

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ginger Smock: Narratives of Perpetual Discovery, Jazz Historiography, and the “Swinging Lady of the Violin”

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Abstract

Ginger Smock (1920–95), an African American jazz and classical violinist, was a popular Los Angeles entertainer and one of the first African American women bandleaders on television. This article traces her career from Los Angeles’ Central Avenue to Las Vegas showroom orchestras, drawing on archival materials from the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. Through a close reading of a 1951 *DownBeat* profile of Smock, I interrogate racialized constructions of gender in that magazine and frame mid-century jazz reporting on women instrumentalists via a “narrative of perpetual discovery” that positions these women as waiting for a career break that never comes. As an antidote to the effacement implicit in such narratives, I propose close documentation of sustained artistic practice: That is, the day-to-day facts of a working musician’s life. This article reads Smock’s professional trajectory through an intersectional lens to offer a critical perspective on the ways in which social identities, especially race and gender, may shape both musical careers and our historicization of those careers.

The earliest extant footage of African American jazz and classical violinist Emma “Ginger” Smock is an episode of the popular Los Angeles variety television show *Dixie Showboat*, broadcast on local station KTLA. Approximately 7 minutes into the episode, just after a blackface minstrel routine by duo Peanuts and Popcorn, the camera pans to Smock sitting stage right among the showboat’s “passengers.” An open violin case waits expectantly at her side. The ship’s “captain,” host Dick Lane, approaches, saying, “Ma’am, I don’t want to appear to interrupt your reverie here, but you seem totally fascinated by this orchestra and the music [i.e., the house band, Nappy Lamure and his Straw Hat Strutters]. Is that right?” “Oh, I am. I definitely am,” she says in a lilting Californian accent. He asks, “Are you a musician?” She shakes her head and replies, this time in a high, strained voice with a faux-Southern twinge, “Well, I’m trying to be.”¹

By late 1951, when this episode of *Dixie Showboat* likely aired, Ginger Smock was an established Los Angeles freelancer. She had fronted bands including The Sepia Tones, The Three (later Four) V’s, and Ginger and Her Magic Notes; held down long-running engagements at venues such as The Last Word and The Waikiki Inn; hosted the radio show *Melody Parade*; played on a number of recordings; and, earlier that year, made her television debut with the short-lived CBS production *The Chicks and the Fiddle*.² Her claim on *Dixie Showboat* that she is “trying to be” a musician is thus as facetious as

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¹*Dixie Showboat*, show no. 33, Dick Lane (host), Scatman Crothers, Jacqueline Fontaine, Ginger Smock, Tony Lovello, Maurice Rocco, Peanuts & Popcorn (Harry Cody and John Swore), and the Dixiettes, on KTLA, Paramount Television Productions, Inc., original broadcast date unknown, inventory no. VA22699 T (video viewing copy), UCLA Film and Television Archives, University of California, Los Angeles.

²On the Three V’s, see Bette Yarbrough Cox, *Central Avenue—Its Rise and Fall, 1890–c. 1955: Including the Musical Renaissance of Black Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: BEEM Publications, 1996), 313.

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the altered voice with which she makes that claim; her role on the show was presumably to play the ingenue, just as Dick Lane played her discoverer.

“Trying to be,” repeats Lane. “Well, I see you’ve got an instrument here.” “What kind of an instrument is that, ma’am?” Smock responds in a teacherly, almost patronizing, tone: “A violin.” Lane asks if she would “mind playing us a little something on that violin” and Smock’s faux-Southern accent returns. On a high, incredulous pitch, she replies, “Well, I wouldn’t mind, but in front of all these people and with a great big band like that?” Again, her altered vocal quality underscores the disconnect between her scripted lines and her musical history to date.

Ginger Smock was known for her arresting stage presence. In the late 1940s, she had been hailed as “a happy combination of personality, glamour and talent” and a “heart throb violinist-entertainer.”³ Later reviews of her performances on *Dixie Showboat*, once she joined the cast as a regular, also give the lie to her staged amateurism on this episode. Indeed, in April 1952, *Jet* would celebrate her “zany antics” on the show, calling her “bombastic” and “a fireball... She stomps her feet, sways her head and gyrates her arms in lively rhythm as she bows vigorously on her fiddle.”⁴

“Why certainly,” Lane replies to Smock’s disingenuous hesitancy. “Here’s your chance, ma’am. What would you like to play?” She says, “Well, I’d be thrilled if they’d play ‘What Is This Thing Called Love.’” Lane turns to the house band and asks, “Boys, you know ‘What Is This Thing Called Love’? Miss Ginger Smock. Would you play it for her?”

Once Ginger Smock has accepted Lane’s invitation to perform, her demeanor shifts. No longer playing the wannabe musician, she cracks a huge smile and strides confidently to center stage. The band starts up and Smock plays the melody once with classical tone and technique, adding in occasional double stops and virtuosic runs. She stands tall and poised, her eyes often closed, her face concentrated. Toward the end of the form, she smiles slightly, the band switches to a swing rhythm, and Smock breaks into a high-energy solo over three choruses. She relaxes her posture, her hips shifting from side to side. When she plays an extended run of ascending tremolo scales, some audience members clap spontaneously, and she smiles in response. On the final sixteen bars, she shifts higher, swings harder, strums a few pizzicato chords precisely in time with the house band and stops short, flinging her arm out as the horns play a long note. The audience claps and cheers, some yelling “Yay!” Smock takes a slight bow. Beaming, with a nod to the captain and a bounce in her step, she walks back to her seat—and disappears from our view for 30 years. The next video footage of her would be a late-career demo tape accompanying lounge singer Billy Andre in Las Vegas in the 1980s.⁵

Ginger Smock can claim a number of firsts: She was the first woman to record hot jazz improvisations on the violin; she was one of the first African American women bandleaders on television; and she may have been the first African American full member of a Las Vegas showroom orchestra.⁶ My goal in this article is not to argue for Smock’s exceptionalism, however. Rather, I draw on a wide range of archival sources to examine the ways in which Smock negotiated the work-a-day world of professional music-making as a racialized woman. This is a world in which she was often called upon to play the dual roles that she inhabits on the set of *Dixie Showboat*: The timid amateur “trying to be” a musician and the stunning virtuoso with a “gingervating” stage presence.⁷ It was a world in which she was a civic-minded “star” in the local African American press but a struggling musician in need of discovery, her gender foregrounded and her race effaced, in jazz magazine *DownBeat*. It was also a world in which she was denied recording opportunities due to her race and gender, but hired to

³Herman Hill, “Bright Future Predicted for Ginger Smock,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 20, 1947, 16; untitled photo captioned “Lovely and Talented, Too,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 26, 1948, 3.

⁴“West Coast Television Star,” *Jet*, April 24, 1952, 2; “‘Hot’ Violinist is TV Hit in Los Angeles,” *Jet*, April 24, 1952, 62–63.

⁵Anthony Barnett, “Ginger Smock: Issued and Unissued Sessions on Disc and Tape,” *Fable Bulletin Violin Improvisation Studies* no. 3 (1994): 11. (This bulletin hereafter cited as *FBV.I.S.*)

⁶Pianist Hazel Scott hosted *The Hazel Scott Show* as a solo performer on the DuMont Network from July to September 1950. See Donald Bogle, *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 15–18, and Karen Chilton, *Hazel Scott: The Pioneering Journey of a Jazz Pianist, from Café Society to Hollywood to HUAC* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 140–42.

⁷“‘Hot’ Violinist is TV Hit.”

play a variety of Others, from Hawaiian native to “bronze Gypsy,” roles that Smock seems to have taken on with pragmatism and, occasionally, delight.

This article documents Smock’s 50-year career, from her early years on Los Angeles’ Central Avenue through her work on radio and television, a stint at national touring, and her last decades in Las Vegas. I weave together Smock’s outward-facing successes, in the form of gigs, studio sessions, and audience reception, with her later disheartened reflections on her career, as voiced in interviews and correspondence: “What a waste!” she would write to friends in 1983, “I should’ve been a secretary or something.”⁸ Through a close reading of a 1951 *DownBeat* profile of Smock, I argue that mid-century jazz reporting positioned women instrumentalists, whatever their previous accomplishments, as waiting for a career break that never comes—a narrative which I term perpetual discovery. Such narratives foreground the discoverer and the recuperative process rather than the subject herself. I also show that, despite *DownBeat*’s ostensibly color-blind presentation of jazz at the time, the magazine foregrounded the physicality and sexuality of white women instrumentalists while absencing race and even corporality for Black women instrumentalists. Throughout, I hold in consideration a question posed by Jayna Brown with respect to Valaida Snow: “How can histories—particularly lost histories—of black women be constructed in ways that remain sensitive to the slippery properties of fact (and its often unsupportive banality) and wary of the temptations of recuperative triumphalism?”⁹ As an antidote to the effacement implicit in a narrative of perpetual discovery—itsself a form of recuperative triumphalism—I propose close documentation of sustained artistic practice: The day-to-day facts of a working musician’s life, in all their slipperiness and banality.

This article reads Smock’s career through an intersectional lens in order to, in the words of Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, “illuminate the organization of institutional power” in the musical worlds she inhabited and the ways in which “power relations of race, class, and gender... buil[t] on each other” to shape her performing and recording opportunities and her reception in the mainstream press.¹⁰ By demarcating the breach between Smock’s 50-year professional career and the narratives of discovery that positioned her as always on the verge of unachieved success, I interrogate what Maria V. Johnson has termed the “entrenched notions of authenticity” in both scholarship and journalism that determine not only which artists are “recognized, recorded, and studied” but also, crucially, how Black women musicians (electric blues guitarists, in Johnson’s example) are received and portrayed and which recording opportunities are made available to them.¹¹ Women jazz instrumentalists in the mid-twentieth century were, almost by definition, inauthentic, as Sherrie Tucker has noted, with instruments other than the piano “considered ‘normal’ in the hands of men, and a ‘gimmick’ in the hands of women,” but Black women instrumentalists had even fewer recording opportunities than their white peers.¹² An intersectional reading of Smock’s career illuminates the structuring of what Collins and Bilge term the “cultural domain of power” and points to the ways in which narratives of perpetual discovery help “manufacture and disseminate [a] narrative of fair play” through unrealized promises of “equal access to opportunities” via the next big break.¹³

How do we hear, and see, the performances of an African American woman whose professional identity, stage persona, reception, and gigging opportunities were inextricably linked to her gender and to the color of her skin? How do we historicize the contributions of a performer who

⁸Ginger Smock to Ivy and John Reeves, August 25, 1983, Ginger Smock Archives, Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, D.C. Gift of Ivy G. and Dean Tatam Reeves in memory of John Reeves (all correspondence to/from John Reeves cited hereafter is from this collection; additional items from this collection hereafter cited as NMAAHC-Reeves). Underlining in original.

⁹Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 241.

¹⁰Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), under “Using Intersectionality as an Analytic Tool” and “What is Intersectionality?,” <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/lib/utoronto/reader.action?docID=6177666&ppg=14>.

¹¹Maria V. Johnson, “Black Women Electric Guitarists and Authenticity in the Blues,” in *Black Women and Music: More than the Blues*, eds., Eileen M. Hayes and Linda F. Williams (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 2007), 53.

¹²Sherrie Tucker, “West Coast Women: A Jazz Genealogy,” *Pacific Review of Ethnomusicology* 8, no. 1 (Winter 1996/1997): 19.

¹³Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, under “Power Plays: The FIFA World Cup.”

succeeded—as measured via gigs and reputation—as a working musician for a half-century but who retrospectively saw herself as a failure? Furthermore, reworking a question that Lisa Barg has posed with regard to Billy Strayhorn, what new histories of musical, social, and cultural life in jazz and classical music does Smock’s story afford, and what sonic histories of Otherness might be recorded in her musical output?¹⁴ Through an in-depth survey of Smock’s professional life, I offer a critical perspective on the ways in which social identities may shape both musical careers and our historicization of those careers.

