film noir including *The Strip* (László Kardos, MGM, 1951) and *Sweet Smell of Success* (Alexander Mackendrick, United Artists, 1957). As the musical, often crossing genres, begins to reflect the shift in jazz away from big band swing towards bebop, cool jazz and a vision of jazz as art, the jazz musical becomes a site in which ideas of cultural value, racial identity and contemporary racial politics collide with the genre’s myth of entertainment, resulting in an unusually dramatic sub-genre of the musical. Focusing on some of the jazz musicals of the post-war era whose narratives are based around jazz soloists, this essay explores the various ways in which the films negotiate these collisions and the themes which emerge. In addition, it considers the shifts which occur – or don’t – as the jazz film moves into the 1960s and the context of a more radicalized racial politics.

Essential to most of these films is the trope of cultural appropriation, which the narratives openly acknowledge while failing to address the industrial inequalities central to this dynamic. In his seminal exploration of jazz in the movies, Krin Gabbard points to the complexities of the notion of cultural appropriation:

There is no such thing as a pure, uncorrupted, uncommercialized black music that is somehow knowable without the apparatus of the culture industry. As any good deconstructionist can tell you, the “original” and the “copy” are not so easily distinguished. Nor are the black urban original and the white nostalgic imitation so strictly delineated. What is more easily identified...is the gross power imbalance between black artists and the predominantly white industry that exploited them.¹

Drawing on these blurred boundaries between the “original” and the “copy”, the post-war jazz musicals acknowledge the black origins of jazz as well as their white characters’ constant connection to those origins, while failing to explicitly draw out the industrial ‘power imbalance’ to which Gabbard refers. Both *All the Fine Young Cannibals* (Michael Anderson, MGM, 1960) and *Young Man with a Horn* (Michael Curtiz, Warner Bros., 1950), for example, develop narratives of white male jazz stardom initiated through encounters with black jazz performance. Robert Wagner’s Chad Bixby in *All the Fine Young Cannibals*, loosely modelled on Chet Baker, is introduced to us as a jazz performer when he takes southern girlfriend Natalie Wood away from a dull, racially exclusive country dance to the illicit environment of an urban black club. Here, he’s coaxed to channel his emotions over the recent loss of his disapproving father into a performance watched by a crowd of African-American

¹ Krin Gabbard, *Jammin’ at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1996), p. 17.

partygoers. The number connects jazz to both freedom and emotional release, suggesting a white performer learns to express such sensibilities in this racially-defined cultural space. In *Young Man with a Horn*, Kirk Douglas' Rick Martin, a Bix Beiderbecke-style figure, is introduced as a lonely orphan whose love of jazz is developed under the tutelage of a black trumpet player he spies playing Dixieland jazz with his band after hours in a local club. This scene of a white character observing black performance as a site of learning is a familiar moment in the jazz musical, evident also in Red Nichols biopic *The Five Pennies* (Melville Shavelson, Paramount, 1959), as well as much more recently in the 2016 hit *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, Summit Entertainment, 2016). The trope of cultural appropriation similarly occurs in the noir musical *Pete Kelly's Blues* (Jack Webb, Warner Bros., 1955), a film which literally passes the torch – or trumpet – of jazz from its southern African-American roots to white America's urban East Coast. The opening scenes show a trumpet falling from a hearse at a New Orleans black funeral and subsequently being won in a card game by a white WW1 New Jersey veteran, explicitly signalling an acknowledgement of the roots of jazz while transferring its musical culture to the white performance and career that follows. Moreover, in contrast with other films in the genre, the black context is limited to this pre-credit sequence and discarded from the body of the narrative, resulting in a film which structurally limits narrative links between jazz and black culture to Ella Fitzgerald's disconnected musical moments. These films' association of jazz with an essential black culture, emotional expression and white acquisition of learning while centring on white performance and stardom reinforces the notion that, as Gabbard has observed: 'According to 1950s Hollywood [or post-war Hollywood more generally]...blacks may play jazz more "naturally," but it is in the "nature" of white musicians to surpass them by learning to play a music that people really want to hear.'²

