A Thin Blue Line down Central Avenue: The LAPD and the Demise of a Musical Hub

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A THIN BLUE LINE DOWN CENTRAL AVENUE: THE LAPD AND THE DEMISE OF A MUSICAL HUB

MINA YANG

Before Los Angeles's South Central had become indelibly linked in the public mind with gang wars and riots, its main strip, Central Avenue, boasted glamorous nightclubs and swinging dance halls that rivaled the great African-American music centers back east. Saxophonist Art Pepper paints an idyllic picture of "the Stem" as he remembers it from the 1940s:

> It was a beautiful time. It was a festive time. The women dressed up in frills and feathers and long earrings and hats with things hanging off them, fancy dresses with slits in the skirts, and they wore black silk stockings that were rolled and wedgie shoes. Most of the men wore big, wide-brimmed hats and zoot suits with wide collars, small cuffs, and large knees, and their coats were real long with padded shoulders. They wore flashy ties with diamond stickpins; they wore lots of jewelry; and you could smell powder and perfume everywhere. And as you walked down the street you heard music coming out of everyplace. And everybody was happy. . . .
>
> [T]here were all kinds of places to go, and if you walked in with a horn everyone would shout, "Yeah! Great! Get it out of the case and blow some!" They didn't care if you played better than somebody else. Nobody was trying to cut anybody or take their job, so we'd get together and blow. (Pepper and Pepper 1994, 41–42)

Less than ten years after reaching its dizzying height during the war years, however, the Central Avenue club scene was on its way to extinction, and fifty years later, little remains of its former glory.

What caused the precipitous decline of this vital and vigorous musical

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culture? Clearly, a number of factors—social, economic, and political—propelled Central Avenue on its downward trajectory. The downsized postwar economy threw many out of work, and unemployment hit the African-American community particularly hard, leaving little money for cultural or recreational activities. After the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1948 that housing covenants were illegal, upwardly mobile black families moved out of South Central in droves, seeking more commodious living conditions on the west side of the city. The merger of the black Musicians' Union 767 with the white Musicians' Union 47 opened up opportunities for black musicians to play in other venues throughout the city and diffused the musical talent on Central Avenue. Nightclubs in general suffered as the rapid adoption of television kept their clientele at home.

While acknowledging the deleterious effects of these factors on the clubs, many musicians from the era point to the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) as the real culprit behind the demise of Central Avenue. As singer Ernie Andrews (1993, 71) remembers, the police "harassed the people—tear up their joints and put them in jail, you know, just keep harassing them, harassing them, harassing them, and putting them in jail and whatnots." Trumpeter Art Farmer (1995, 57) concurs: "The police started really becoming a problem. I remember, you would walk down the street, and every time they'd see you they would stop you and search you." Jazz trumpeter Clora Bryant (1994, 252) maintains, "They'd catch you over there, and you'd better not have a ticket out or something, you know, the least little thing and you were going down." In his autobiography, *Raise Up off Me,* pianist Hampton Hawes conjures up a dystopian snapshot of Central Avenue after the invasion of the police: "On any weekend night on Central Avenue [along] the forties [numbered blocks] you could probably see more blinking red lights than on any other thoroughfare in the country. Seen from a distance you'd think it was some kind of far-out holocaust, a fifty-car smashup, Watts '65. But it was only the cops jamming brothers" (Hawes and Asher 1979, 29). Increased police presence on the avenue transformed street life from a festive to a nightmarish scene in only a few short years.

In the 1940s, the LAPD was beginning to fashion itself in a new image. William H. Parker was appointed its chief in 1950, and during his fifteen-year stewardship, the LAPD turned itself around completely, from a department under the thumb of City Hall and corrupted by its associations with mobsters to one of the best-paid, most-emulated police forces in the world. That the time period in which the LAPD's status rose also saw the decline of Central Avenue is hardly coincidental; I would go as far as to posit that the two events had a direct impact on one another. I examine here why the LAPD at this pivotal moment in its history target-

ed Central Avenue, how it used generally accepted perceptions of the South Central music scene to win support for its often unconstitutional actions from the Los Angeles establishment and white populace, and how its "success" in destroying the Central Avenue economy both bolstered its position in the short run and undermined its standing in the long run. The modern LAPD, shaped by the reactionary forces that governed the Los Angeles civic arena, was (and, some would argue, continues to be) instrumental in the suppression of progressive social, political, and cultural movements and in the preservation of the power structure. Its combative and despotic rule over street life in South Central and elsewhere in Los Angeles incurred costs and benefits that went far beyond the fate of a dozen nightclubs.

The LAPD Before and During the Parker Era

The LAPD in the mid-twentieth century looked back on a short but heavily checkered past (see Domanick 1994; Woods 1993). Not infrequently, underpaid police officers gave in to the temptation of lining their pockets with payoffs from vice operators in the Los Angeles underworld of gambling, prostitution, and liquor and narcotics trafficking. To appease both the reform-minded Protestant voting population and the politicians whose elections were financed by mobsters, the police department played a duplicitous double role, selling protection to select vice operators and raising arrest numbers by apprehending their competition. Highly respected criminologist August Vollmer was hired as police chief in 1923 and raised the professional standards of the department considerably, but his position lasted only a year, and his reforms proved to be almost as short lived. James Davis, LAPD chief from 1926 to 1929 and again from 1933 to 1938, left a deeper imprint. He encouraged his men to carry out dragnets—sweeps of entire streets of people, innocent and guilty—and bum blockades—illegal police bulwarks that turned away "vagrants" and migrants at various points along the state border during the Great Depression. His Intelligence Squad spied on, collected dossiers of, and intimidated critics and foes of the department; his Red Squad raided meetings of labor unions, Socialists, the American Civil Liberties Union, and any other groups suspected of subversion. With the mayoral election of Fletcher Bowron and his reformist platform in 1938, the city's vice operations suffered a major blow. From the late 1930s into the 1940s, as Bowron's City Hall deployed the police force in its zealous crusade against the Los Angeles underworld, police brutality and infractions of civil liberties came to dwarf corruption as matters of public concern.