Building Out the Archive

Archives are “where law and singularity intersect in *privilege*,” writes Jacques Derrida.¹⁵ The reminder by Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook that archives are “dynamic technologies of rule” that “*create* the histories and social realities they ostensibly only *describe*” carries particular meaning in a story such as Smock’s, whose absence from jazz violin histories is linked to her lack of recordings—the *sine qua non* of jazz historiography—which is in turn linked to the “social realities” within which she lived and worked.¹⁶ The contents of public archives delimit the narratives that may be told about the associated body politic, meaning that building out those archives is one means of claiming space to script the future.¹⁷ Nevertheless building out an archive does not eliminate its limitations. In certain corners of the jazz archive Ginger Smock is an object of perpetual discovery while in others she is simply absent. To dismiss this—even in the name of expanding that archive—is to deny its impact on her career and her own retrospective reading thereof, while to foreground it would generate a new narrative of discovery. This article seeks a middle ground that “inhabits [the] limitations” of the archive while refusing to center exclusion or absence.¹⁸

From 2013 to 2018, I worked with two families to coordinate the transfer of their private collections of Smock-related materials to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). Items donated by Lydia Samuel Bennett, a member of Smock’s extended family, include handwritten manuscripts of Smock’s compositions and big-band arrangements; onionskins and prints for several of her compositions; reel-to-reel recordings of a studio session and a 1967 live performance at Raffles Restaurant; items from Smock’s own collection of LPs and 78 rpm records; and various personal and professional effects, including her violin and music stand. Items donated by Dean and Ivy Reeves, the son and wife, respectively, of Canadian jazz violin collector John Reeves, include correspondence between Smock and John Reeves from 1973 to 1994; gig announcements and press clippings; personal and publicity photos; several videocassettes; and forty-three cassette tapes and seven reel-to-reels containing recordings of live performances, interviews, phone conversations, a backstage jam session, and practice and listening sessions, as well as dubs of earlier studio and demo recordings. This article draws from these materials as well as African American newspapers, trade journals, magazines, and published and unpublished interviews.

Smock spent much of her later career working toward a solo album that was never realized, though one of her bands did release an LP, *On the S.S. Catalina with the Shipmates and Ginger*, of what Smock called “original island music.”¹⁹ Recent interest in her jazz playing is indebted to the posthumous CD *Strange Blues: Ginger Smock, The Lovely Lady with the Violin, Los Angeles Studio & Demo Recordings*

¹⁴Lisa Barg, “Queer Encounters in the Music of Billy Strayhorn,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66, no. 3 (2013): 773, doi:10.1525/jams.2013.66.3.771.

¹⁵Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): 10. Italics in original.

¹⁶Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory,” *Archival Science* 2, nos. 1–2 (2002): 7, doi:10.1007/BF02435628. Italics in original. Krin Gabbard’s *Jammin’ at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) recenters jazz historiography on film, as does Nicolas Pillai’s *Jazz as Visual Language: Film, Television and the Dissonant Image* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016). Also see a recent special issue edited by Pillai, “Jazz in Television,” *Jazz Research Journal* 12, no. 1 (2018).

¹⁷See Mark V. Campbell, “Doing the Knowledge: Digitally Archiving Hip Hop in Canada,” in *We Still Here: Hip Hop North of the 49th Parallel*, eds., Charity Marsh and Mark V. Campbell (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020), 17–31.

¹⁸Laura Helton, Justin Leroy, Max A. Mishler, Samantha Seeley, and Shauna Sweeney, “The Question of Recovery: An Introduction,” *Social Text* 33, no. 4 (2015): 2.

¹⁹Cox, *Central Avenue*, 312; *The Shipmates and Ginger, On the S.S. Catalina with the Shipmates and Ginger*, Venise 7015, 1961, 33⅓ rpm.

1946–1958, compiled by English jazz violin historian Anthony Barnett, who was in touch with Smock in the last years of her life.²⁰ Barnett published a comprehensive discography of Smock in the print newsletter *Fable Bulletin Violin Improvisation Studies* in 1994, with subsequent updates.²¹ He also wrote a brief entry on Smock for the *New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* and profiled her in *Strad* magazine.²²

Academic sources on Ginger Smock are few and far between. Kristin McGee mentions her briefly in *Some Liked It Hot: Jazz Women in Film and Television*, noting her work with *The Chicks and the Fiddle* on CBS.²³ Smock also appears in Linda Dahl's *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen*, though Dahl states, incorrectly, that Smock's first professional gigs were with Ada Leonard's all-white big band.²⁴ Los Angeles music educator and historian Bette Yarbrough Cox interviewed Ginger Smock in 1983: A video of that interview is available online and a lightly edited transcription appears in Cox's magisterial *Central Avenue—Its Rise and Fall (1890–c. 1955)*.²⁵ Several interviewees for the UCLA Central Avenue Sounds Oral History Project mention Smock, but she herself was not interviewed for that project.²⁶ Sherrie Tucker graciously shared with me a transcription of her own 1993 interview with Smock, excerpts of which may be found in Tucker's 1998 article on African American women musicians on Central Avenue.²⁷

Given that Smock's later career was defined, in part, by her struggle for recording opportunities, a word is in order with regard to the audio and video tapes now at the NMAAHC. Many of the tapes are significant for research purposes, such as a 1975 radio interview on CRFN in Edmonton, Alberta; a 1976 recording of Smock playing along with a televised broadcast of violinist Clarence Gatemouth Brown on *Austin City Limits*; and a 1981 recording of Smock commenting on and playing along with LPs of violinists Stuff Smith, Fritz Kreisler, Don Harper, and Svend Asmussen. Two reunion concerts with organist Nina Russell and "friends" in Hungry Horse, Montana, for Russell's birthday, have a promising line-up but, unfortunately, poor audio quality.²⁸ Sound quality is better on a 1985 recording of a live concert with guitarist Greg Lowe in Winnipeg, but the musicians' stage patter indicates that Smock is sight-reading many of the pieces. Some tapes are dubs of Smock's earlier studio and

²⁰Ginger Smock, *Strange Blues: Ginger Smock. The Lovely Lady with the Violin, Los Angeles Studio & Demo Recordings 1946–1958*, AB Fable ABCD1-010, 2005, compact disc.

²¹Barnett, "Ginger Smock, Issued and Unissued," 1–12. Updates in Anthony Barnett, "Ginger Smock," *FBVIS* no. 5 (1995): n.p.; Anthony Barnett, "Ginger Smock," *FBVIS* vol. 3, no. 10 (1998): 132–38; Anthony Barnett, "Ginger Smock," *FBVIS* vol. 4, no. 11 (1999): 113; "Fable Bulletin: Violin Improvisation Studies, Pink Page Updates 2001–2017," AB Fable, accessed July 31, 2021, <http://abar.net/fbvisupdate.htm> (hereafter cited as "Pink Page Updates").

²²Anthony Barnett, "Smock, Ginger," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, ed. Barry Kernfeld (Oxford Music Online, 2003), accessed September 28, 2011, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/J696500>; Anthony Barnett, "The Gingervating Ginger Is Literally a Fireball in Her Act," *The Strad*, November 2010, 66–70. See also Laura Risk, "Ginger Smock: First Lady of the Jazz Violin," *Strings Magazine*, November/December 2020, 28–34, <https://stringsmagazine.com/ginger-smock-first-lady-of-the-jazz-violin/>.

²³Kristin A. McGee, *Some Liked It Hot: Jazz Women in Film and Television, 1928–1959* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 211.

²⁴Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 51. Also see Sonya Ruth Lawson, "The Origins and Development of the Use of Violins, Violas, and Cellos in Jazz in the United States of America" (PhD diss., University of Oregon, 2003), 91–94.

²⁵Ginger Smock, "Ginger Smock interviewed by Bette Yarbrough Cox," Black Experience as Expressed through Music (BEEM), filmed February 24, 1983, 41:28, Ethnomusicology Archive, University of California, Los Angeles, posted September 23, 2015, https://archive.org/details/calauem_000206 (hereafter referred to as "Cox interview"). A letter from Ginger Smock to Ivy and John Reeves dated November 1, 1983 places this interview on November 7, 1983 rather than in February. Ginger Smock to Ivy and John Reeves, November 1, 1983, NMAAHC-Reeves.

²⁶Central Avenue Sounds Oral History Project, UCLA Library Center for Oral History, University of California, Los Angeles, <https://oralhistory.library.ucla.edu/>. Portions of these interviews are reprinted in Clora Bryant, Buddy Collette, William Green, Steven Isoardi, Jack Kelson, Horace Tapscott, Gerald Wilson, and Marl Young, eds., *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Smock is mentioned in interviews by Clora Bryant, William Douglass, William Green, and Jack Kelson (Jackie Kelso).

²⁷Ginger Smock, interview by Sherrie Tucker, October 28, 1993, Las Vegas, NV (hereafter referred to as Tucker interview); Tucker, "West Coast Women," 8–9.

²⁸These concerts were on September 8, 1974 and September 14, 1975. See "Friends Honor Nina Russell," *Hungry Horse News*, September 13, 1974, 13, NMAAHC-Reeves.

demo recordings, now available on *Strange Blues*, while others are copies of demos that she made during her Las Vegas years. Sound quality varies widely. In sum, although these recordings are of significant scholarly interest, substantial curatorial work would be necessary before making selections available to the general public.

“First Lady of the Violin”: Building a Career

The geographic story of Smock’s family, from rural areas of the southeastern United States to urban centers in the North and West, follows common trajectories of the Great Migration. Smock’s mother, Ruby May Garrett, was born in Greenwood, Mississippi circa 1891. Her father, Henry James Smock (born circa 1887) was from Shelbysville, Kentucky, though he seems to have spent at least some time in Marion, Indiana as a boy. By 1919, they were married and living in Chicago, and their daughter was born in that city on June 4, 1920.²⁹ Six years later, due to challenging family circumstances, Smock was sent to live with her paternal aunt and uncle, Georgia and Lawrence Jones, in Los Angeles. She grew up on Central Avenue in a close-knit African American community, delimited by race-restrictive housing covenants, where music was at the center of cultural and economic life, and her teenage years coincided with the swing era and an “explosion of jazz” on the Avenue.³⁰

Smock was something of a child prodigy. She began private classical violin lessons with Bessie Dones at age eight and, at age ten, performed Kreisler’s “Old Refrain” at the Hollywood Bowl to a standing ovation.³¹ The following year, she gave a recital at the People’s Independent Church of Christ and with the proceeds purchased the violin that she would play throughout her career.³² At age twelve, she was invited to a film audition. As she later told Sherrie Tucker, “Twentieth Century Fox heard of [me]... They wanted a little girl violinist to play in a movie. And so my teacher came by the school and got me.” At this point, however, Smock’s story shifts:

I walked in there and the studio moguls looked at me from head to toe, a twelve-year-old, with the braids hanging down, like I was something from Mars... They acted like they weren’t glad to see me. I didn’t receive any kind of welcome... And one of them said, “What are you?” And I didn’t know how to answer that other than say, “I’m an American.” I come from a mixed marriage, which is obvious. And very proud of that. Thankful. And they said, “Well, my dear, I’m afraid we can’t use you. You do not represent any particular group of people.” And the tears, I remember, rolled down my cheeks, ran down my chest, and I said, “I’ll never come back, even if you

²⁹Genealogical details from the online database of Ancestry.com Operations Inc. (2004–11): 1900 United States Federal Census, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/7602/>; 1920 United States Federal Census, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/6061/>; Marriages Index 1871–1920, Cook County, IL, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2556/>; Cook County, IL, Birth Certificates Index, 1871–1922, <https://www.ancestry.ca/search/collections/2545/>. Original data: Twelfth and Fourteenth Census of the United States, National Archives and Records Administration, Records of the Bureau of the Census, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; “Marriage Records, 1871–present,” Illinois Department of Public Health; Cook County Birth Certificates, 1878–1922, Illinois Department of Public Health.

³⁰Bette Yarbrough Cox, “The Evolution of Black Music in Los Angeles,” in *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California*, eds., Lawrence B. de Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor (Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage, 2001), 263. Additional sources for the history of jazz on Central Avenue include Bryant et al., *Central Avenue Sounds*; Cox, *Central Avenue*; Dwight Dickerson, “Jazz in Los Angeles: The Black Experience,” *Black Music Research Journal* 31, no. 1 (2011): 179–92; Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje and Eddie S. Meadows, eds., *California Soul: Music of African Americans in the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), especially Michael B. Bakan, “Way out West on Central: Jazz in the African-American Community of Los Angeles before 1930,” 23–78, and Ralph Eastman, “‘Pitchin’ up a Boogie’: African-American Musicians, Nightlife, and Music Venues in Los Angeles, 1930–1945,” 79–103; Ted Gioia, *West Coast Jazz: Modern Jazz in California, 1945–1960* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 3–15; Steven L. Isoardi, *The Dark Tree: Jazz and the Community Arts in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), doi:10.1525/california/9780520245914.001.0001, especially Chapter 2, “Ballad for Samuel: The Legacy of Central Avenue and the 1950s Avant-Garde in Los Angeles,” 18–40; Tucker, “West Coast Women”; and Peter Vacher, *Swingin’ on Central Avenue: African American Jazz in Los Angeles* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

³¹Cox, *Central Avenue*, 95, 309; “Fiddlin’ Around,” *Tele-Views*, March 1953, 8, NMAAHC-Reeves.