Having acknowledged the music's black roots and transferred it to a white cultural context, a central concern of these films is to establish the cultural legitimacy of jazz. This is addressed through firstly the dynamic of art vs entertainment, and secondly through the status of jazz in the wider musical culture impacted by the attendant issue of its racially-defined origins. The protagonist's narrative struggle often revolves around the aim to maintain individual artistry in the commercial world of entertainment, the difficulty of achieving this resulting in one or other kind of personal decline. The central concern for white performers is expressed as: 'I don't play for people; I play for myself', as Douglas in *Young Man with a Horn* proclaims. However, the rejection of both audience and the very notion of entertainment is necessarily problematic for the musical genre, indicating a character flaw that in this case plays out through alcoholism, a failed marriage, issues of masculinity displaced onto wife Lauren Bacall and the suggestion of a lesbian relationship, and the destruction of Douglas' career until apparent redemption in the final reel. For African-American jazz performers though, the space for such internal artistic struggle does not exist, individual tragedy instead presented as inevitable. The superior artistry of Douglas' mentor Art Hazzard (reported to have been loosely based on Louis Armstrong, who was considered for the role that was played by Juano Hernandez³) therefore leaves him poor, lonely and run over in the street. Similarly, while the suffering of Robert Wagner's Chad Bixby in *Cannibals* is restricted to his personal life, he gains his entrée to commercial and critical success through his friendship with Pearl Bailey's jazz singer who, having discarded her career due to an errant trumpet player, in contrast declines into alcoholism and early death. These films occasionally point to industry racism, for example a nightclub manager's warning to Rick in *Young Man with a Horn* that he spends too much down-time playing jazz with his mentor because, after all, 'Why bother with a bunch of...?' However, they engage little with the disparity they

² Gabbard, p. 2.

³ David Butler, *Jazz Noir: Listening to Music from Phantom Lady to The Last Seduction* (Westport CT and London: Praeger, 2002), p. 81.

otherwise display in relation to the rise of white jazz stardom and the decline of the black performer, which ultimately reinforces the association of the black jazz musician with tragic failure, and leaves the path to cultural legitimacy in the fingers and lips of the white protagonists.

The search for legitimacy requires the films to negotiate a clash between the genre's promotion of popular entertainment as evidence of American democracy and the narratives' drive for the recognition of jazz as art. While firmly establishing jazz roots in the African-American culture of the South, specifically New Orleans, the films suggest cultural legitimacy is to be found in the settings of white European classical musical traditions. The aim of Danny Kaye's Red Nichols in *The Five Pennies*, for example, is to play Carnegie Hall, and Paul Newman's trombone player in *Paris Blues* (Martin Ritt, United Artists, 1961) yearns to write a jazz concerto and play the concert halls of Paris. The narrative of the 1947 film *New Orleans* (Arthur Lubin, United Artists) is wholly constructed around the aim to have jazz performed and sanctioned by critics and audiences in the classical arenas of America and Europe. The necessity to remove jazz from its roots in order to achieve such artistic recognition is made plain in the depiction of a musical procession out of Storyville's red light district, as the music moves on to Chicago, London and Paris. **[Fig. 1]** The film's dynamic is that of jazz performed instinctively by African Americans in the clubs of New Orleans, divided by the cultural judgements of race and class from the operas and orchestral music performed by wealthy and educated white society in America's respectable opera houses and concert halls. Only white characters are initially able to move between these worlds, jazz representing an alluring temptation prompting them to cross physical, musical and moral boundaries. It is these same characters – a male club owner, a budding female opera singer, and a classical conductor – whose strategies and power provide the means for Louis Armstrong (as himself) to play Command Performances in London and for a female white opera singer to sing 'Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?' at Chicago's Symphony Hall. The latter performance occurring alongside Woody Herman rather than Armstrong frames the inability to combine cultural legitimacy with a racially inclusive performance of jazz on an American concert hall stage as a national peculiarity, as well as pointing to the musical genre's propensity for racially divided performances.