It was in this rather lawless environment that William Parker, a devout

Catholic and an autocratic moralist, mastered the political skills that would help him maneuver his way to a position of power. He joined the force in 1927 and rose through the ranks quickly. While acting as Chief Davis's administrative assistant, he helped rewrite Section 202 of the city charter, which vested and codified the rights of LAPD officers and which, in essence, guaranteed the chief of the department lifetime tenure, free of accountability to City Hall or to the general populace. Upon his return from service in World War II, Parker, upholding an ideology in line with the reactionary ethos of postwar Los Angeles, was within arm's length of the chief's office. In 1949, he assumed a position as the head of the Internal Affairs Division, a new division responsible for investigating complaints of police misconduct and meting out appropriate disciplinary measures. By internalizing this function, the LAPD in effect shielded itself from outside intervention. When at last Parker was offered the job, the position of LAPD chief was perhaps the most powerful, certainly the most autonomous, in the city of Los Angeles, largely through Parker's own efforts and design. In 1950, he seized total control over the department, reorganizing divisions, implementing scientific and technological improvement in police work, recruiting drill instructors from elite military academies to train police cadets and to put into place a military code of conduct, generally raising the standards of police comportment, and remaking his men (and a handful of women) in his own image. Parker's value system permeated every aspect of the LAPD and shaped a police culture that survives to this day.

First and foremost, the new chief envisioned the role of the LAPD to be one of social control. Parker (1957a, 8), who often resorted to barely veiled white supremacist rhetoric, proclaimed that "Los Angeles is the white spot of the great cities of America today" and pledged to take whatever actions were necessary to preserve the status quo. In a 1954 article in which he advocated the use of wiretap surveillance for effective policing, Parker (1957b, 101) wrote, "Policemen consider themselves as a 'containing element'—a thin line of blue which stands between the law-abiding members of society and the criminals who prey upon them." His later statements and policies made it abundantly clear that he saw the white and the nonwhite populations on opposite sides of the thin blue line.

The decade of the 1940s was a turbulent time in the history of race relations in Los Angeles. Drawn by the flush of wartime economy of the Southland, migrants poured into the region. The population as a whole increased more than 30 percent, and the nonwhite population grew by a staggering 116 percent. The young city had experienced dramatic population growth spurts in the past, but the boom of this decade transformed the demographics of the city irrevocably, helping to sprout pockets of

black, brown, and yellow in the erstwhile lily-white field. In 1920, there were approximately 15,000 African Americans in Los Angeles; by 1930, there were 39,000; and following the massive wartime migration, more than 170,000 African Americans lived in Los Angeles, making up 9 percent of the city's population (Collins 1980, 41). The 1940s bore witness to several incidents that brought to the surface the deep-seated anxiety of the Los Angeles establishment in the face of rising numbers of minorities. In 1942, twenty-three innocent Chicanos were thrown in jail for a murder at Sleepy Lagoon. In 1943, white servicemen, abetted by the police, instigated a large-scale attack on Mexican-American and African-American youths, setting off the Zoot Suit riots. At the end of the riots, six hundred Mexicans had been arrested, whereas the servicemen were let off scot-free. During World War II, President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, passed in large measure as a result of powerful Angelenos petitioning the federal government, forcefully expelled more than one hundred thousand Americans of Japanese descent from California. Chief Parker was simply playing up the fears of the greater Southland population when he claimed:

> It's estimated by 1970 that . . . 45% of the metropolitan area of Los Angeles will be Negro. . . . Now how are you going to live with that without law enforcement? This is the lesson that we refuse to recognize, that you can't convert every person into a law abiding citizen. If you want any protection in your home and family in the future, you're going to have to stop this abuse, but you're going to have to get in and support a strong police department. If you don't do that, come 1970 God help you! (Parker 1965, 9)

Rather than acknowledge police complicity in the racial conflicts of the 1940s, the chief maintained that stronger law enforcement was the best deterrent against such occurences. Parker acceded to a position of power within an inherently racist society, and by condoning the aggressive practices already rampant among police officers, he institutionalized and perpetuated racism in the LAPD.

According to Edward Escobar (1999, 105), the LAPD has been linking race and crime for some time and began in 1923 to compile and annually publish statistics on the number of people arrested for specific crimes, broken down into specific races. The "Arrests by Charge and Race" tables published in the LAPD *Annual Reports* between 1945 and 1949 reveal some surprising figures (see Table 1). The African-American population, comprising less than 10 percent of the city's whole, was responsible, according to the LAPD arresting officers, for approximately one-third of the homocides, rapes, and infractions of narcotics laws. Black prostitution and vice made up about 40 percent of the city's total; assault comprised