³²Tucker interview. Smock played a late nineteenth-century Czech instrument with a label reading “Ferdinandus Aug. Homolka Fecit Prague 1849.” The instrument was not in fact made by Homolka but is an excellent copy.

begged me. I'll never come back. I will never see you again." And I walked out... And my teacher was crying, fighting back the tears, because she was humiliated and embarrassed for me. And I guess that did something to where that rejection has stuck to that day. And I'm 73 years old and it's still sitting.³³

As Collins and Bilge note, intersecting dynamics of power and control based on social categories may shape the specific, individual ways that a person experiences bias and "create pipelines to success or marginalization."³⁴ Although census records list both sides of Smock's family as Black and she grew up in a predominantly African American community, she seems to have self-identified as mixed-race (of African American, Irish American, and Native American heritage) and the above anecdote suggests that Smock understood early on her particular physiognomy as a basis for marginalization.³⁵ In her letters to John Reeves, Smock refers to herself as an "I.B.I.," or "Irish-Black-Indian," and presumes that others will restrict her opportunities based on her racial identity.³⁶ "He probably thought it was 'corny,'" she writes to Reeves after he has sent her demo to a potential supporter, adding, "Plus, maybe he doesn't favor IBI's, too. smiles!"³⁷ When she is invited to participate in the 1984 St. Patrick's Day parade in Las Vegas, she underscores the disconnect between the presumed whiteness of that space and her own racial identity, again softening her statement with a wry "smiles!": "Did I tell you...I rode and played (by special invitation) on the Daughters of Erin float... Yep! The ol' I.B.I. herself. smiles!"³⁸ The mix of bitterness, defiance, and dry humor that characterizes these and similar remarks in her letters suggests that once Smock had been shunted toward the pipeline to marginalization as a 12-year-old, she carried the experience of that rejection across her career.

Smock's star continued to rise through her teenage years. At age thirteen, she performed "To a Wild Rose" on Clarence Muse's local radio program and, according to *Tele-Views*, "her rendition so charmed an influential listener that she was given a scholarship at the Music and Art Foundation in Los Angeles."³⁹ At Jefferson High School, she joined the band and was drum majorette under celebrated orchestra and bandleader Sam Browne, who occasionally had her conduct in his stead.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, although she did not study jazz formally, she would often "sit by the phonograph" and

³³Tucker interview.

³⁴Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*.

³⁵Census records list Smock's maternal grandmother, Emma Garrett, as "Mulatto" in 1910 and "Negro" in 1930 and 1940. Garrett's daughter—Smock's mother—Ruby Mae is listed as Black in both 1900 and 1920. Smock's paternal grandfather, George A. Smock, and her paternal aunt, Georgia Jones, née Smock, were also listed as Black (online database of Ancestry.com Operations Inc. [2002–2006]: 1900 United States Federal Census, <https://www.ancestry.ca/search/collections/7602/>; 1910 United States Federal Census, <https://www.ancestry.ca/search/collections/7884/>; 1920 United States Federal Census, <https://www.ancestry.ca/search/collections/6061/>; 1930 United States Federal Census, <https://www.ancestry.ca/search/collections/6224/>; 1940 United States Federal Census, <https://www.ancestry.ca/search/collections/2442/>; original data: Twelfth, Thirteenth, Fourteenth, Fifteenth and Sixteenth Census of the United States, National Archives and Records Administration, Records of the Bureau of the Census, National Archives, Washington, D.C.). The genealogical record is incomplete and it is possible that Smock's was one of many African American families to erroneously claim Native American heritage (Henry Louis Gates Jr., "High Cheekbones and Straight Black Hair?," *The Root*, December 29, 2014, <https://www.theroot.com/high-cheekbones-and-straight-black-hair-1790878167>). Note that, when Smock was a child, race mixing in the United States was seen primarily through the lens of pathology whereby mixed-race people were physically, mentally, emotionally, and morally weak, leading to infertility and early death (Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe, ed., *Mixed Race Studies: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004), 9–14). See, for instance, W. E. Castle, "Biological and Social Consequences of Race-Crossing," *Journal of Heredity* 15, no. 9 (1924): 363–69, doi:10.1093/oxfordjournals.jhered.a102491. For more on mixed-race identity today, see Shantel Gabriel Buggs, "Does (Mixed-)Race Matter? The Role of Race in Interracial Sex, Dating, and Marriage," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 3, no. 4 (2017): 538–51, doi:10.1111/soc4.12531; and Jennifer Patrice Sims, "Reevaluation of the Influence of Appearance and Reflected Appraisals for Mixed-Race Identity: The Role of Consistent Inconsistent Racial Perception," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 2, no. 4 (2016): 569–83, doi:10.1177/2332649216634740.

³⁶Ginger Smock to Ivy and John Reeves, October 11, 1982, NMAAHC-Reeves.

³⁷Ginger Smock to Ivy and John Reeves, February 16, 1994, NMAAHC-Reeves. Underlining in original.

³⁸Ginger Smock to Ivy and John Reeves, letter dated April 29, 1984, NMAAHC-Reeves. Underlining in original.

³⁹"Fiddlin' Around," 8.

⁴⁰Cox interview.

improvise along to records by violinists Joe Venuti, Stuff Smith, and Eddie South.⁴¹ She also attended big band performances by Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Benny Goodman, and Glenn Miller: “I’d sit there and get really inspired... and go home and try and play a few things that I would hear on violin.”⁴²

As a teenager, Smock was first violinist with the All-City Symphony Orchestra and the “only person of her race” to play with the Junior Philharmonic Orchestra, under conductor Otto Klemperer.⁴³ She attended Los Angeles City College and the Zoellner Conservatory of Music and, after graduating, led the 48-member Symphonetta ensemble, which performed “light concert music” in Southern California.⁴⁴ Indeed, as violinist Kelly Hall-Tompkins has noted, Smock’s early life had all the hallmarks of a pre-professional classical music career, and her goal was in fact a position with a symphony orchestra.⁴⁵ In the early 1940s, however, African Americans were excluded from professional orchestras in the United States. Smock took a job at a lithography shop, continued to perform at church and community functions, and joined the Southeast Symphony, a community orchestra for African American musicians.⁴⁶ Her first jazz gig, in 1943, was unexpected: She received a call from the union to sub for Stuff Smith with Austin McCoy’s ensemble at Randini’s on Western Avenue and, although she still thought of herself as a “concert violinist and a church violinist,” agreed to audition. She went to the club, played along, according to *Tele-Views*, to a “jazz tempo beat out by the [club] owner,” and got the job.⁴⁷

Smock’s high school classmate Jackie Kelso would later recall her approach to gigging as eminently pragmatic: “[Her attitude was,] you want to make a living playing music? You simply find out what product is being sold on the market and make sure that you can do [it].”⁴⁸ Her first band, The Sepia Tones, with Mata Roy on piano and Nina Russell on Hammond organ, performed such favorites as “Rhapsody in Blue,” “Persian Market,” “Holiday for Strings,” and their theme song, “Poinciana.” This was the “less challenging swing and novelty repertoire” that, as Tucker states, “employers and audiences generally expected” from all-women groups at the time.⁴⁹ By May 1944, the trio was “packing them in” at The Last Word on South Central Avenue.⁵⁰ *Billboard* described them as a “sure-hot” for upscale venues booking “sepian talent” and a solid fit for “[u]pholstered lounges appealing to moderns,” and lauded Smock’s contributions: “As a hot fiddler she carries the fast tempos well and her boogie-woogie interpretation is out of this world. She is one of the most versatile violinists to hit these parts.”⁵¹ Although The Last Word was presumably integrated, given its location, at least some of the trio’s performances were likely for all-white audiences. Later in 1944, for instance, they performed at The Rite Spot in Glendale, a sundown town.⁵² The Sepia Tones disbanded in late 1944

⁴¹Hal Holly [Charles Emge], “Addition To ‘Girls In Jazz’ Found On Coast By Holly,” *DownBeat*, June 15, 1951, 8.

⁴²Tucker interview.

⁴³Cox, *Central Avenue*, 310; Hill, “Bright Future Predicted.”

⁴⁴“Fiddlin’ Around,” 8, 36; “Aristocrats Claim a Century of Musical Know-How,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 14, 1960, C1.

⁴⁵Kelly Hall-Tompkins, interview by the author, August 26, 2020, online.

⁴⁶“ABOUT US | southeast-symphony,” Southeast Symphony, accessed August 11, 2021, <https://www.southeastssymphony.com/aboutus>; Cox, *Central Avenue*, 310.

⁴⁷Tucker interview; “Fiddlin’ Around,” 8. Barnett dates this gig to April 26, 1943, following communication in the early 1990s with Smock and/or Reeves (Barnett, “Ginger Smock, Issued and Unissued,” 2; Anthony Barnett, personal communication with the author, August 12, 2021). *Tele-Views* dates it to 1944.

⁴⁸Jackie Kelso (John Kelson), interview by Steven L. Isoardi, tape number III, side 2, April 7, 1990, Central Avenue Sounds Oral History Project, <https://static.library.ucla.edu/oralhistory/text/masters/21198-zz0008zn0c-5-master.html>.

⁴⁹Tucker interview; Tucker, “West Coast Women,” 18. The band was originally called “Nina, Mata and Ginger.” For more on “sepia” as a signifier of “upscale blackness,” see Andrew Flory, “Sepia and the American Black Middlebrow,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 73, no. 2 (2020): 363, doi:10.1525/jams.2020.73.2.327.

⁵⁰Harry Levette and Florence Cairez, “Gossip of the Movie Lots,” *Kansas City Plaindealer*, May 5, 1944.

⁵¹Sam Abbott, “Reviews: Nina, Mata, and Ginger,” *Billboard*, March 11, 1944, 30.

⁵²“Small Bands and Cocktail Attractions: The Sepia Tones,” *The Billboard 1944 Music Year Book*, 1944, 321; “Glendale, California,” History and Social Justice Website, Tougaloo College, 2021, accessed December 11, 2022, <https://justice.tougaloo.edu/sundowntown/glendale-ca/>. James W. Loewen defines sundown towns as “any organized jurisdiction that for decades kept African Americans or other groups from living in it and was thus ‘all-white’ on purpose” (James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: New Press, 2005), 4).

or early 1945 when Smock fell ill, “suffering from exhaustion and a near-nervous breakdown.” She put down the violin for a year to recover and then returned to performing in Los Angeles clubs.⁵³

Smock’s primary gig from 1947 to 1950 was at The Waikiki Inn on South Western Avenue, where she “dressed Hawaiian, with the grass skirts ... the flowers in the hair and the lei.”⁵⁴ From August to September 1947, she played electric violin with Walter Johnson on piano, a duo which the *Los Angeles Sentinel* described ambivalently as “definitely different.”⁵⁵ From March to May 1948, she performed with Emile Williams and Lloyd Glenn on “twin pianos” before returning to a duo lineup with Glenn only. Reviewing the show that June, *The Pittsburgh Courier* called her a “big hit” with a repertoire that “[ran] the gamut from Bach to Boogie... Talent scouts from Hollywood are casting their eyes her way.”⁵⁶ Williams returned to the ensemble in July, now on Hammond organ, thus replicating the Sepia Tones instrumentation. “[W]hen it comes to sweet music, this trio have really got something,” declared the *Los Angeles Sentinel*.⁵⁷ The ensemble was a steady draw, in part for its musical constancy:

Contrary to the belief of many that the public tires of the same type of entertainment over and over again... the musical trio at Mike’s Waikiki, over on Western [A]venue, still hold forth nightly and continue to draw upon a large following that never seem to get enough of their kind of music... With all due credit to the talents of these three top-notch artists, like credit must be given to their realization of the type of music their patrons enjoy and their efforts towards adhering strictly to this policy.⁵⁸

In Smock’s final year at the Waikiki, she replaced Glenn first with pianist Gid Honore and then with guitarist Ceele Burke and pianist Charles (Charlie) Pryme before settling on a trio with Pryme and Williams, both of whom she would continue to perform with over the following decades.⁵⁹

⁵³“Fiddlin Around,” 36; Hill, “Bright Future Predicted.”