Nevertheless, Louis Armstrong repeatedly becomes the means by which the post-war jazz musical aims to resolve the clash between America and Europe, high art and entertainment, individual artistry and the commercial, and often unspoken but visible racial divisions. Armstrong is represented in iconic terms in these films, drawing on audience awareness of his status as a star and in the development of jazz. In *The Five Pennies*, Red Nichols' ability to improvise with Armstrong serves as early validation of his jazz credentials when he seeks out Armstrong (playing himself) in Harlem and joins him on stage; in *Paris Blues* Armstrong appears as Wild Man Moore, a thinly veiled version of himself, whose posters promoting his concerts at the Palais de Chaillot stimulate the ambition and envy of Paul Newman's budding jazz classicist. In *New Orleans*, the narrative attempts an uneasy power balancing act between its depiction of club owner Nick (Arturo de Córdova) as a Norman Granz-style jazz impresario with that of Armstrong and his music which draw white America to Storyville. As Armstrong goes on to establish Chicago as America's next jazz city, and writes a book about jazz history while travelling the concert halls of Europe, he represents the ultimate fusion of American entertainment and cultural legitimacy, even as the visible evidence is limited to performances on the opera hall stages of Paris.

In turn, *Paris Blues* represents the shifts that begin to occur across the post-war era as these films re-negotiate the generic demands of the musical, and through which links can be drawn to the more explicit racial politics of *A Man Called Adam* (Leo Penn, Embassy Pictures, 1966). The film's representation of Armstrong as an iconic symbol of jazz history, cultural legitimacy and American

entertainment comes into focus in a performance when, taking a break from his concert hall performances, Moore, makes a surprise appearance at the jazz club where Ram (Newman) and Eddie (Sidney Poitier) are the resident musicians. Entering with his band in a New Orleans-style procession and challenging the residents to join in the performance, Armstrong commands the room through the weight of jazz history and popular entertainment, eclipsing what the film presents as Ram's artistic pretensions. **[Fig. 2]** Earlier in the film, Moore's spontaneous performance for fans at a train station, while being feted around Paris for his series of concerts at the Palais de Chaillot, demonstrates the ease with which he, through the iconic image of Armstrong, combines these worlds and cultural distinctions, becoming the film's most explicit means of promoting American entertainment. Further, the racial integration of performers and audience in this exuberant club number promotes American popular entertainment as a marker of American democracy, while suggesting a shift in the way that democracy is generically defined and represented. Notably again, the Paris setting contains such racially inclusive definitions of entertainment within Europe.

Alongside this musical representation of popular entertainment performance as an illustration of racial equality runs *Paris Blues'* Civil Rights narrative theme. The film's original storyline of an interracial relationship between Ram and visiting student Connie played by Diahann Carroll was discarded as too controversial and replaced by the development of a relationship between Eddie and Carroll (and another between Ram and Lillian, played by Newman's off-screen wife Joanne Woodward).⁴ The choice of Poitier's saxophone player Eddie to live in Paris as an escape from America's racial segregation positions France and the United States in opposition. Connie's optimistic belief in the Civil Rights Movement in contrast to Eddie's passive retreat provides the conflict for this narrative strand, ultimately resolved by his decision to follow her in returning to the United States and actively participating in racial politics. This political stance of progressive but not radical racial politics runs parallel to the film's approach to jazz and its performance. The Duke Ellington score, Armstrong's iconic jazz status alongside an audience-pleasing style, and his character's ability to cross the street from concert hall to basement jazz club, bringing a New Orleans party with him, depicts the best jazz as a combination of high art and popular entertainment, maintaining a position of cultural inclusiveness. The August 1961 issue of *Ebony* magazine similarly drew on a mix of Hollywood entertainment, high art and a racially democratic setting, putting Poitier and Carroll on its cover, and describing how Armstrong and Ellington 'were feted and entertained lavishly by artists, poets, actors and intellectuals. To the French musicians and technicians on the set, Ellington and Armstrong were heroes who were treated with more respect than all the starring actors combined.'⁵

The 1966 film *A Man Called Adam* demonstrates the impact of a more radical racial politics on its representation alongside jazz as parallel themes. In addition, we again see the genre's struggle to incorporate this problematic dynamic into its core mythologies through musical numbers. The film stars Sammy Davis Jr. and was the first feature produced through his production company Trace-Mark Productions. The project had originally sparked the interest of fellow performer Nat 'King' Cole, and, following King's early death, was brought to Davis by Ike Jones, head of Cole's Hollywood film production and music publishing company, Kell-Cole Productions. *A Man Called Adam* would make Jones the first African-American producer of a major feature film working alongside James Waters, with Joseph E. Levine acting as executive producer. Reporting on Davis' project in September 1966, *Jet* magazine remarked that overseeing film production was one of the few routes

⁴ Butler, p. 70.