Table 1. LAPD arrests of blacks in relation to the general population, 1945–1949

	1945				1946				1947				1948				1949			
	M	F	T	%	M	F	T	%	M	F	T	%	M	F	T	%	M	F	T	%
Homicide	52	12	190	34	53	16	241	29	75	18	264	35	41	14	191	29	42	5	184	26
Rape	146	–	390	37	133	–	439	30	169	–	543	31	161	–	514	31	144	–	469	31
Robbery	2,166	70	3,279	68	1,752	72	3,978	46	2,202	1,581	4,926	77	1,759	77	4,431	41	1,282	61	3,613	37
Assault	657	147	1,590	51	805	155	1,908	50	741	224	1,852	52	1,069	300	2,375	58	964	286	2,237	56
Prostitution/ vice	546	825	3,796	36	752	1,090	4,391	42	464	816	3,038	42	372	750	3,001	37	323	664	2,607	39
Narcotics	225	25	721	35	344	48	1,058	37	462	55	1,458	35	463	60	1,516	34	431	56	1,372	35
Liquor	143	55	475	42	116	44	518	31	89	32	567	21	28	15	559	8	21	8	362	8
Drunkenness	6,708	562	71,112	2	8,612	619	92,141	10	9,418	697	97,483	10	9,616	819	101,143	10	10,307	822	88,447	13
Disorderly conduct	62	15	408	19	63	9	462	16	47	17	323	20	45	15	339	18	53	18	382	19
Gambling	6,224	304	9,450	69	5,418	245	9,225	61	5,438	253	9,614	59	5,510	309	9,766	60	4,562	346	7,631	25
Traffic violation	966	10	2,571	38	718	21	2,795	26	960	12	2,987	33	1,856	29	5,147	37	2,653	46	7,074	38
Vagrancy	173	14	675	28	107	11	939	13	138	26	1,282	13	173	27	1,520	13	240	31	1,437	19
Total	22,605	2,438	115,933	22	22,651	2,695	138,627	18	23,908	2,740	14,938	19	25,093	2,868	151,185	18	25,201	2,809	136,911	20

M = black male arrests
F = black female arrests
T = total number of arrests
% = percent of black arrests/total number of arrests
M, F, and T numbers are from "Arrests by Charge and Race"

This data is extracted from LAPD records. Listed categories are extracted and collated from *Annual Reports* of the Los Angeles Police Department published by the department for the years between 1945 and 1949. The total at the bottom of the chart refers to a larger group of categories than are listed here.

more than half. Even though blacks earned significantly less than their white counterparts and cars were an unattainable luxury for most, blacks constituted a third of the traffic violation arrests. The stories involving the police that appeared regularly in *The California Eagle,* a weekly paper serving the African-American community, give some indication of the frequency and the violent nature of the encounters between the LAPD and black Angelenos.[1] In one reported incident at Forty-sixth and Central, at the heart of the Stem, two black men and a black woman were forced out of their car and held at gunpoint. The police officers then beat the threesome and told them that "black folks had no country, that [they] were only loaned the use of this city, but not for long" ("Woman, Two Men Victim" 1947). The high rate of police brutality incidents in black Los Angeles stemmed in large part from the LAPD's practice of proactive policing, which involved apprehending anyone who seemed suspicious, even before any crime was perpetrated. Racial bias often influenced the judgment of the almost exclusively white police on the highly subjective determination of who "appeared" suspicious.

Starting in 1950, the annual reports no longer contained the "Arrest by Charge and Race" tables. However, racial profiling was certainly not on the wane in Chief Parker's police force. Parker (1957b, 162) defended his stance on this issue: "The demand that the police cease to consider race, color, and creed is an unrealistic demand. Identification is a police tool, not a police attitude." The reports from the Parker era instead display tables that break down the number of arrests by police divisions, and these show evidence of heightened police activity in certain areas of the city. Witnesses note a marked increase in the harassment of white clientele patronizing Central Avenue establishments after Parker's accession, and Tables 2 and 3 illustrate the high numbers of arrests in the Newton Street station, white and black, compared to the significantly lower numbers in Hollywood, a white area with a similar nightclub economy. Especially notable are the figures for the number of arrests per one hundred thousand people living in the division. The Newton Street Division

1. The strained relations between the police and the South Central community are evident upon perusal of the headlines from *The California Eagle.* The following are sample headlines from around the time of Parker's appointment as chief in August 1950: "Hit Newton Police for Delayed Answer to Near Fatal Call" (December 1, 1949); "Police Bullets Fell Man" (March 30, 1950); "Committee Report Hits Police Discrimination in Los Angeles" (April 6, 1950); "Bail Bondsman Unconscious 6 Hours after Police Beating" (April 20, 1950); "Indignation on Shooting of Mentally Ill Youth by Police" (May 4, 1950); "Police Intimidation Fails to Halt Anti-Minstrel Pickets" (May 11, 1950); "Patrolmen Brutally Assault War Vet on Public Highway" (June 1, 1950); "Beverly Hills Police Beat Him, Broke Hand, Man Claims" (July 14, 1950); "Negro, Not Man, Policeman Tells Citizen" (August 11, 1950); "Police Kick Youth, Call Him Black S.O.B." (August 18, 1950).

Table 2. LAPD vice arrests, 1950 and 1952

	1950				1952			
	Newton St.	% Total	Hollywood	% Total	Newton St.	% Total	Hollywood	% Total
Prostitution	316	12.8	98	4	282	13.6	94	4.5
Liquor	39	8.8	35	7.9	20	4.8	44	10.5
Sex perversion	49	2.1	406	17	12	1.0	179	15.5
Other sex	3	6.7	5	11.1	1	1.6	26	41.2
Bookmaking	117	11.8	81	8.2	85	18	29	6.2
Other gambling	1,876	44.5	37	.9	2,091	46.8	29	.6
Total	2,400	22.8	662	6.3	2,491	28.7	401	4.6
Number of crimes per 100,000 inhabitants	5,589.61		2,865.75		5,575.8		2,856.3	

Source: Los Angeles Police Department *Annual Reports* for 1950 and 1952, published by the department. Percent total numbers represent total arrests in Los Angeles.