⁵⁴Tucker interview. Smock’s performances as “Hawaiian” (and later as a “Gypsy”; see below) align with post-war fetishization of the exotic in popular music (see Phillip Hayward, *Widening the Horizon: Exoticism in Post-War Popular Music* (Sydney: John Libbey, 1999)) as well as a long history of light-skinned African American women performing, on the burlesque and variety stages, “a range of female colonial subjects” (Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 93). An example contemporaneous with Smock is that of African American performer Juanita Hall adopting Asian personae for the musicals “South Pacific” and “Flower Drum Song” (on the latter, see James Deaville, “The Many Lives of Flower Drum Song (1957–2002): Negotiating Chinese American Identity in Print, on Stage, and on Screen,” in *China and the West: Music, Representation, and Reception*, eds., James Deaville, Hon-Lun Yang, and Michael Saffle (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 119–36). Such examples asked audiences to willingly suspend disbelief only for the space of a performance and stand in contrast to instances of African American musicians “passing” as non-Black in order to avoid police harassment or violence while on tour, or to access certain professional opportunities. On the latter, see George Lipsitz, “Masquerades and Mixtures: The Hidden History of Passing,” in *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), esp. 186–90. Lipsitz discusses at length the case of John Roland Redd, who first passed as Mexican under the name “Juan Rolando” and then became a popular Los Angeles television personality as “Korla Pandit,” purportedly of mixed Indian–French heritage. My thanks to the anonymous JSAM reviewer who pointed me to some of these examples.

⁵⁵“Hitting the Nite Spots,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 28, 1947, 20. For more on electric violins in jazz, see Stacy Phillips and Anthony Barnett, “Musings on the Evolution of Jazz Violin & Electric Violins and Jazz Violinists 1930s–1950s,” Mel Bay, Fiddle Sessions, 2019, accessed August 8, 2021, <http://abar.net/fiddlelessons.pdf>.

⁵⁶Photo captioned “Lovely and Talented, Too.”

⁵⁷George B. Brady, “Round Town with Brady,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 12, 1948, 20.

⁵⁸“Artistry of Trio at Mike Waikiki ‘Tops’ with Patrons,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 30, 1948, A18.

⁵⁹Personnel details taken from display ads in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 11, 18, 1948; weekly from April 1 to July 1, July 22 to October 28, and November 11 to 25, 1948; December 9 and 23, 1948 (1948 ads usually between pp. 19 and 23); February 3, 1949; weekly from February 17 to March 3, March 24 to April 7, and April 21 to June 9, 1949; June 23, July 28, August 25, 1949; weekly from October 6 to December 29, 1949; January 12, 1950; weekly from June 8 to September 7, 1950; September 21, 1950; weekly from October 5 to November 16, 1950 (January to July, 1949 ads usually p. C4 or C5; subsequent ads usually between pp. B1 and B6). Harvey “88” Brooks (piano) was a featured guest with Smock for several weeks in late 1950; it is unclear if he replaced either Pryme or Williams or was a fourth bandmember, but he continued on with “Ginger and Her Magic Notes” when Smock later opened at Mike Lyman’s in Hollywood (Florence Cadrez, “Mostly About Musicians,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, December 7, 1950, B2).

Smock's long stints at the Waikiki—where she ended her tenure as the “Sweetheart of the Strings’ and her torrid trio”—framed numerous other engagements in the same years.⁶⁰ In 1946, she brought “Ginger and Her Magic Notes” to the Sphinx Club on Sunset Boulevard, with a rhythm section composed of Jack Carrington on piano, Louis Gonzales on guitar, and Bill Thomas on bass.⁶¹ As “First Lady of the Violin” in a revue at The Last Word from October to November 1947, she “scored a smash success,” according to *The Cleveland Call and Post*, and four nightclubs in San Francisco began “bidding against each other for her services.”⁶² In January 1948, she opened at The Memo on a bill that included blues singers Wynonnie Harris and Joe Turner.⁶³ *The Pittsburgh Courier* also has her hosting “her own radio program,” *Melody Parade*, in these years.⁶⁴

Smock launched her recording career in the mid-1940s. Her first studio session was in July or August 1946 for Joe Alexander with the Red Callender Quintet, under the name Emma Colbert, but the recording that put her on the proverbial map came in September of that year, when she joined the Vivien Garry Quartet for Leonard Feather’s *Girls in Jazz* project on RCA Victor.⁶⁵ Playing a Rickenbacker electric violin, she recorded four 78 rpm sides, including the 12-bar blues “A Woman’s Place is in the Groove.”⁶⁶ “Five west coast girls playing good jazz, including some stuff Smithian sounding fiddle [sic],” wrote *DownBeat*.⁶⁷ *Billboard* panned the project, however, describing it as of little musical value and useful only as “novel emcee chatter,” though they nevertheless considered it “a demonstration that there are femme jazz talents that can make many a feller pack up.”⁶⁸ Smock’s playing on these sides amply demonstrates her hard-edged rhythmic sensibility and blues-based soloing and showcases certain hallmarks of her improvisational approach, such as the use of ostinati to build intensity. The narrow compass and straightforward phrase structure of her solos does, however, point to her relative inexperience at this stage of her career.

An illustrated advertisement in the *California Eagle* suggests that by 1948, Smock—with her violin—had come to function as a metonym for the successful, elegant, and socially connected African American working woman. The ad shows two women conversing on the phone. One is dressed in bathrobe and slippers, her hair up in a kerchief, and sitting in a torn armchair surrounded by empty liquor bottles. “No Mabel,” she says. “I just can’t go. I entertained ‘at home’ last night, and I’m as beat as Lionel Hampton’s Drums.” Her conversation partner wears a fitted skirt, billowing blouse, and heels. Her hair is loose and wavy, and she leans casually against a cupboard. “Why honey,” she replies. “I gave a big party last night too. But I entertained at ASSOCIATED CLUBS and I’m as [fit as] Ginger Smock’s fiddle.”⁶⁹ This advertisement, which ran on at least eight occasions, points to the high degree of name recognition that Smock enjoyed on Central Avenue while still in her twenties and suggests that she and her music denoted independence and professionalism for women in Los Angeles’ African American community.

⁶⁰Display ad, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 17, 1950, B2.

⁶¹Barnett, “Ginger Smock, Issued and Unissued,” 3.

⁶²Display ad, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, October 23, 1947, 5; Display ad, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, October 30, 1947, 21; Display ads, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, November 6 and 20, 1947, 20; “Lady With Violin Has Plenty of Jobs,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, November 15, 1947, 8A.

⁶³“Gertrude Gipson’s Candid Comments,” *California Eagle*, January 29, 1948, 23.

⁶⁴Hill, “Bright Future Predicted.”

⁶⁵AB Fable, “Pink Page Updates.” Smock had a brief and unhappy marriage to a John Colbert (Ginger Smock to Ivy and John Reeves, March 7 and July 12, 1978, NMAAHC-Reeves).

⁶⁶Vivian Garry Quartet, “Body and Soul/A Woman’s Place is in the Groove” and “I’m in the Mood for Love/Operation Mop,” *Girls in Jazz*, RCA Victor HJ-11, 1948, 78 rpm; Barnett, “Ginger Smock, Issued and Unissued,” 2. “A Woman’s Place is in the Groove” was composed by Edna Williams (not Leonard Feather, as elsewhere indicated) and originally titled “Sycamore Blues,” likely because the Victor recording studio was located on North Sycamore Avenue (Barnett, “Ginger Smock,” *FBVIS* 3, no. 10, 132; Anthony Barnett, personal communication with the author, April 21, 2021).

⁶⁷“Diggin’ the Discs with Mix,” *DownBeat*, January 14, 1948, 14. The positive tenor of this review is unsurprising given Feather’s close association with the magazine.

⁶⁸“Album Reviews,” *Billboard*, February 28, 1948, 36.

⁶⁹Display ad, *California Eagle*, November 11, 18, and 25, December 2, 9, 16, 23, and 30, 1948 (usually between pp. 16 and 18). Capitals in original.

In late 1950, although still at the Waikiki, Smock brought her band to the Sphinx Club for an after-hours gig and caught the ear of Klaus Landsberg, an executive at Los Angeles television station KTLA.⁷⁰ He invited her to audition and a few months later the *Los Angeles Sentinel* reported that “PHIL MOORE is rehearsing an eight-piece all-girl combo for a shot at television, which may feature GINGER SMOCK on violin.”⁷¹ The show was *The Chicks and the Fiddle*, which premiered on June 4, 1951—Smock’s birthday—with Smock as bandleader, Clora Bryant on trumpet, Willie Lee Terrell on guitar, Jackie Glenn on piano, Anna Glasco on bass, Mattie Watson on drums, and Vivian Dandridge on vocals and as MC.⁷² They were “the first band of sepia swingers to break into west coast TV,” with “some really bright and jumping musical routines,” according to *DownBeat*, and one of the first African American bands nationwide to host a regular television show.⁷³ In the end, *The Chicks and the Fiddle* ran for just over a month, due to a lack of commercial sponsorship and in spite of a campaign by the *Los Angeles Sentinel* to “bombar[d]” the station with “letters and phone calls... [to let] sponsors know just how much we appreciate the talent presented.”⁷⁴ Smock had broken into television, however, and would continue working in the new medium through the remainder of the decade.

“Just Another Problem We Have to Face”: Navigating Bias in the Jazz Press

In July 1951, shortly after her television debut, Ginger Smock was profiled in *DownBeat* by staff reporter Charles Emge, writing under the pseudonym Hal Holly.⁷⁵ This profile is ostensibly a column for Emge’s “Hollywood Beat” series but also functions as a contribution to the magazine’s “Girls in Jazz” series, launched by critic and producer Leonard Feather shortly after his production of the album by the same name. I have located eight “Girls in Jazz” articles from 1951 and 1952, six by Feather and two by Emge, including the latter’s profile of Smock. In this section, I interrogate racialized constructions of gender in the “Girls in Jazz” series and argue that both Feather and Emge shaped their writings according to a narrative of perpetual discovery. According to this narrative, women musicians must wait for an external agent—such as a producer, critic, or record label representative—to offer them a “break” in order to achieve professional success. When such breaks do arrive, however, they are never sufficient to lift these women out of obscurity.

Feather’s first five “Girls in Jazz” subjects are white women. He typically frames them as brilliant—and shapely—musicians facing a bleak future and, by extension, positions himself as their champion:

A good-looking redhead who sings, and can play the coolest trumpet this side of Miles Davis—it sounds like the stuff of which hip dreams are made. But it hasn’t done Norma Carson much good.⁷⁶

Mary Osbourne, girl singer and girl guitarist extraordinary ... still has youth and beauty and talent, but it is hard to say how long these qualities will endure before she can be considered to have missed the gravy train forever.⁷⁷

⁷⁰“Fiddlin’ Around,” 36. Smock mis-recalls the circumstances of this meeting in her interview with Cox.

⁷¹Ella Tate and Florence Cadrez, “Mostly ‘bout Musicians” [column], *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 19, 1951, B5. Capitals in original.

⁷²Barnett, “Ginger Smock, Issued and Unissued,” 4; Cox, *Central Avenue*, 313. My designation of Smock as bandleader is based on the following: The *Los Angeles Sentinel* writes that the show “features” Smock (untitled photo captioned “Musical Director,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 21, 1951, B4); *DownBeat* describes Smock as “heading the... band” (“Ginger Spikes TV For Jumping Kick,” *DownBeat*, July 27, 1951, 4; this source misnames the show as *Cats and a Fiddle*); *Jet* states that Smock “led” the “all-girl sextette” (“Hot’ Violinist is TV Hit,” 63). It seems that Clora Bryant performed on television with a different all-woman band, The Hollywood Sepia Tones, with many of the same members, at approximately the same time (Bryant et al., *Central Avenue Sounds*, 361–62).