⁵ 'Paris Blues: Jazz filled movie tells tale of expatriate musicians living 'Beat' life in France', *Ebony*, August 1961, p. 50.

for an African-American actor to land a starring role, noting in addition Davis' employment of a large African-American cast, many of whom were also appearing with Davis in the musical *Golden Boy* (1964-1966) running on Broadway during the film's production.⁶ The film was also notable for the involvement of several of its leads in the racial politics of the moment. Ossie Davis, for example, was an active Civil Rights proponent and closely tied to both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. Louis Armstrong, not known for his forays into political commentary, courted controversy in September 1957 when, in an interview with a young local reporter while on tour in the South, he criticized President Eisenhower's limited action to protect black schoolchildren who were desegregating Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Responses to Armstrong's comments were mixed, Davis condemning what he viewed as Armstrong's hypocritical readiness to appear before segregated audiences, despite his star power.⁷ Armstrong subsequently became a central figure in the State Department's 'Jazz Ambassadors' programme, taking jazz overseas as a racially integrated American art form in support of the United States' Cold War cultural battle against the East.

Davis's own history of political engagement was both more extensive and more controversial than Armstrong's solitary outburst. His involvement in racial politics was complex and woven across protest and fund-raising, as well as an essential use of performance to both assert his identity as a black American star and explicitly raise issues of racial inequality. The difficulties apparent in combining both were apparent when a *New York Times* article in April 1965 criticized Davis for cancelling a performance of *Golden Boy* in order to attend the Selma to Montgomery Civil Rights march of the previous month. Responding through an open letter to *The Times*, Davis asserted his right to an active political identity, stating: 'Though I have dedicated my life to show business (happily), I am first an American citizen who believes in the dignity and the freedom of man.'⁸ Emilie Raymond in her essay on Davis' political persona terms his approach to racial politicking a combination of the 'daring and referential', referring to his attempts to promote the Civil Rights agenda while aiming to appeal to stars and audiences of both races.⁹ Davis' public persona as an African-American star seen frequently in the company of white stars and white women made him the object of persistent criticism, not only from white extremists but also those in the black community who questioned his commitment to the Civil Rights agenda. During an interview with African-American author Alex Haley (who would later pen the novel *Roots*) published in *Playboy* in December 1966, Davis responded to the question of whether he was attempting to win the approval of his mainly white live audiences by explaining his use of performance to overcome racial prejudice: 'No question about it. I always go on stage anticipating what people out there may be feeling about me emotionally. I want to rob them of what they're sitting there thinking: *Negro*. With all the accompanying clichés. Ever since I recognised what prejudice is, I've tried to fight it away, and the only weapon I could use was my talent.'¹⁰ As a performer, Davis had consistently resisted limitations imposed on African Americans as both creative artists and stars. His impersonations of white stars and direct address to white members of the audience were ground-breaking for a black performer, and developed further with his referencing of the performances of white stars such as Fred Astaire in his movies. One of the most explicit examples is the 'Bang! Bang!' number in the 1964 film *Robin and the 7 Hoods* (Gordon Douglas, Warner Bros.) during which Davis impersonates stars including

⁶ Bobbie Barbee, 'Sammy Davis, Jr. Stars in His Swinging New Motion Picture', *Jet*, 15 September 1966, p. 56.

⁷ 'Sammy Davis, Jr., Says Satchmo No Spokesman', *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 12, 1957 in Gerald Early (ed.), *The Sammy Davis Jr. Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), pp. 231-233.

⁸ 'Sammy Davis Explains', *New York Times*, May 9, 1965 (n.p.).

⁹ Emilie Raymond, 'Sammy Davis Jr.: Public Image and Politics', *Cultural History*, Vol. 4, Issue 1 (2015), p. 42.

¹⁰ 'Alex Haley Interviews Sammy Davis, Jr.', *Playboy*, December 1966 in Gerald Early (ed.), *The Sammy Davis Jr. Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), p. 460.