Table 3. LAPD arrests by divisions, 1954–1957

	1954				1955				1956				1957			
	N	/100K	H	/100K	N	/100K	H	/100K	N	/100K	H	/100K	N	/100K	H	/100K
Homicide	14	17.1	5	3.2	18	21.7	4	2.5	16	19.72	5	3.14	15	18.08	6	3.69
Rape	82	100	25	16.2	115	138.5	65	41.3	161	198.47	94	58.97	167	201.31	80	49.20
Robbery	338	412.2	207	134	295	355.3	226	143.7	429	528.85	253	158.71	505	608.76	268	164.81
Assault	1,146	1,397.7	128	82.9	1,026	1,235.7	147	93.5	1,153	1,421.37	159	99.74	1,110	1338.06	170	104.54
Burglary	1,458	1,778.2	1,172	758.9	1,668	2,008.9	1,235	785.2	2,039	2,513.59	1,597	1,001.79	2,290	2,760.50	1,713	1,053.43
Larceny	2,601	3,172.2	3,359	2,174.9	2,343	2,821.9	3,456	2,197.2	2,832	3,419.17	4,135	2,593.86	2,903	3,499.85	4,374	2,689.85
Auto theft	563	686.7	628	406.6	597	719	657	417.7	940	1,158.79	710	445.38	1,036	1,248.85	958	589.14
Total	6,202	3,576.7	5,524	3,576.7	6,062	7,301	5,790	3,681.1	7,866	9,696.87	8,637	5,417.93	8,436	10,169.25	9,893	6,083.84

N = Newton Street Division
H = Hollywood Division
/100K = number of arrests per one hundred thousand people living in the division
Source: Los Angeles Police Department *Annual Reports* for the years 1954 through 1957, published by the department.

ranked either first or second every year in the entire city (second only to Central Division, adjacent to Newton to the north), and the number for the Hollywood Division was about half that of Newton. The number of arrests peaked in 1957—when a resident or visitor in this precinct could expect a one in ten chance of getting arrested—and dropped off thereafter. In one well-publicized case in January 1952, singer Jimmy Witherspoon, headlining a show at the Club Alabam, was picked up on his way home on charges of drunk driving, was beaten, and then was kept at the police station all night. The officers laughed and refused his request for a sobriety test, denying him the opportunity to disprove the charges brought against him ("Jimmy Witherspoon Beaten" 1952). Increasing frequency of false arrests and police harassment prompted action on the part of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), resulting in a grand jury probe. The NAACP "placed the blame for such abuses squarely on Chief William Parker" ("Grand Jury Probe" 1952).

Parker's Officers and Black Musicians

Several musicians hypothesize that it was the racial mixing of crowds at Central Avenue clubs that provoked the intense police activity in the area. For Parker and the city's conservative power elite, racial intermingling was an undesirable trend that necessitated strong defensive measures. They were powerless to fight the Supreme Court ruling of 1948 that struck down segregated housing as illegal, but Central Avenue, a concentrated area within the jurisdiction of the LAPD, could be subject to police control. Ernie Andrews (1993, 71) recalls, "You had a chief of police downtown who was tough, he was tough. He just didn't want all of this love, peace, and happiness going along with all these various people, white, black, blue or indifferent. He didn't want this mockery, so he broke up all of that." Bassist David Bryant (1996, 63) remembers that glamorous Hollywood stars were frequent visitors to the Central Avenue scene, drawing even more attention from the police: "All the stars and all the [white] people would come over to Central Avenue and listen to the music, man. So [the police] didn't like the mixing, so they rousted people around and stuff, and that's how they closed it up."

By holding the thin blue line taut and impermeable between whites and nonwhites, the police positioned themselves to safeguard the virtue of Hollywood icons such as Rita Hayworth, Lana Turner, and Ava Gardner, regular patrons at the clubs, as well as the countless white middle-class women who ventured into the area looking for excitement and

good music. Cultural critic Judith Butler (1993, 18), writing about the LAPD in more recent times, theorizes:

> The fear is that some physical distance will be crossed, and the virgin sanctity of whiteness will be endangered by that proximity. The police are thus structurally placed to protect whiteness against violence, where violence is the imminent action of the black male body. And because with this imaginary schema, the police protect whiteness, their own violence cannot be read as violence; because the black male body . . . is the site and source of danger, a threat, the police effort to subdue this body, even if in advance, is justified regardless of the circumstances.

Art Farmer supports her contention: "The police, as far as they were concerned, the only thing they saw anytime they saw any interracial thing going on was crime, . . . it was a crime leading to prostitution and narcotics." Clora Bryant (1994, 251) recalls that the police were not above abusing the very women they purported to protect: "They would stop the women and pat them down and call them nigger lovers and all that kind of stuff." The police, in this instance, disturbed rather than maintained peace and order and even molested innocent law-abiding citizens. Bryant describes the humiliating pat-downs: "They'd have the men patting the women down up against the wall. The men spread their legs, and they'd be patting them all over." She sums up, "You know, that's what stopped Central Avenue. It was the insults, the heckles, raiding the after-hours places" (103).

The LAPD's tactic of intimidation on the Stem, the cultural heart of African-American Los Angeles, was also part of a larger effort to suppress the voice of a minority population and thus to block any channels of mass protest. Writer Josef Skvorecky (1977, 10), speaking from his own personal experience as a jazz musician in Soviet- and Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia, explains why political demagogues fear and attempt to repress the culture of subjugated peoples:

> Totalitarian ideologists don't like real life (other people's) because it cannot be totally controlled; they loathe art, the product of a yearning for life, because that, too, evades control—if controlled and legislated, it perishes. But before it perishes—or when it finds refuge in some kind of *samizdat* underground—art, willy-nilly, becomes protest. Popular mass art, like jazz, becomes mass protest. That's why the ideological guns and sometimes even the police guns of all dictatorships are aimed at the men with the horns.