⁷³“Ginger Spikes TV.”

⁷⁴Ella Tate and Florence Cadrez, “Mostly ‘bout Musicians” [column]. *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 5, 1951, A11.

⁷⁵Holly, “Addition To ‘Girls In Jazz.” For more on Emge, see Jack Tracy, “The First Chorus,” *DownBeat*, May 16, 1957, 5. This is a rare appearance for Smock in the mainstream press, though note that syndicated columnist Dorothy Kilgallen calls her “the new jazz violin sensation” in 1955 (Dorothy Kilgallen, “Voice of Broadway,” *Schenectady Gazette*, September 28, 1955).

⁷⁶Leonard Feather, “This Chick Plays Like Navarro,” *DownBeat*, April 6, 1951, 3.

⁷⁷[Leonard Feather], “Mary Osbourne: A TV Natural,” *DownBeat*, May 18, 1951, 4.

Feather's article on pianist Beryl Booker—to the best of my knowledge, his only profile of a Black musician for "Girls in Jazz"—describes her as "the greatest girl pianist since Mary Lou Williams" and "the female Erroll Garner" but "plagued" by a series of "bad breaks": "She was to play the Paris Jazz Festival in 1949 but had to beg off when pneumonia trapped her. She started a new solo career in New York recently but left suddenly...when pleurisy set in." Although he notes that she has performed with Slam Stewart's trio and the Austin Powell quintet, toured with Dinah Washington, and recorded numerous sides, Feather describes Booker as still in need of a "real break." He hopes that she might soon see "the first glimpses" of one due to interest from producer Bod Shad and agent Billy Shaw.⁷⁸

The "Girls in Jazz" profiles take a formulaic approach, typically quoting the featured artist on the challenges of being a woman in jazz, detailing her childhood and musical influences, briefly surveying her professional career while emphasizing that she has yet to reach her potential, and, where relevant, highlighting her tracks on the *Girls in Jazz* album.⁷⁹ Charles Emge joined Feather for the series in July 1951 with his profile of Smock, with a headline ("Addition To 'Girls In Jazz' Found On Coast By Holly") that makes no mention of her but rather speaks to a friendly competition between the two men. Emge opens by quoting Smock on the difficulty of "get[ting] anywhere in the musical profession" given that "[a] lot of people think there's something...unladylike about a girl jazz musician... Just another problem we have to face." He dubs her "the No. 1 girl jazz violinist in the business" but documents no professional accomplishments other than her *Girls in Jazz* sides and a vague reference to her television appearances. The profile ends with a paraphrase of Smock that attributes women musicians' lack of success to a desire for domesticity: "Ginger, despite all the handicaps she's encountered, still thinks the main reason girl musicians rarely make the top brackets is that they find it much easier to marry, settle down and raise families." Emge's narrative style leaps from discovery to discovery: First by Feather, who "pass [es] on" a "tip" to Emge, then Emge's own "belated 'discovery' of Ginger via her guest appearances on local TV shows," and finally a suggestion that Smock might "get her long-deserved and long-delayed 'break' in the new medium" of television. Although the accompanying photo is of Smock, the caption is about Feather and Emge, describing them as intrepid explorers of "every gal musician in sight."⁸⁰ This is the crux of the narrative of perpetual discovery: It divests power from the objects of such "discoveries" and instead grants agency to the (male) "discoverers." Effaced are the day-to-day working lives of these women.

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has argued for race as a "metalanguage" with a "powerful, all-encompassing effect on the construction and representation of other social and power relations, namely, gender, class, and sexuality."⁸¹ In the early 1950s, *DownBeat* had a complicated relationship to race. On the one hand, the magazine decried instances of racial discrimination, from the Jim Crow South to Los Angeles' segregated musicians' unions.⁸² On the other, it was adamant that such inequities did not exist in jazz—except against white musicians, which it dubbed "Crow Jim."⁸³ Thus, in May 1951, *DownBeat* devoted over a full page to an interview with Roy Eldridge in which the trumpeter describes being denied hotel rooms and harassed in venues while on tour with Gene Krupa and Artie Shaw in the 1940s. Nevertheless the headline singles out Eldridge's statement that, after a year of performing in Europe, he wants "never in my life [to] work with a white [American] band again!" In subsequent issues, it is to this assertion that

⁷⁸Leonard Feather, "Beryl Best Since Mary Lou?" *DownBeat*, April 4, 1952, 8.

⁷⁹Similarly, Sherrie Tucker notes that publicity materials for the "The Hour of Charm," an all-white women's ensemble, downplayed or omitted the musicians' professional accomplishments, instead framing them as "intrinsically feminine, domestic, and amateur." Tucker's argument is grounded in contemporary conceptions of white womanhood as virginal, innocent, and socially elite (Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 82–83).

⁸⁰Holly, "Addition To 'Girls In Jazz.'"

⁸¹Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 17, no. 2 (1992): 252, doi:10.1086/494730.

⁸²See Charles Emge, "Move Grows To Scrap L.A.'s Jim Crow Union," *DownBeat*, June 15, 1951, 1.

⁸³See "Crow Jim As Bad As Jim Crow" (unsigned editorial), *DownBeat*, March 9, 1951, 10.

DownBeat returns, accusing Eldridge of reverse racism.⁸⁴ The “Girls in Jazz” series likewise expressed concern that white women might be victims of “Crow Jim”—Feather writes that Marian McPartland has “three hopeless strikes against her” in the eyes of French jazz fans because she is “English, white, and a girl”⁸⁵—but avoided any mention of race for Black women. In short, *DownBeat* allowed space for collective grievance within jazz for white male musicians, its primary readership, and occasionally extended that collectivity to white women, but not to Black men or women.

White women musicians profiled in *DownBeat* in the early 1950s fell somewhere between pin-up girl, virginal innocent, and devoted wife.⁸⁶ Leonard Feather consistently mentions his white subjects’ physical attractiveness and marital status: Pianist Barbara Carroll is a “young brunette” hoping to marry (to Feather’s dismay); Marian McPartland is a “tall, laughing chick with [a] happy disposition” and “half of... a ‘Dixieland vs. bop’ connubial team”; and bassist Bonnie Wetzel—even if her fingers are “covered with rough, ugly calluses... [and] big, bleeding blisters”—is “lovely to behold,” but a widow (her husband, trumpet player Ray Wetzel, having died young in a tragic car accident).⁸⁷ Charles Emge labels white harpist Corky Hale “as cute as her name” and a natural for “cheesecake photos,” and asks if she is dating (she is not). He peppers her with leading questions and reports her non-sequitur responses with glee: When he asks for her “favorite girl musician,” for instance, she replies with accolades for the Charlie Ventura sextet and the Woody Herman band.⁸⁸ Emge used this aggressive interview style in other articles on white woman instrumentalists, too. The previous year, he had bragged about his attempts to “trap” bandleader Ada Leonard into a “scrap” with fellow bandleader Ina Ray Hutton by asking questions such as, “What about those gowns Ina wears? They’re so tight, everyone is waiting—and hoping—for an accident.”⁸⁹ A generous reading suggests that Emge was willing to offer white women instrumentalists his grudging respect provided they demonstrate that they could hold their own against prurient remarks by white male colleagues.

Meanwhile, the two “Girls in Jazz” profiles of Black women—Ginger Smock and Beryl Booker—absent their bodies entirely. Although Emge “discovers” Smock via the visual medium of television, he makes no mention of her appearance or stagecraft, and his trademark sexual innuendo is lacking. Feather likewise includes no physical descriptors for Booker, instead characterizing her as poor and family oriented: She grew up in a large family that could not afford music lessons, earned her musicians’ union dues by waitressing at \$5 per hour, supported her young daughter from a short-lived early marriage by playing Philadelphia bars, and later stopped gigging to care for her terminally ill mother.⁹⁰ Both men also studiously avoid any mention of race. At times, this borders on the absurd, as when Emge writes that Smock “thought she was headed for the [classical] concert stage... [b]ut, like thousands of other good violinists, she didn’t make [it],” with no mention of the fact that the color of her skin would have precluded her from such a career in the early 1940s. This is no politics of respectability, as per Higginbotham, in which the “reform of individual behavior and attitudes” is also “a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race

⁸⁴Leonard Feather, “No More White Bands For Me, Says Little Jazz,” *DownBeat*, May 18, 1951, 1, 13; “Can’t Solve Problems By Running, Lena Tells Roy,” *DownBeat*, June 15, 1951, 1; Leonard Feather, “Little Jazz Goes Color Blind,” *DownBeat*, July 13, 1951, 12.

⁸⁵Leonard Feather, “East Saw West; Twain Met,” *DownBeat*, July 13, 1951, 13.

⁸⁶Elworth has noted a “dissonance” between the covers and the interiors of *DownBeat* in the late 1940s and early 1950s, where the former were dominated by “glamorous closeups of white women” while the latter were addressed to “musicians, agents, publicists, and fans” (Steven B. Elworth, “Jazz in Crisis, 1948–1958: Ideology and Representation,” in *Jazz among the Discourses*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 63, 62). *DownBeat* interiors also contained many “cheesecake” photos in these years, however; see, for instance, photos captioned “No Bop, Sloate’s Still Progressive” and “Serious Student,” *DownBeat*, May 18, 1951, 3.

⁸⁷Leonard Feather, “Barbara Carroll Bopped Early,” *DownBeat*, October 19, 1951, 2; Feather, “East Saw West”; Leonard Feather, “A Bonnie Bassist, Mrs. Wetzel,” *DownBeat*, January 25, 1952, 2.

⁸⁸Hal Holly [Charles Emge], “Corky, The All-Girl Harpist, Won’t Talk On Gal Bands,” *DownBeat*, June 4, 1952, 14.

⁸⁹Hal Holly [Charles Emge], “Reporter Fails To Trap Ada Into Scrap With Ina,” *DownBeat*, April 6, 1951, 8.

⁹⁰Feather, “Beryl Best Since Mary Lou?”

relations,” for in disallowing race Feather and Emge disallow the possibility of an African American collectivity.⁹¹ Rather, they implicitly connect Black female sexuality, and even corporality, to presumptions of impropriety by granting space to these women only after evacuating any mention of their bodies.

Although credit is due to Feather and Emge for tackling gender bias in the industry, the “Girls in Jazz” profiles suggest a certain voyeurism that watches both Black and white women fail while fetishizing female obscurity. The series uses a variety of mechanisms to circumscribe the place of both white and Black women instrumentalists in *DownBeat* and, by extension, in professional jazz: Depicting them as passive actors waiting for a break that never comes; emphasizing that technical prowess on an instrument is no guarantee of success for a woman; reassuring a readership of primarily white male musicians that white women could succeed in jazz only so long as they remained physically attractive; and, in the case of Black women, absenting their race and their bodies in order to portray them as morally sound. Taken together, these techniques delineate the different spaces allocated to white and Black women instrumentalists in jazz, while maintaining a near-unbreachable chasm between the categories of “girl” and “professional jazz musician.” What complicates the picture in Smock’s case is the fact that, as per her later letters and interviews, she also seems to have understood her career in these terms.

“Wherever You Were, People Flocked To”: The 1950s and 1960s

The 1950s were, in many respects, the height of Smock’s career, even as Central Avenue declined as a musical hotspot and cultural hub.⁹² She was a recognized television personality, appearing on multiple shows. In early 1952, after she signed a contract as a regular cast member for *Dixie Showboat*, where she was “The Swinging Lady of the Violin” and “The Lovely Lady of the Violin,” *Jet* magazine noted that she was the “only Negro musician regularly appearing on television on the West Coast.”⁹³ Her gigging continued apace, including slots at Las Vegas’ Jungle Club in late 1951 (with the J. C. Heard Trio) and Club Oasis in Los Angeles in early 1952, where she played “many of her own compositions in addition to popular request numbers.”⁹⁴ In 1953, she toured the West Coast with the Jackson Brothers Orchestra, a jump blues band, performing at the Say When in San Francisco, the Tropics in Portland—where they were billed as a “hard-driving ‘go-go’ sextette”—and the Ernie Piluso Club in Eugene, Oregon. (Smock would marry Jackson Brothers bassist Harold Jackson, also known as Hal or Hack, in June 1954.)⁹⁵ While in San Francisco, Smock was approached by a representative from RCA Victor, who, as she later wrote to Reeves:

liked my playing so well, he rented a studio, made the tape, took it back to Hollywood to RCA. He played it for the rest of the execs there, they listened, said it was superb (especially my rendition of “Dark Eyes”[)]) and asked him who was the artist.