James Cagney and Al Jolson, before moving into a gun-shooting dance that culminates in a tap routine atop a bar, referencing Astaire numbers such as 'One For My Baby' from *The Sky's the Limit* (Edward H. Griffith, RKO, 1943) and 'Let's Say it With Firecrackers' from *Holiday Inn* (Mark Sandrich, Paramount, 1942). [Fig. 3] Davis' star vehicles on Broadway, commencing with *Mr Wonderful* in 1956 and followed by *Golden Boy*, his BBC television special *Meet Sammy Davis Jr.* (1963) and a weekly NBC TV variety show *The Sammy Davis Jr. Show* (1966) pointed to the high level of multi-media stardom he had achieved through cross-over appeal. The jazz-scored adaptation of Clifford Odets' *Golden Boy*, which opened to ten pages of congratulatory messages and articles in *Billboard* magazine from stars including Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, Sam Cooke and Sophie Tucker¹¹, contained an explicit Civil Rights theme through its narrative of an African-American from Harlem escaping poverty through boxing, as well as its interracial relationship and controversial on-stage kiss. The drama reiterated Davis' unapologetic determination to combine performance and politics while straddling the worlds of white-dominated stardom and black protest.

A Man Called Adam presented its more radical mix of racial politics and jazz in ways which illustrate Davis' assertion of his identity and status as an American entertainer, as well as the need to accommodate the essential requirements of the musical genre. The film's explicit discussions of racial politics are drawn through the relationship between Davis' troubled trumpet player Adam Johnson (loosely based on Miles Davis), and Claudia Ferguson (played by Cicely Tyson who would later marry Miles Davis), whose political ties are to the Civil Rights Movement and non-violent protest. While Claudia has already been jailed as a protestor before the two characters meet, Adam's engagement with racial politics is limited to a resistance to individual acts of racism against himself, seen, for example, when he later strikes a cop who attempts to arrest him without basis. Adam's approach to the Movement, moreover, is one of contempt, as he makes clear in his mockery of Claudia when she refuses to slap him following his initial aggressive attempt at seduction: 'Passive resistance, huh? The New Negro. Love your enemy. Thanks to you, I can buy a hotdog in any dime store in the country now.'

As a jazz film with an integrated cast and crew that included a roll call of African-American jazz musicians led by Louis Armstrong as famed trumpet old-timer Willie Ferguson, and a narrative centred around black characters, the film gave the impression of authenticity less evident in earlier fictional screen depictions of jazz. While musicals constructed around white stars and narratives explicitly appropriated jazz for white performance, and films like *New Orleans* implied a glimpse into the African-American arena of jazz during musical moments alongside a more ambivalent narrative, *A Man Called Adam*'s representation of black jazz performance from the perspective of African-American characters suggested an alternative depiction of the jazz world that, in itself, was political. The combination of African-American jazz performance, characterization, narrative and perspective led one 1966 article published prior to the film's release to term it 'the first major film production concerned primarily with Negro life since "A Raisin in the Sun"'.¹² Quoting Ike Jones' assertion 'We tried to show jazz musicians as they really are', the article described how both Jones and Les Pine spent six months travelling and living with various jazz musicians in order to achieve the film's more realistic depiction of the life of a jazz performer. Jones explained: 'Most pictures of jazz players are cliché-ridden. I cannot recall a single one that dealt with these people in [sic] other than in a stereotyped fashion...We try to be authentic in our language...Travelling in buses for a series of one-nighters is a hard life, and in our picture the men do not suddenly break out in a gay theme song of

¹¹ *Billboard*, October 1964, pp. 33-42.

¹² 'Sammy Davis' New Movie to be Released Soon', *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 6, 1966 in Gerald Early, *The Sammy Davis Jr. Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), p. 241.

joys of the road as they journey from one job to another.¹³ The link between notions of authenticity and the core structure of the integrated musical which, Jones indicates, the film attempts to disrupt, becomes central to its difficulties as the theme of racial politics plays out.