The LAPD focused on the Central Avenue club scene in order to discipline the music that grew out of a population that was seen as increasingly unwieldy and threatening.

During the postwar years, the Los Angeles establishment reacted to the perceived danger of African-American music by attempting to minimize its presence within the city. Black bands were signed to play in the city's white clubs only after 1944. Their popularity among mainstream audiences was immediate and provoked a conservative backlash. The comedic antics of Slim Gaillard and Harry "The Hipster" Gibson, who lampooned and translated the more inaccessible bop style for mainstream audiences (and, incidentally, shared the stage at Billy Berg's with Coleman Hawkins' and Dizzy Gillespie's bands), came under the negative scrutiny of the morally righteous and were banned by the radio station KMPC: "Said Program Director Ted Steel: 'Be-bop . . . tends to make degenerates out of young listeners'" (Be-bop Be-bopped" 1946).[2] Between 1948 and 1949, both the Shrine and the Philharmonic Auditoriums proscribed further staging of bebop concerts, citing the obstreperousness of bebop fans. The industry rag *Variety* reported: "Board of directors [of the Shrine] was more than somewhat upset by bop addicts who attended a Dizzy Gillespie bash early in January. Squad of cops had to quiet youngsters of both sexes, who stampeded up on stage and began snake dancing in the aisles" ("Boppers 'Rowdy'" 1949). Despite city council exhortations not to attend a 1949 Paul Robeson concert, seventeen thousand Angelenos showed up to hear the singer in Wrigley Field. Meanwhile, the council chose not to intervene in a meeting of thirty-five race baiters who gathered at the corner of Sixty-sixth and Compton to call for the expulsion of all blacks and Jews from Los Angeles. Observers noted "a parallel between the action of the city council in asking the public not to attend the Robeson concert, and the freedom without council interference with which a meeting based upon the philosophy of the Ku Klux Klan was held on a street corner" ("Hate Flare" 1949).

Rhythm and blues emerged on the West Coast out of the meeting of rural blues, gospel, and jazz. Artists such as T-Bone Walker, Nat King Cole, Ivory Joe Hunter, Charles Brown, Joe Turner, Joe Liggins, Little Esther Philips, and Big Mama Thornton sang alongside jazzmen and itinerant bluesmen at the Club Alabam, Elks Hall, and the Last Word on Central Avenue, as well as the Barrelhouse in nearby Watts (see Eastman 1989). Pious moralists who alleged that R&B corrupted young minds with lewd, overly sexual imageries and lyrics tried to banish the new music from the city. R&B artist Big Jay McNeely (1993, 10–11) recalls his

2. Gibson was a white pianist who achieved notoriety by mimicking black slang and musical styles for the entertainment of white audiences. Gaillard was an entertainer who was, on the one hand, dismissed by Gillespie as one of the "'Toms' and musical nothings" who spoiled his time in California and, on the other, celebrated by hip-hoppers as a progenitor of vocal virtuosity (see DeVeaux 1997, 397–398).

popularity with white Los Angeles youths and the resultant trouble with adults: "I developed a tremendous white audience. And [the adults] didn't understand, because I was acting so wild. They didn't know if I was using stuff or not, because they'd never seen the white kids act this way." The police tried to stop him: "I was drawing five or six thousand kids every week. . . . That's when I got locked up and put in jail. I was outside blowing my horn, and a guy came by off duty. . . . He said I was disturbing the peace. . . . So, eventually, they just banned me out of the whole city. I couldn't play at all." Bandleader and talent promotor Johnny Otis (1993, 60) also remembers the police harassment at R&B concerts: "The Los Angeles police hounded us in the early days of R&B. They hated to see white kids attending the dances along with Black and Chicano youngsters. . . . At first, the cops would stand around glaring at the kids and harassing them with bullshit questions, checking their ID's and so on. This was damaging enough, but eventually they began to use ancient blue laws against us." These particular blue laws prohibited fifteen-year-olds from dancing with sixteen-year-olds, sixteen-year-olds with seventeen-year-olds, and so on. Eventually, Otis's band was forced to move its Saturday night dances to the American Legion Stadium in El Monte, a small town outside of Los Angeles. The El Monte city fathers revoked its dance license as well; it was reinstated only when the band agreed to pay off the firemen and police. According to Otis, the perceived danger of R&B lyrics was far greater than its actual content: "With the exception of a few blue records with naughty lyrics, most releases in the early days were simply about love or good times. The reason the establishment was so uneasy about the new R&B discs was the radically new sound. . . . The straight-laced American moralists saw the new music as alien and subversive" (61).[3]

Narcotic abuse was becoming a serious problem on Central Avenue by the 1950s. Marijuana had been on the streets in previous decades; in the postwar years, heroin was introduced into the area, hitting musicians first and perhaps hardest. Whether the LAPD ameliorated or worsened the drug problem is debatable. As part of his rigorous antivice campaign, Chief Parker advocated a strong police response to any violation of narcotics laws. The 1952 *Annual Report* announced:

> Los Angeles has a narcotic problem. Drug addiction is on the increase, both among adults and children. Adult narcotic arrests have risen about 600% in the past ten years. Juvenile narcotic arrests have shown an even greater

3. Getrude Gipson (1950a) advanced a similar theory for the radio stations KLAC's and KFWB's ban of Joyce Bryant's hit "Drunk with Love": "Why [the ban]? Aha, here's why, because somebody dislikes progress, the number can be called 'progressive' because the music is in a new trend of progressive idiom, it's different."