⁹¹Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 187. See also Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 71–72.

⁹²See Eastman, “Pitching up a Boogie,” and Mina Yang, “A Thin Blue Line Down Central Avenue: The LAPD and the Demise of a Musical Hub,” *Black Music Research Journal* 22, no. 2 (2002): 217–39. In 1953, the Black Musicians’ Union (AFM Local 767) merged with white Local 47, increasing African American musicians’ access to studio work but depriving the community of an important site of networking and social support (Bryant et al., *Central Avenue Sounds*, 403–5; Cox, *Central Avenue*, 85–88).

⁹³Barnett, “Ginger Smock, Issued and Unissued,” 4; “West Coast Television Star.” Smock is listed as a “guest” on *Dixie Showboat* in March 1952 but a “member of the crew” by June (“New Series to Start Today on Channel 8,” *San Diego Union*, March 17, 1952, A16; “‘Soap Opera’ Plans First Shift to TV,” *San Diego Union*, June 30, 1952, A14).

⁹⁴Barnett, “Ginger Smock, Issued and Unissued,” 4; “Club Oasis in New Policy,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 23, 1953, B3. The Jackson Brothers Orchestra were among the headliners at Club Oasis.

⁹⁵Florence Cadrez, “Mostly ‘Bout Musicians” [column], *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 17, 1953, B3; Display ad, *The Oregonian*, August 17, 1953, 13; “New York Beat,” *Jet*, February 4, 1954, 64.

Smock told this story on at least two occasions. In her letter to Reeves, the representative describes her to the executives as “a girl from L.A.” Their response: “They told him I had no-name and they could get Joe Venuti instead.”⁹⁶ When Smock retold this story to Sherrie Tucker in 1993, however, she added an additional detail: When the executives say, “Who on earth is playing the violin?” the representative says, “A *colored* girl up there in San Francisco,” and they respond, “Aw, forget it. We’ve got Joe Venuti.”⁹⁷ Putting aside the question of how Smock learned of this in-house exchange at RCA Victor, I note that this anecdote follows the same trajectory as that of her failed Twentieth Century Fox audition at age twelve: An industry insider offers her a potential break only to withdraw it due to her physical presentation—hair, skin tone, gender. As she wrote to Reeves, “Needless to say that ‘took the wind out of my sails’ in more ways than one.”⁹⁸ Smock would later link her lack of a record deal to her move to Las Vegas, saying, “[I] never did have anything out that was really worthwhile because I never got a chance to. I never had anyone to record me... I got discouraged and I went on into orchestral work.”⁹⁹

What might have been audible in a 1953 recording of Smock’s composition “Strange Blues” with Cecil “Count” Carter and his Orchestra (Figure 1; notated in 12/8 to indicate predominant triplet feel).¹⁰⁰ Her “flaming violin,” as hailed by the *Atlanta Daily World*, leads the band through the head and takes the first solo.¹⁰¹ Smock’s playing is rhythmically complex, technically demanding, and alternately strident and delicate, with long melodic lines spun out across the changes. She concludes her otherwise restrained statement of the head with a descending quintuplet and an unexpected mid-bar slide to a B (bars 14–15). A bluesy run leads back to the tonic chord, which Smock underscores with raucous double-stopped sixths intensifying into a Db-C ostinato (bars 16–21). Breaking up the prevailing eighth-note feel, Smock spins out a rapid run of descending sixteenth-note triplets before tracing an ascending G pentatonic scale and then a wild upward slide from a B flat (bars 22–24). The solo seems to draw to a close as the piano takes over, yet Smock’s accompanying double-stops grow in volume and intensity and leap to a high A (bars 29–32). With her technical prowess clearly on display, Smock descends chromatically on rapid broken thirds, leaps again to reach the high Db, and counters that with a low G pizzicato (bar 33). Her solo closes by counterposing duplets and quadruplets against the prevailing triplet feel while mapping out ever-more-complex melodic descents, first from G, then from B, and finally from D (bars 33–39). We hear echoes of Stuff Smith’s wide vibrato, conspicuous slides, horn-like phrase structures, and thoroughly bluesy harmonic language, as well as the sweetness of tone and technical virtuosity of the likes of Stephane Grappelli and Eddie South, but Smock’s assertive, uncompromising sound, bold melodic gestures, and easy virtuosity are unmistakable. “Strange Blues” foregrounds Smock’s artistry as a composer and soloist and highlights the loss of having so few recordings of her from the 1950s, a time when she was, in many ways, at the peak of her game as a jazz and blues player.

As a performer, Smock evinced something akin to the early twentieth century “blues culture” of urban, working-class Black women that has been traced by Angela Davis: Sexually expressive, independent, neither jezebel nor prudishly respectable, but rather, in the words of Patricia Hill Collins, “much closer to erotic sensibilities about Black female expressiveness, sensuality, and sexuality.”¹⁰² In “Ginger Boogie,” recorded with the Jackson Brothers in 1953, Smock openly flirts with a male bandmate who sings, “I love to do the boogie with Ginger, ’cause Ginger puts it on my mind... Ginger, Ginger, Ginger, wanna park right in your stall.” After a few half-hearted objections to his request to “make

⁹⁶Ginger Smock to Ivy and John Reeves, undated, postmarked May 3, 1974, NMAAHC-Reeves. Underlining in original.

⁹⁷Tucker interview. Italics added.

⁹⁸Smock to Reeves, undated, postmarked May 3, 1974, NMAAHC-Reeves.

⁹⁹“Ginger’s phone call #1,” cassette tape, NMAAHC-Reeves.

¹⁰⁰Barnett, “Ginger Smock, Issued and Unissued,” 4. This recording was reissued on the *Strange Blues* CD. Smock recorded three additional sides with Cecil “Count” Carter and his orchestra: Cecil “Count” Carter and his orchestra, “What’s Wrong with Me?/Strange Blues,” with Ginger Smock, Federal 12130, 1953, 78 rpm (“Strange Blues” is the B side); and Cecil “Count” Carter and his orchestra, “I Know, I Know/Gingerbread,” with Ginger Smock, Federal 12135, 1953, 78 rpm. “Strange Blues” may be heard online at Ginger Smock, “Ginger Smock plays ‘Strange Blues,’” Laura Risk, November 5, 2020, YouTube video, 2:48, <https://youtu.be/orWUJ6lffjk>.

¹⁰¹“Rating the Records,” *Atlanta Daily World*, June 2, 1953, 4.

¹⁰²Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 55; Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 72.

♩. = 94

INTRO

Violin

3

5 HEAD

8

11

14 5:6

17 VIOLIN SOLO

20

22

Figure 1. Ginger Smock solo on her composition “Strange Blues” (1953), as recorded on Federal 12130-B (78 rpm) with Cecil “Count” Carter and his Orchestra. Transcription by Laura Risk and Evan Price.

it,” she cheerfully acquiesces and then, on his prompt to “rock me with all your might,” launches into a frenzied solo loaded with virtuosic pyrotechnics.¹⁰³ This did not preclude her from being a model of civic engagement on other stages, however, and she was a regular performer in church and for benefit events. In 1968, the People’s Independent Church awarded Smock a certificate in recognition of 30-plus years of musical service to the community.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³Jackson Brothers Orchestra, “Ginger Boogie,” unreleased demo, RCA Victor, 1953. Re-issued on Smock, *Strange Blues*.

¹⁰⁴Cox, *Central Avenue*, 310. As an example, between February and June 1952 alone, Smock provided entertainment at the following events: Fashion shows for the People’s Independent Church and the Greater Faith Baptist Church; a reception for the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History; a tribute evening to mothers organized by Symphony Chapter No.

24 *8va*
 27
 29 *pp* *cresc. poco a poco*
 31 *ff*
 33 *p* *f* *2* *8va*
 34
 36
 38

Figure 1. Continued.

43, a woman's club; an All Nations Fashion Revue and Blue Book Tea honoring a local councilman and an assemblyman; and the annual benefit show for St. Augustine Westview Hospital ("Vi's Column," *California Eagle*, February 7, 1952, 2; "Stellar Talent Listed for Pre-Easter Show," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 28, 1952, C3; "Reception, Program, Citation Awarding End History Week," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 21, 1952, A4; "Mothers Honored by Symphony Chapter," *California Eagle*, June 12, 1952,

Smock's first and only stint on the national stage came in 1953–1955 with R&B ensemble Steve Gibson and the Red Caps, featuring singer Damita Jo. They toured the country, playing large venues such as Emerson's in Philadelphia (December 1953 and January 1954), Ciro's and Copa City in Miami (circa February/March 1954 and January/February 1955, respectively), and El Rancho in Las Vegas (circa September 1954).¹⁰⁵ The *Philadelphia Tribune* described a winning combination of stagecraft, virtuosity, and sex appeal:

That fine framed, personality girl with the raven tresses...and her golden violin held this south-side spot's customers enthralled for four weeks. Ginger is all of this and more with her terrific driving style of syncopated bow-bending. She is a show all by herself... Stuffy [sic] Smith and his hawkish fiddling and Yehudi Menuhin wrapped into one mold. Despite the difficulty of playing in airish and large-sized clubs her amplified violin turns 'em on...Ginger is the bombshell of the fiddle in more ways than one, if you let the men folks from hereabouts talk!¹⁰⁶

Smock left the Red Caps for several months in mid-1954 over disagreements regarding "her length of tenure with the organization," but was back with the band later that year for gigs in Las Vegas and Miami.¹⁰⁷ She split with the Red Caps for good in early 1955.

Smock returned to Los Angeles after 2 years on the road and her gigging continued apace: Featured in a "Sexsational! Glamorous! Floor Show" at Club Californian (top billing went to "Jeni, The Cherokee Charmer"); performing at the Club Mar-lyn with Harold Jackson and his Tornados; and her only known film appearance, a bit part as an Egyptian court musician in Cecil B. DeMille's "The Ten Commandments."¹⁰⁸ At the Rubaiyat Lounge of the Watkins Hotel in 1956 and 1957 she was "The Bronze Gypsy and her Violin," attracting "large crowds nightly," and her fans at the integrated venue included Hollywood actors Mantan Moreland, Pauline Myers, and Luukialuana Kalaeloa (Luana) Strode; bandleader Cab Calloway; and boxer Kid Gavilan.¹⁰⁹ In 1957, she was "Queen of the Violin" with The All-Star Four (Travis Warren, Hammond organ, Tommy Askew, piano, Sharkey Hall, drums) for a weekly television show on KCOP-TV Channel 13. Originally scheduled for just 13 weeks, some version of this show seems to have continued through 1960, eventually acquiring the title *Rhythm Review*.¹¹⁰ Smock also guested on the Larry Finley Show, on Spade

11; "Review, Blue Book Tea Acclaimed High Class," *California Eagle*, June 12, 1952, 10; "On Benefit Show" [photo and caption] and "Big Easter Parade and Show" [advertisement], *California Eagle*, April 10, 1952, 10).

¹⁰⁵Florence Cadrez, "Mostly 'Bout Musicians" [column], *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 25, March 18, and February 3, 1955, all A11; Francis Cauthorn, "The Night Shift," *Philadelphia Tribune*, January 12, 1954, 13; Al Dunmore, "Jo Thompson, Treniers, Red Caps Scorch Ciro's," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 27, 1954, 18; "Chazz" Crawford, "'Chazz' Crawford's 'Sound Track,'" *California Eagle*, September 2, 1954, 9. The *Los Angeles Sentinel* places Smock and the Red Caps in Philadelphia in April 1954, Las Vegas in May 1954, and Wildwood, New Jersey in August 1954 but does not list venues (Hazel L. Lammare, "Applause! in the Theatre" [column], *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 8, 1954, A10; Florence Cadrez, "Mostly 'Bout Musicians" [column], *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 20, 1954, A11 and August 19, 1954, A11). Barnett lists additional venues for Smock and the Red Caps (dates unknown): Scioha's, Erie Soc. Club, and Latin Casino in Philadelphia; Latin Casino, Washington, D.C.; The Lake Club, Springfield, IL (Barnett, "Ginger Smock, Issued and Unissued," 5). The *Chicago Defender* places Smock at Ben Maksis' Town and Country in Brooklyn in 1954 but does not specify if this was with the Red Caps (Marion B. Campfield, "With the Women...Day by Day: Another Letter from NYC" [column], text by Lucille Cromer, *Chicago Defender*, September 19, 1956, 12).