The film sets up around jazz performance the familiar clash of the artistic and the commercial, explicitly connecting this dynamic to contrasting approaches to racial politics. While Adam refers to Armstrong's veteran as a genius, and Willie's performances evoke Armstrong's familiar form of entertainment, Adam's numbers frequently descend into insults and violence. The equation of modern jazz with individual artistry and an attendant disdain for the audience has antecedents in earlier jazz musicals, as discussed earlier, such as *Young Man with a Horn*, whose narratives often echo a core theme within the closely associated biopic genre of characters' challenges to convention.¹⁴ Here, however, Adam's behaviour both confronts the relationship between performer and audience central to entertainment, and implicitly links the character's approach to jazz performance to his dismissal of Claudia's non-violent Movement politics and his individualized responses to racial abuse. After one early incident when Adam throws money at a heckler, indicating a rejection of his performance being bought and paid for, the remainder of his band express their frustration with his anti-commercial behaviour, one urging him: 'Why don't you go out there and play real pretty for the people, huh?' [Fig. 4] This positioning of active artistry in opposition to passive entertainment, and the racialized positioning of both (the heckler is notably white and requesting up tempo, birthday party music), is made more explicitly political in wider industry terms. When Adam resists his agent Manny's (Peter Lawford) attempts to control his behaviour, Manny potently threatens Adam with a tour of the South, ignoring his protests that he would likely be killed, and explicitly connecting industry demands and the taming of the artist to the racial climate. While the narrative displaces Adam's active struggle onto his troubled psyche – the legacy of a fatal car crash when his drunk driving killed his wife and child – the film's musical numbers similarly draw a line between jazz, performance and racial politics, while ultimately and necessarily restricted by the genre's essential promotion of entertainment and its accompanying myths.

One number in particular illustrates these limited attempts to make such connections. When one of Adam's previous girlfriends berates Claudia in a club about her passive acceptance of abuse for the Civil Rights cause, and slaps her in an apparent attempt to prove the point, Adam's response that immediately follows his modern jazz performance on stage is to return the slap on Claudia's behalf. In the club, resolution comes through the introduction of Willie on stage, reinforcing the contrasting associations with entertainment represented by the performers and their musical and performance styles. The next scene again acts as a direct contrast with Adam's on-stage artistry and off-stage aggression, providing a setting which explicitly connects jazz as entertainment rather than art to democratic racial equality. At a party in a plush apartment, Mel Tormé (as himself) performs 'All That Jazz' in a crowd-pleasing number which fully complies with the genre's commitment to spontaneity, integration and community¹⁵, as he meanders through the room and the guests contribute to and become part of the performance. [Fig. 5] Moreover, the racial diversity apparent in this setting and, more specifically the number, including moments such as Tormé's provocative interactions with both white and African-American women, draws on the kind of party scene and racially inclusive atmosphere quite radically promoted on *Playboy's Penthouse*, a TV variety show that ran between 1959 and 1961 and would later be resurrected as *Playboy After Dark* in 1969. Davis himself appeared

¹³ 'Sammy Davis' New Movie to be Released Soon', p. 242.

¹⁴ George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p. 72.

¹⁵ Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 2nd Edition (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993).

on *Playboy's Penthouse* in September 1960, and Adam's first number in the film is, notably, the 'Playboy Theme' that opened episodes of the show. While 'All That Jazz', therefore, becomes the film's most direct carrier of its integrationist theme, updating generic strategies to convey the myth of democracy through its racial inclusiveness, such a utopian vision is nevertheless articulated via white performance and the genre's sanctioned brand of entertainment. When Tormé sings the number over the film's concluding images of Adam's death – one more doomed black jazz performer – alternative, biographically-framed lyrics suggest 'For the way he played the game, he only had himself to blame', pointing to the film's narrative drive to tame Davis' brand of jazz performance and, by implication, radical racial politics, ultimately reasserting entertainment and the genre's conventional mythologies.

The core problem for these musicals is to marry the requirements of the genre to promote popular entertainment and the myth of American democracy, with changing approaches to jazz and its performance, and the unresolved racial politics of the era. The whiteness of the Hollywood musical around which these myths were constructed makes this all the more difficult when the narratives and performances explicitly relate to jazz and its African-American roots. Most interesting about these films is the devices they use to negotiate these fundamentally irresolvable challenges to the genre, including the whitening of jazz, the idealized iconography of Louis Armstrong, and the use of entertainment as a route to racial inclusiveness, while jazz becomes validated via European classical traditions. Ultimately, *A Man Called Adam* suggests even the production control of a major black star and the shifting context of racial politics were not enough to reconcile these competing factors, only raising additional issues for a genre built on American popular entertainment and the vision of a democratic America.