> increase. . . . The Los Angeles Police Department has used specialized narcotic officers since 1920. The present Narcotic Division of the Detective Bureau is rated as the finest municipal squad of its type in the nation. Its around-the-clock battle has limited the spread of this vice and demonstrated that cooperative community efforts can win against the dope peddler. (Los Angeles Police Department 1952, 27)

The report continues in an alarmist fashion, equating drug use with immorality and warning of its viral propensity:

> Because morality deteriorates with drug use, there are few barriers left to anti-social activity. This is doubly dangerous to the community because *addiction is contagious*—it spreads from person to person. If the spread of the this disease-like vice is not controlled, it will multiply at a frightening rate, infecting all age groups, social levels, and races. (27)

According to the musicians on the scene, the LAPD's campaign against drugs was draconian if not outright illegal. Art Farmer (1995, 57–58) remembers, "If you had one marijuana cigarette, you could get ninety days. . . . And if you had one mark on your arm you'd be called like a vagrant addict. I don't know if that still exists or not, but that was automatic: ninety days." The police would target known users repeatedly in order to get the arrest numbers up. According to Farmer, the musicians would "get hooked and they'd get arrested by the police. You go to jail, you come out, you have a record, and if the police want a promotion, . . . they know who to come to. . . . And sometimes they might even manufacture some evidence, because you already have the record" (106–107).

Police harassment, which precipitated club closures and created a hostile and antagonistic environment, may have aggravated the narcotics problem by taking away the livelihoods and the dignity of Central Avenue musicians. Horace Tapscott (1996, 108), trombonist and leader of the Pan-Afrikan People's Arkestra, argues that the hard drugs began to pervade the Central Avenue scene only in 1951, when the clubs were already in decline and that "It didn't have to do with just narcotics. It had to do with more than narcotics. It had to do with everyday living in the kind of society . . . during those early fifties for black people, and the black male in particular." Farmer (1995, 103–104) echoes the sentiment: "The prejudice thing might have led to the narcotics in some cases, you know, just feeling like the avenues are blocked anyway, so we might as well get high."

Another possible incentive behind the police crackdown on Central Avenue was economic. Clora Bryant (1994, 103) offers her theory: "Central Avenue closed up when they found out how much money was being dropped over there and city hall started sending the cops out there

to heckle the white people." She continues, "They found out there was more action on the Avenue than the clubs were getting out West—out northeast, you know, Hollywood" (251). Other musicians corroborate the importance of the money the white patrons pumped into Central Avenue. Responding to the question of how much white customers contributed to the Central Avenue economy, jazz sideman Frank Morgan (1996, 35) replies, "Shit, at least 60 percent of it, maybe more. The prices certainly weren't geared to the people of the local community. You know $10 and two-drink minimums. It was stickup prices." Saxophonist Marshall Royal (1996, 95) describes the Apex, one of the largest clubs on the avenue, as "a black-owned place that would have 90 percent white [audiences]. The blacks didn't have the money to spend." Tapscott (1996, 175) believes City Hall was behind the movement to shut down Central Avenue from the start. In addition to sending cadres of policemen into clubs, "they started rezoning the areas in the district, which would call for this and not call for that, certain beverages, and this type of establishment in the block or in the neighborhood . . . you know, anything to become a nuisance."

Through the late 1940s and into the 1950s, the LAPD and City Hall succeeded in siphoning money away from Central Avenue and South Central. The Plantation Club, opened during the height of the boom on the avenue in 1942, closed its doors in 1947, reopening briefly in 1949, only to shut down again for good shortly thereafter. When one of the largest and oldest nightspots, Club Alabam, closed temporarily in the late 1940s, theater critic Gertrude Gipson (1949) mused, "We'd sure like to see the Alabam in operation again. Think it would sorta do something to the many nitelifers who seemingly have hibernated." In 1950, the Downbeat Club was out of business, and the nightlife moved underground into smaller late-night joints, prompting Gibson (1950b) to note: "Avenue deader than dead, with little or no entertainment to offer . . . seems as though unless you are a stay-up-later, you miss out on all the fun. . . . Jack's Basket Room holding down the late crowd on the avenue." In May 1951, "Jack's Basket Room [was] under renovation in more ways than one with the new law in effect concerning early morning spots" ("People and Places" 1951a), and a few months later, it was reported as defunct ("People and Places" 1951b). New clubs farther west, such as The Oasis, Club Milomo, Rubiayat Room, and Club Morocco on Western Avenue, began to receive more extensive coverage in the papers in the early 1950s; *Los Angeles Tribune* critic Lillian Cumber (1953) noted the general trend: "Night club traffic fast moving westward." Club Alabam reopened in November 1951 to great fanfare, but by late 1952, the *Eagle* gossip column was already hinting at the club's impending demise, recounting owner

Joe Morris's complaint that "he is making everything but loot" ("People and Places" 1952). The Dunbar Hotel, the watering hole of hundreds of African-American luminaries, which had presided over the scene from its central location at the corner of Central Avenue and Forty-second Street since its founding in 1928, struggled to stay open through the 1950s and 1960s. Its closure in 1974 sounded the final death knell of the Stem.

Short- and Long-Term Consequences of LAPD Policies

With his expansionist ambitions for the police force, Chief Parker instituted a public relations machinery, establishing the Public Information Division, entrusting several of his top men to consult on Jack Webb's television show *Dragnet*, and even appearing on television himself to field criticisms and questions about the department on the weekly show *The Thin Blue Line*.