¹⁰⁶Cauthorn, "The Night Shift."

¹⁰⁷"Sh-uh-uh—Confidential," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 24, 1954, 17.

¹⁰⁸Display ad, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 26, 1955, A11; Display ad, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 1 and 8, 1955, both A10; Florence Cadrez, "Mostly 'Bout Musicians" [column], *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 23, 1955, A11. Other "gal-musicians" playing Egyptian court musicians in this film include Melba Liston, Peggy Brashear, Guelda Williams, Marcene "Dimples" Harris, and Beverly Harris.

¹⁰⁹Untitled photo captioned "Ginger Smock and her swinging violin," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 6, 1956, A11; "Bronze Gypsy and Her Violin," *Nite Owl Pocket Guide*, April 12, 1956, NMAAHC-Reeves; Campfield, "Another Letter from NYC"; "Ginger' Smock Honored at Rubaiyat," *California Eagle*, February 21, 1957, 10; Gertrude Gibson, "Candid Comments," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, October 31, 1957, A11. Smock opened at the Rubaiyat with organist Frances Carter but by that summer had changed duo partners to Travis Warren, also on organ (display ad, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 28, A14).

¹¹⁰Untitled photo captioned "Bank Motors Television Show Stars," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 15, 1957, B10; Hazel L. Lammare, "Applause! in the Theatre" [column], *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 12, 1957, B10; untitled photo captioned "Newest attraction on Los Angeles' KCOP," *Ebony*, December, 1957, NMAAHC-Reeves; Cox, *Central Avenue*, 313.

Cooley's popular *The Hoffman Hayride* (KTLA-TV), and on "Club Checkerboard" (KTLA).¹¹¹ Increasingly, she gigged in Las Vegas as well, playing both The Sands and the Moulin Rouge, Las Vegas' first integrated casino, with Charlie Pryme in 1955.¹¹² In 1958, she was with Jack McVea's band at Town Tavern, the only Black-owned and operated club in Las Vegas.¹¹³

In 1959, Smock launched a new band, the Aristocats—soon renamed "The Shipmates and Ginger"—with Art Maryland (guitar), Al Mitchell (guitar, trumpet), and LeRoy Morrison (bass). For several years in the early 1960s they wintered in Las Vegas, playing venues such as the Flamingo, the Frontier, and the El Cortez, and summered in Los Angeles, where they were the house band on the S.S. *Catalina*, a cruise ship that ran daily between San Pedro and Catalina Island. Smock was the first woman musical director for the S.S. *Catalina* and the Shipmates were the ship's first African American band in three decades.¹¹⁴ Several years ago, I received an email from someone who had heard the band on an eighth-grade field trip, with the following description: "The music was different than anything I had ever heard—the rhythmic acuity of Ms. Smock and the whole group was astounding! Mainly jazz, with some blues, Latin, and pop songs."¹¹⁵ As noted above, the Shipmates recorded one LP of "original island music"; this was Smock's only full-length album to be released in her lifetime.¹¹⁶ (Smock would meet her third husband, Bob Shipp, at a Shipmates engagement in Salinas, CA.)¹¹⁷

Smock continued playing club dates, performing as a "Fabulous Swinging Gypsy of the Jazz Violin...Direct from Rumania" [sic] at Archie Moore's Restaurant in 1964, and bringing her "swinging Quartette" to the Tikki in 1965 and her "swingsational jazz violin" to the Parisian Room in 1970.¹¹⁸ "Wherever [she was], people flocked to," recalled Bette Yarborough Cox. "If it was a restaurant, they flocked to eat there, and if it was a supper club or whatever, they were there, following Ginger."¹¹⁹ Her repertoire remained a mix of standards, popular songs, and blues, though she had a special interest in "Gypsy"-themed repertoire, such as "Play Gypsy Play," "Play Gypsies, Dance Gypsies," and her signature, "Dark Eyes" ("Ochi chyornye").¹²⁰ These are not actual melodies from one of the European populations commonly called "Gypsy" or "Tzigan," of course, but rather early twentieth-century popular songs following in the tradition of, to use Brian Currid's words, the "Gypsy" as "a centerpiece of the cultural fantasies of Central European art music."¹²¹

¹¹¹Untitled photo captioned "On Larry Finley Show," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 1, 1957, B8; Bryant et al., *Central Avenue Sounds*, 362; "Tuesday TV Program" (television listings), *Los Angeles Times*, November 25, 1958, A6.

¹¹²Florence Cadrez, "Mostly 'Bout Musicians" [column], *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 30 and July 7, 1955, both A11. Also see Kevin Cook, "The Vegas Hotspot That Broke All the Rules," *Smithsonian Magazine*, January 2013, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-vegas-hotspot-that-broke-all-the-rules-165807434/>.

¹¹³"Start the New Year off with a Bang!" [display ad], *Los Angeles Tribune*, December 19, 1958; "'Way Out' New Year's in Vegas Offered," *Los Angeles Tribune*, December 26, 1958.

¹¹⁴Cox, *Central Avenue*, 310–12. Also see "Aristocats Claim a Century"; "Theat: People and Places," *The California Eagle*, January 28, 1960, 9; "Aristocats, Ginger Smock on 'Catalina,'" *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 12, 1960, C6; untitled photo captioned "Change of Professional Name," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 8, 1960, C4.

¹¹⁵Robert Moehle, email to author, January 8, 2017.

¹¹⁶The Shipmates and Ginger, *On the S.S. Catalina*. Sharkey Hall guests on drums and vibraharp.

¹¹⁷Cox, *Central Avenue*, 316.

¹¹⁸Display ad for Archie Moore's Restaurant, *San Diego Union*, June 13, 1964, A26; untitled photo captioned "Ginger Smock and her swinging Quartette," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 1, 1965, B8; Gertrude Gibson, "Sammy Super in 'Klowns,'" *Los Angeles Sentinel*, November 19, 1970, B2A. *DownBeat* describes Smock as "fill[ing] part of the void" at the Parisian Room left by Johnny Creach when he went on tour with Jefferson Airplane but Smock, speaking to John Reeves, disagrees, saying, "I wasn't taking his place, I had worked there in and out" ("Los Angeles," *DownBeat*, January 1971, 40, NMAAHC-Reeves; "Ginger's phone call #1," NMAAHC-Reeves).

¹¹⁹Cox interview.

¹²⁰A 1967 concert recording from Raffles Restaurant, for instance, includes Broadway melody "Play Gypsies, Dance Gypsies"; jazz standards "My Romance," "Shiny Stockings," and "Misty"; popular songs "Zing Went the Strings of my Heart," "Rockabye Your Baby (with a Dixie Melody)," and "Winchester Cathedral"; and an "untitled jump blues" (Barnett, "Ginger Smock, Issued and Unissued," 7).

¹²¹Brian Currid, "'Gypsy Violins' and 'Hot Rhythms,'" in *Western Music and Race*, ed. Julie Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 38. Regarding use of the term "Gypsy," see Laura Corradi, *Gypsy Feminism: Intersectional Politics, Alliances, Gender and Queer Activism* (London: Routledge, 2018), xv–xix.

Performing “Gypsy”-themed melodies allowed Smock to show off both her classical chops and her jazz skills (and adhered to a common trope of the “Gypsy violinist” in both genres). By her own account, however, it also pointed to something deeper. In the early 1980s, she sent John Reeves a cassette dub of some of her earlier recordings, with spoken commentary before and after each track. After “Play Gypsies, Dance Gypsies,” recorded live in 1967, Smock says, “Basically, I presume I was once a Gypsy when I was here before, maybe 500 years ago.” And then she laughs awkwardly.¹²² Smock’s self-identification as a reincarnated “Gypsy” invokes the romantic stereotype of, in Corradi’s words, the “‘happy Gypsy,’ beautiful and seductive, who freely wanders around the world”—and, in Smock’s case, through time.¹²³ Nevertheless imagining herself as a “Gypsy” reborn into the body of a twentieth-century African American woman may have offered Smock a way to make sense of the many liminal spaces that she inhabited. She rarely spoke openly of the interstices of identity at which she found herself, instead expressing herself obliquely through offhand remarks and seemingly casual asides—always softened by her trademark “smiles!”—in interviews and letters. She negotiated identity not verbally but musically; through performance, through her choice of repertoire, and through her compositions, such as “When a Gypsy Really Plays the Blues” (Figure 2).

“I Finally Got Discouraged”: Ginger Smock in Las Vegas

Ginger Smock recentered her career on orchestral work in the 1970s. In Los Angeles, she performed with the George Rhodes Orchestra at the Now Grove from April 1970 to February 1971, backing Sammy Davis Jr., Johnny Mathis, Connie Stevens, and Dionne Warwick.¹²⁴ In Las Vegas, where she and Shipp lived from 1971, she was concertmaster at The Tropicana and then moved to The Flamingo, backing Gladys Knight and the Pips, Jack Jones, Tony Bennett, and others.¹²⁵ She played Caesar’s Palace for a decade, accompanying Diana Ross, Frank Sinatra, Julie Andrews, and her “favorite star,” Sammy Davis Jr.¹²⁶ An intriguing note in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* from 1972 seems to suggest that she had a hand in integrating showroom orchestras: “DON’T know when we have heard such great news as learning that violinist Ginger Smock is now a full member of the Antonio Morrelli Orchestra at the Las Vegas Sands in Vegas ... Of course, this is a first.”¹²⁷ Nevertheless in her correspondence with John Reeves, Smock makes it clear that this work was a regrettable necessity, the disappointing outcome of a jazz career that had never quite taken off as she’d hoped.¹²⁸

Reeves cold-called Smock in 1973 to request copies of her recordings, but their conversation quickly turned to her past accomplishments, her hopes for the future, and her frustration at the limitations placed on her career:

¹²²“Blues for Ginger,” cassette tape, NMAAHC-Reeves.

¹²³Corradi, *Gypsy Feminism*, xxviii.

¹²⁴Gertrude Gipson, “Candid Comments from G. G.,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 23, 1970, B4A; “Johnny Mathis in Starry Opener at the NOW Grove,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 27, 1970, B2A; Bill Lane, “Fred MacMurray Denies Rental Bias; Connie Stevens Clicks; Carmen McRae Opens,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 7, 1971, B3A; Leonard Feather, “Dionne Warwick at Grove,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 2, 1971, NMAAHC-Reeves. Lane describes the George Rhodes Orchestra as “the city’s only really racially integrated supperclub orchestra.”

¹²⁵Ginger Smock to Ivy and John Reeves, undated “Hotel Tropicana” postcard, NMAAHC-Reeves; “Benny & Bailey with Louie Bellson” program, NMAAHC-Reeves; Smock to Reeves, undated, postmarked May 3, 1974, NMAAHC-Reeves; Ginger Smock to Ivy, John, Dean and David Reeves, July 9, 1974, NMAAHC-Reeves.

¹²⁶Ginger Smock to Ivy and John Reeves, February 18, 1976, NMAAHC-Reeves; Ginger Smock to Ivy and John Reeves, August 18, 1976, NMAAHC-Reeves; Bill Lane, “people—places ‘n’ situ wayshuns,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 28, 1977, B2A; Ginger Smock to Ivy and John Reeves, January 17, 1979, NMAAHC-Reeves.

¹²⁷“Gertrude Gipson’s Candid Comments,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 18, 1972, B3A.

¹²⁸John Reeves was born in England, immigrated to Winnipeg in 1956, and moved to Edmonton in 1968. He worked as a plumber, pipefitter, and tile setter (Dean Reeves, personal communication with author, January 27, 2016). For more on Reeves and his correspondence with Smock, see Laura Risk, “‘Trouble Is, We Don’t Make the Rules’: The Las Vegas Years of Jazz and Classical Violinist Ginger Smock,” in *The Possibility Machine: Music and Myth in Las Vegas*, ed. Jake Johnson (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, forthcoming).