The change is visible in the appearance of the 1950 *Annual Report*, now with glossy photographs and brochure-ready text touting the professionalism of the new Parker LAPD and its significant value to the community:

> Our stockholders, the citizens and taxpayers, have a 20,000,000 dollar-per-year investment in the department. They are entitled to expect the best possible return on that investment. Their dividend is a police service which gives them the greatest protection for the least cost. To merit the confidence of the people of Los Angeles, we must see to it that they have top-notch service for their tax money. In order to do this, we must be constantly aware of the changes in the city's needs and be prepared to make changes and improvements in our organization necessary to keep pace with the city.
>
> We believe we did exactly that in 1950. (Los Angeles Police Department 1950, 17)

The pictures show attractive policemen, predominantly white, looking out for the welfare of children and housewives, also predominantly white. Even at the risk of infringing upon the civil rights of minority populations, the police protected its white constituency, keeping in check, in Parker's own words, the "primitive Congolese" incapable of obeying the rule of law (Parker 1965, 1). To this constituency, the demise of Central Avenue represented a victory in the war against miscegenation, vice, narcotics, and related crimes. The high arrest numbers in the Newton Street Division, for example, were proffered as evidence both that the area was a high-crime district and that the LAPD was doing its job efficaciously.

The LAPD propaganda succeeded in gaining the department additional funding—especially for salary increases and more officers (see Table 4)—and autonomy, as well as attracting higher-quality recruits. Within the first decade of Parker's tenure, the budget increased almost twofold,

Table 4. LAPD Expenditures, salaries, numbers of officers, 1950–1959

	Total LAPD expenditure	*Salary for police*	*Allotted number of officers*
1950	21,599,298.23	17,727,656.81	4,158
1951	21,747,111.11	17,605,424.12	4,494
1952	28,748,660.12	18,816,576.80	4,494
1953	26,214,277.97	20,869,524.33	4,494
1954	27,379,924.99	21,807,032.22	4,494
1955	29,669,235.32	23,476,411.60	4,494
1956	30,359,434.55	23,811,534.05	4,560
1957	34,159,209.83	26,699,328.03	4,575
1958	36,868,995.33	28,963,060.16	4,708
1959	41,482,009.27	32,294,677.01	4,708

Source: Los Angeles Police Department *Annual Reports* published by the department for the years 1950 through 1959

and the size of the force grew by 13 percent. By 1956, the LAPD was the best-paid police department in the United States (Domanick 1994, 108).

Chief Parker received many individual honors as well. In August 1951, the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce recognized the LAPD for its exceptional efficiency and granted the chief an award for his leadership. In February 1953, Parker was elected "Citizen of the Year" by the Los Angeles Junior Chamber of Commerce. Throughout his tenure, the Los Angeles establishment—in the form of the Chamber of Commerce, the Merchants and Manufacturers Association, the *Los Angeles Times* and *Examiner*, the mayor and city council—idolized Parker. Jack Webb, who played Sergeant Friday on *Dragnet*, wrote a hagiographic biography of the chief, *The Badge*, in 1958. Parker suffered a fatal heart attack in 1966 at an awards ceremony held by the Second Marine Division Association, collapsing just as the more than one thousand marines in attendance were giving him a standing ovation (West 1966). The *Los Angeles Times* featured front-page stories on the chief for four days following his death and published numerous tributes, including those from Mayor Yorty, Governor Brown, the attorney general, and city council members (Houston 1966).

Although the short-term benefits were many for Chief Parker and his force, the LAPD's success in shutting down Central Avenue proved to be

a Pyrrhic victory, with long-term consequences that were disastrous for both the city and the police department. With unemployement at fourteen percent among the general black population in the late 1940s and increasing thereafter (Collins 1980, 24) and with no big spenders pouring cash into the clubs, the stores that lined Central Avenue began to shut down one by one. By eviscerating the cultural heart of the area, the LAPD stamped out the glamour and pride that had once flourished there and exacerbated the economic slowdown of South Central. The bitterness and hopelessness that filled the void caused more people to turn to drugs and crime, in effect creating a high-density crime ghetto; Parker's earlier characterization of South Central became a self-fulfilling prophecy thanks to his own policies. South Central's worsening socioeconomic conditions and relationship with the police department culminated in the outbreak of the Watts Riots in 1965. A police arrest set off the riots, and after seven days of burning, looting, and violence that came to an end only after the National Guard was called in, thirty-four people were dead, four thousand were arrested, and the damage totaled more than $40 million. An independent study from 1967 encapsulated what South Central residents already knew: "[Chief Parker] began to look at the Negro community as an implacable foe" (Raine 1967, 14). It concluded that "the police in their uniforms seem like the troops of an occupying country to the Negro" (28).

The horrifying outcome of the 1965 riots did not alter the LAPD or its chief. The *Los Angeles Times* reported: "Commenting on . . . allegations of police brutality, Parker retorted that the riots might not have occurred if police hadn't been handling Negroes with 'kid gloves'" (Berman 1965). Police brutality continued to be a problem after Parker's death, as his successors helped sustain the macho police culture that he had done so much to cultivate. As recently as the 1990s, violence and anger directed against the LAPD blew up in the African-American community following the Rodney King verdict.[4] Mike Davis (1992, 223–322) characterizes Los Angeles in the late twentieth century as the full-fledged realization of Foucault's "carceral city" (Foucault 1979). The panoptic gaze of the establishment has become inescapable with the "imbrication of the police function into the built environment" (Davis 1992, 250), and the boundaries between the races and classes have become even more rigid with the erection of actual physical barricades in certain neighborhoods, including along Central Avenue, creating conditions for de facto apartheid (277).

4. Darryl Gates, the LAPD chief at the time of the Rodney King beating in 1991, was a protégé of Chief Parker, serving as his chauffeur in the 1950s.