"When a Gypsy Really Plays the Blues" - G. Smock

INTRO AD LIB RUBATO

SLOW Blues tempo

THEME

GINGER SMOCK

(Original manuscript) Copyright June 1966

MUSIC PAPERS 703 - w

Figure 2. Ginger Smock, "When a Gypsy Really Plays the Blues" (comp. 1966). Ginger Smock Archives, Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Lydia Samuel Bennett. Digital copy reprinted with permission from the personal collection of Lydia Samuel Bennett.

Ginger Smock: I never got really a chance to play, you know, a real chance... I used to be on television here in Los Angeles. Several shows. A bunch of malarkey... But I finally got discouraged and went on into playing orchestra work because I just didn't quite make the grade as a soloist.
John Reeves: And yet you play terrific jazz.

GS: Well, I don't know about being so terrific, but just nice, you know. I can play. I've had the pleasure of Stuff Smith putting his violin up and giving up. And Eddie South got mad and walked out of the club one night because I stood up and played against him.

When Reeves suggested that she might receive more recognition were she to perform in Europe, Smock replied:

They say they're very responsive [in Europe]. Well, Stuff [Smith] was telling me, when he went to Paris and then he played all in through there. You know, he died over there... He always called me his daughter. And [Joe] Venuti called me his daughter. The two of them called me their daughters. I was quite flattered 'cause each one would say that... I must have been their kid, because I played like both of them, you know. And so, anyway, Stuff came back saying that it's too bad that I never went to Europe because they would have, you know. But I guess somewhere along the line just—I got a little discouraged and just didn't bother ... I didn't seem to have gotten an agent or somebody that was interested enough. You know, you can't do things by yourself.¹²⁹

Remarkable in this exchange is the contrast between Smock's descriptions of besting Stuff Smith and Eddie South in cutting contests, and of Smith and Venuti claiming her as their musical "daughter," and her assertion that she never really had "a chance to play" because she lacked "somebody that was interested enough." Smock worked with agents, promoters, and record labels across her career but none, it seems, offered her the break she felt she deserved. In her telling, she had the raw talent but not the professional spaces in which to develop it. Eventually, she "got tired of so many 'doors' being closed in my face."¹³⁰

John Reeves promised to "try to get the people that matter interested in giving you the chance to prove them stupid in the past" and began writing to labels and promoters.¹³¹ Smock, for her part, recorded several new demos.¹³² Producer Joachim Berendt expressed interest in making an album for MPS Records, which had issued the legendary *Jazz Violin Summit*, but withdrew his offer after label executives stated that they already had "the great violinists" on MPS and did not need Smock as well.¹³³ When Claude Nobs then refused Smock a spot at the Montreux Jazz Festival because she did not have a record deal, Smock's bitter reply to Reeves is all the more cutting for its flurry of exclamation points, underscores, faux-Irish colloquialisms, and emoji-like "smiles": "Rejections, rejections! the story of me life! smiles! Oh, well, when it's the proper time we'll go to the jazz festival with flying colors, eh? Why not? ... Can't win 'em all, just want to win some. smiles!"¹³⁴ Meanwhile, her health was in gradual decline, her hands stiffening with arthritis and her eyesight worsening.¹³⁵ In the end, none of Reeves' efforts panned out. Smock's orchestral work diminished, and the hoped-for recording and European tour did not materialize.

Smock was acutely aware of the late-in-life successes of her fellow jazz violinists. Stuff Smith restarted his career with a 1957 recording produced by Norman Granz (whom Reeves would later approach about an album for Smock).¹³⁶ After his 1967 comeback at Dick Gibson's Jazz Party in

¹²⁹"Ginger's phone call #1," NMAAHC-Reeves.

¹³⁰Smock to Reeves, undated, postmarked May 3, 1974, NMAAHC-Reeves.

¹³¹John Reeves to Ginger Smock, October 20, 1973, NMAAHC-Reeves. For instance, see John Reeves to the Rounder Collective, April 17, 1976 (draft), NMAAHC-Reeves; Bernard Brightman (Stash Records) to John Reeves, July 10, 1978, NMAAHC-Reeves; Johnny Simmen to John Reeves, August 1, 1978, NMAAHC-Reeves.

¹³²Smock cut two demos at Harold Jackson's home studio in Los Angeles in 1980, one to pre-recorded backing tracks and the other with a live rhythm section (Ginger Smock to Ivy and John Reeves, May 28, 1980, NMAAHC-Reeves).

¹³³John Reeves to Ginger Smock and Bob Shipp, December 11, 1975, NMAAHC-Reeves; Joachim E. Berendt to John Reeves, March 29, 1976, NMAAHC-Reeves; Stuff Smith, Stéphane Grappelli, Svend Asmussen, and Jean-Luc Ponty, *Violin-Summit*, SABA Records SB 15 099 ST, 1967, 33⅓ rpm. SABA Records was the predecessor to MPS.

¹³⁴John Reeves to Claude Nobs, October 3, 1978 ("proof copy") and October 4, 1978 ("2nd copy"), NMAAHC-Reeves; Claude Nobs to John Reeves, November 1, 1978 and May 29, 1979, NMAAHC-Reeves; John Reeves to Harold Jackson, June 4, 1980, NMAAHC-Reeves; Ginger Smock to Ivy and John Reeves, June 23, 1979, NMAAHC-Reeves. Underlining in original.

¹³⁵Ginger Smock to Ivy and John Reeves, February 18, 1976 and June 23, 1988, NMAAHC-Reeves.

¹³⁶John Reeves to Norman Granz, November 16, 1976, NMAAHC-Reeves.

Colorado, Joe Venuti recorded dozens of albums and toured extensively. Johnny Creach, who lived and worked in Los Angeles from the mid-1940s, rose to fame as Papa John Creach when he joined Jefferson Airplane in 1970. Each of these musicians was celebrated as an elderly statesman of the instrument in his later years and accessed a higher degree of stardom. This was the trajectory that John Reeves sought for Smock—and that Smock sought for herself. In his press releases, Reeves labeled Smock the “Cinderella of jazz violin,” implicitly calling on record labels, festivals, and producers to act as her Prince Charming.¹³⁷ This, too, is a narrative of discovery, and there is an uneasy tension between John Reeves’ dogged pursuit of the festival gig or recording contract that would finally end the cycle of breaks-turned-rejections that, in Smock’s telling, had defined her career, and the ways in which Reeves’ correspondence with an all-male, all-white set of power brokers reinscribes the purgatory of perpetual discovery.

What public recognition Smock did receive in the last decades of her life would come from another source; the Los Angeles-based BEEM Foundation (The Black Experience as Expressed Through Music), founded by Bette Yarborough Cox to document and celebrate the history of African American musical life in Los Angeles in Central Avenue’s heyday. Invited to Los Angeles for a filmed interview as an “unsung musical heroine,” Smock thanked Cox profusely: “I’m so thrilled and grateful that you asked me. You don’t know, this means an awful lot just to be asked and to be wanted.”¹³⁸ Smock returned to Los Angeles for BEEM Foundation events on several occasions over the following years, including performances with the Buddy Collette Trio and Quintet in 1985 and 1989, respectively (pianist Gerald Wiggins and bassist Red Callender were in both ensembles).¹³⁹ When she jammed with pianist Dorothy Donegan and trumpeter Bob Rodriguez at the BEEM Foundation’s “First Annual Free Jazz Concert” in 1990, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* reported that “the roof appeared to be raised from its rafters.”¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless these were not the breaks she had hoped for and past injustices still rankled. “I still go through some stuff,” Smock told Tucker in 1993, “hoping someday that I’d be invited to a jazz concert or jazz festival, you know. And they would ask me to play. Like the Monterey Jazz Festival. I never was asked to that, yet... People of my age, caliber, there was just too many closed doors. A lot of talent went down the drain.”¹⁴¹ Smock was voted into the Black Hall of Fame at the Black Museum of Southern California in February 1995. Four months later, she passed away at the age of 75.¹⁴²

Conclusion: “Are You a Musician?”

One of the loveliest recordings in the Ginger Smock Archives at the NMAAHC is a 1981 backstage jam session with Sammy Davis Jr.’s rhythm section. “Sammy’s guys, piano, bass & drums, asked me to ‘sit-in’ between shows,” Smock wrote to Reeves. “We did—and surprisingly, it was a ‘blast’... [I am] kind of encouraged, think the ol’ gal has some spark left.”¹⁴³ The backstage sessions continued and, after a few nights, Smock brought her portable tape recorder. Her solos are relaxed and informal. She plays with a light, delicate touch and spins out long, melodic lines with little of her usual bravura. With her habitual showmanship absent, there is space for something else: An introspective musicality, a certain playfulness with the tunes, and even the possibility of mistakes.

At the time of this recording, Smock’s orchestral work in Las Vegas was slowing down. Increasingly, her age was a liability. Three years earlier, she and her husband had pooled their savings to pay for a face lift because, as she wrote to Reeves, “They’ve been laying off the older and older-looking ones like ‘mad’

¹³⁷John Reeves, “Profile—Ginger Smock,” typewritten manuscript dated May 14, 1980, NMAAHC-Reeves.

¹³⁸Cox interview.

¹³⁹“1985 Los Angeles City Cultural Affairs Commission Performing Arts Tribute/Reception,” concert program, NMAAHC-Reeves (enclosed with letter from Ginger Smock to Ivy and John Reeves dated March 6, 1985); “Jazz and Pizzazz on Tap at the Marina,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 7, 1989, C1; “‘BEEM’ Foundation Awards Brunch Tops the Summer with Jazz and Pizazz” [sic], *Los Angeles Sentinel*, October 5, 1989, C1.

¹⁴⁰Frank Milton McCoy, “BEEM Foundation Presents Outstanding Jazz Concert,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 6, 1990, B9.

¹⁴¹Tucker interview.

¹⁴²“Emma Smock-Shipp Violinist, Succumbs,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 29, 1995, p. A3.

¹⁴³Ginger Smock to Ivy and John Reeves, April 26, 1981, NMAAHC-Reeves. Underlining in original.

here. So, pain and all, I don't have much choice."¹⁴⁴ For decades, she had successfully navigated an industry in which she had no choice but to perform both her music and her body when on stage. As she aged, however, fewer and fewer spaces in the industry aligned with the spectacle of her performing body.

As a young woman guesting on *Dixie Showboat*, Smock was granted airtime in part due to her willingness to play at musical ineptitude. When she was granted space in *DownBeat*, it was as a "girl" in need of a break and with her race, sexuality, and even corporeality evacuated. To be legible as a professional musician was, in these instances, to pretend that she was not yet one. Smock's story thus offers a particular set of historiographic challenges. On the one hand, she appeared often enough in African American newspapers that we can document her day-to-day life as a working musician with a high degree of accuracy. On the other, her later correspondence and interviews highlight the missing and retracted opportunities that marked her career: The gigs she didn't get, the albums she didn't record, the tours she wasn't offered. Her later recounting of the high points of her career was tempered by bitterness at what she perceived to be a lifetime of exclusion and the premature truncation of that career;¹⁴⁵ in one telling comment, likely a reference to rising star Regina Carter, Smock writes, "How about this young jazz violinist? Good for her. Glad she's accepted."¹⁴⁶ A recuperative history of Smock must ask—following a question posed by Tucker—not only what she did that has been "omitted from historical memory," and how we might "add it back in," but also what she did not do, and how we might reinscribe those absences back into her narrative while still foregrounding her agency.¹⁴⁷

A narrative of perpetual discovery is, in part, an unrealized promise of historiographical space, where the break functions as a turning point between absence and presence. To position a woman as forever on the verge of unachieved success is another means of justifying her exclusion from history. Through a close reading of the full arc of Ginger Smock's professional life, from the nuances of her gigging and recording to her own retrospective reading of her career as one of lost opportunity, this article speaks not only to the rich detail of her life but also to the potential for that detail to be effaced in the blur of pre-discovery obscurity. It is with the sum total of her career—the music, the spectacle, the rejections, the successes, and the longevity—that we must answer the question posed to Smock on *Dixie Showboat*: "Are you a musician?"

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¹⁴⁴Ginger Smock to Ivy and John Reeves, July 23, 1978, NMAAHC-Reeves.

¹⁴⁵My thanks to the anonymous *JSAM* reviewer who helped to clarify this point.

¹⁴⁶Ginger Smock to Ivy and John Reeves, May 25, 1991, NMAAHC-Reeves. Underlining in original.

¹⁴⁷Tucker, "West Coast Women," 7–8.

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