Central Avenue's Musical Legacy

In terms of musical heritage, the untimely demise of the Central Avenue scene helped distort the history of jazz and popular music on the West Coast. The brilliance on the Stem was extinguished before the rest of the world had a chance to admire it, so that when the East Coast critics finally condescended to designate a style of "West Coast jazz," the players from Central Avenue were nowhere to be found and the white purveyors of "cool" jazz came to represent California. Even in the years of bustling activity on the Stem, from the early to mid-1940s, Hal Holly's column "Los Angeles Bands Briefs" in *Down Beat* reported regularly on the music played by visiting artists at clubs on the Sunset Strip, on Wilshire Boulevard, and in Culver City and very rarely mentioned local talent or Central Avenue clubs. When *Down Beat* critic Charles Emge (1952, 8) wrote of bop's ascendancy in the Southland, he bypassed the contributions of Central Avenue musicians altogether. He avowed: "The bop movement, or progressive jazz as the musicians probably would prefer to have it tagged, has reached its peak of commercial success at Hermosa Beach where Howard Rumsey, a onetime Kenton bass player, starting with Sunday afternoon sessions a couple of years ago, has gradually built his affairs into a full-time operation." Nesuhi Ertegun (1954, 19), writing for *The Record Changer,* likewise ignored Central Avenue musicians and credited Rumsey with bringing much-needed innovation to a provincial and backward jazz culture: "It should be remembered, too, that Howard Rumsey more than anyone else made modern jazz a popular success on the West Coast. When in 1948, at a time when practically no modern jazz was to be heard there, he began to present the finest musicians of the new style at the Lighthouse in Hermosa Beach." *Metronome*'s Teddy Charles (1953, 17) reported that the "young cats [on the Coast] are five or six years behind the eastern level of development," attributing the inferiority of these musicians to "the easy living, goof off environment, etc., in Southern California." In *Billboard*'s retrospective on the Los Angeles scene, Dave Dexter (1969, 118) anointed Stan Kenton as California music's "distinguished messiah" but otherwise remained consistent in neglecting to mention Central Avenue clubs and musicians.

Contrary to the characterizations of West Coast musical life promulgated by the mainstream press, jazz history was being made in the South Central ghetto of Los Angeles throughout the 1940s and early 1950s. In 1945, a few months before Gillespie and Parker's historic stint at Billy Berg's club in Hollywood, Howard McGhee introduced bebop to Central Avenue audiences at the Downbeat, and his later eight-piece lineup included such giants as Charlie Parker and Sonny Criss on alto, Teddy

Edwards and Gene Montgomery on tenor, and Roy Porter on drums. Local musician Dexter Gordon, in addition to recording with visiting virtuosos Gillespie and Parker, preserved for posterity a taste of the excitement generated by his legendary cutting sessions with Wardell Gray in the 1947 Dial release *The Chase.* Gray's 1952 Prestige recording featured up-and-coming Angeleno trumpeter Art Farmer and pianist Hampton Hawes. Another rising local star, Charles Mingus, gigged with Buddy Collette in various clubs on Central Avenue and composed the tunes that a decade later would earn him national recognition. Innovators Eric Dolphy and Ornette Coleman languished in semi-obscurity during the 1950s, their avant-garde styles shunned by the resident bands of the now-dominant westside clubs. Christening the "West Coast sound," a 1953 Contemporary Records release of that name discounted the contributions of the Central Avenue musicians and heralded instead the advent of a new group of jazz musicians, primarily white studio players, who congregated at the Lighthouse Café in Hermosa Beach. The musicians on this recording—Shelly Manne, Bud Shank, Joe Mondragon, and Shorty Rogers—as well as others associated with the California cool sound, including Howard Rumsey, Stan Kenton, Gerry Mulligan, and Chet Baker, played a style of jazz that prioritized composing over improvising and contrapuntally intricate ensemble work over solos. With the black bebop-influenced styles of the Central Avenue musicians suppressed, the carefully crafted arrangements of the white westside musicians became emblematic of California jazz, marketed by recording companies as jazz "tanned by the seaside and tempered by the cool Pacific breeze" (Gioia 1992, 201; see also Gordon 1986). The diversity of the musical offerings in pre-1953 California was nullified by the reductive rubric of "West Coast jazz," with its implications of provincialism and marginality.

Today the clubs on Central Avenue are defunct, and graffiti-ridden storefronts and sweatshops stand mutely where legendary musicians once played. Hatred of the police is a central tenet of the hip-hop culture that has thrived in South Central in place of jazz and R&B. Fifty years ago, the music coming out of the Central Avenue clubs, feared by the white establishment, celebrated love and good times. At the present moment, the music that blares out of boom boxes exhorts gangstas to kill cops and to put an end to the oppression of a downtrodden community. Although the collapse of the music scene was probably not the only nor the most important factor leading to the deterioration of the area, it precipitated the downward turn and stemmed from the same impulses that affected every aspect of life in the racist Los Angeles of the postwar era. As blues singer Jimmy Witherspoon laments, "It's all gone now, . . . nothing left but crack and hardship" (quoted in Otis 1993, 4). Even the mem-

ories of Central Avenue's musical heyday are fading away into oblivion, as the old-time musicians pass on to another world.[5]

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5. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in Central Avenue's past and a reassessment of its significance. The documentary *Ernie Andrews Blues for Central Avenue* (1988) was well received, and the Fountain Theater in Hollywood premiered Stephen Sachs' play *Central Avenue* in 2001 to critical acclaim. Some notable recent publications on the subject are Cox (1996), Bryant et al. (1998), Reed (1992), Bakan (1998), and Eastman (1998). Other books dealing more generally with music on the West Coast also include important sections on the Central Avenue music scene—see, for example, Gioia (1992), Hoskyns (1996), and Cross (1993). The University of California, Los Angeles, Oral History Program continues to add to its Central Avenue project. Relevant recordings include *The West Coast Jazz Box: An Anthology of California Jazz* and *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles (1921–1956).*

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