

Play It Again, Butch, Cricket, Chick,  
Smoke, Happy ...

## The Performances of Hoagy Carmichael as a Hollywood Bar-room Pianist

### Introduction

Dooley Wilson may have portrayed Hollywood's most famous bar-room pianist in *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), but Hoagy Carmichael took on this role the most times in non-musical films during the Forties and early Fifties. After a cameo appearance in *Topper* (Norman Z. McLeod, 1937), Carmichael was given his first character role in *To Have and Have Not* (Howard Hawks, 1944), and then he appeared in nine more films, up to *Timberjack* (Joseph Kane, 1955). He never played a leading role and his characters are reticent within their fictional worlds. The self-effacing easiness of Carmichael's acting style complements his characters' unobtrusive qualities.

There is a growing academic literature on secondary players in film. As Will Straw notes, in a 2011 *Screen* dossier entitled 'Small Parts, Small Players', most writing on such performers has focused on their portrayal of stereotypes, a form of characterisation marked by caricature (2011: 79). Another approach has been to 'read against the grain', deliberately bringing background figures to the fore to imagine an alternative regime of representation in which secondary characters could become protagonists (a good example of this is Judith Roof's monograph on female comic supporting characters, *All About Thelma and Eve: Sidekicks and Third Wheels*). These are approaches that concentrate either on secondary characters' excessive qualities or their potential to be read 'excessively'. By contrast, my article explores the unobtrusiveness as a vital quality in Carmichael's performances.

His self-effacement is most surprising at those moments, included in all his movies, when his character performs musically (usually at the piano). Before he appeared in movies Carmichael had established a high profile as a jazz pianist, a bandleader and a songwriter. He is not a character actor like, say, Walter Brennan, but a supporting player whose film roles occur in the shadow of a more developed reputation within another field of entertainment. His movie appearances provide an example of what Will Straw claims was classical Hollywood's routine secondary casting of performers associated with cinema's 'surrounding cultural and professional fields'. Straw argues that, in this context, the movies function as 'archives of a sort through their absorption of residual entertainment forms' (2011: 126). The numbers played by Carmichael add to the audio-visual archive of his musical performances and part of



their appeal was certainly one of recognition, offering a fresh visual and musical record of a performing style and, in some cases, specific songs, with which many contemporary viewers would have been familiar (of course, this remains a potential attraction for any viewers familiar with Carmichael, no matter when they are watching his movies).

In his study of Carmichael's film appearances, Krin Gabbard privileges attention to Carmichael's renown as a musician, suggesting that '[i]n all of his films, his precise role in American music had a great effect on the kinds of roles he was offered' (1996: 257). Gabbard's appraisal of how Hollywood allowed him to express his musical role is a negative one, in terms of its suppression of Carmichael's reputation as a white performer whose playing was influenced by his association with African-American musicians. He argues that Carmichael's film performances downplay the 'trickster' aspects of his musical persona, in an effort to disassociate him from the connections with African-American culture that the figure of the trickster invokes (1996: 260).

In a way that is typical of writing on jazz musicians' appearances in mainstream film, Gabbard identifies the Hollywood movie as a constraining force on Carmichael's musical expression.<sup>1</sup> His book asserts a subservient and anaemic quality in Carmichael's characters and sees it as a symptom of the toning down of the trickster elements of his musical persona (1996: 264). But this is a result of judging the characters against a given understanding of Carmichael's musical reputation away from the films. Against this view I argue that the film roles accommodated, rather than subdued, key aspects of his musical identity.

If they are assessed against the other figures who populate their fictional environments (rather than against the 'real world' reputation of the performer), Carmichael's characters are seen to display an exceptional knowledge of events and of their world's ethical norms. They are subservient and self-effacing, yet also remarkably well-informed and insightful. These qualities are expressed in the non-musical moments of the film, but also within the musical passages: Carmichael remains 'in character' during these sequences, even as he references a performing style and / or plays particular songs associated with his off-screen career as a musician. The note of reticence that informs the presentation of these numbers is a

distinctive feature and one of the purposes of this article is to enhance an understanding of the form adopted by musical sequences in non-musical films, a development David Neumeyer associates particularly with Hollywood movies of the Forties (2004).

The 'knowing servant' is a character type that exists in many shapes, in film and other art forms. On one level, the close analysis of Carmichael's characters focuses attention on precisely how this broad type has been represented cinematically in a recurrent guise, namely that of the supporting musical figure. It also attests to Carmichael's special status as an actor of this kind of role. As already intimated, his musical persona meant he was *particularly* suited to being cast in these types of parts. Furthermore, his characters exhibit signs of privilege within their supporting positions when compared to similar figures played by other performers.

### Hoagy Carmichael as a Musical Performer

He was the composer of 'Stardust' (1931), reputedly the most recorded popular song of all time, but Carmichael's jazz credentials had been sealed by his early association with Bix Beiderbecke. In their review of his autobiography, the jazz magazine *Down Beat* felt moved to write 'Carmichael is the only pop songwriter identified with the authentic jazz tradition' (26<sup>th</sup> February 1947: 16). However, by the time he appeared in *To Have and Have Not*, he did not have a high profile as a practising jazz musician, at least in the arenas of live performance and recording. For example, between 1943 and 1947 (years encompassing the production and release of *To Have and Have Not* and *The Best Years of Our Lives*, the films which provide my key case studies), *Down Beat* mentions him mainly in terms of his nascent Hollywood career. In May 1944, he is described as a 'songwriter' about to make his movie debut. Less than a year later he is listed as a 'songwriter, movie actor and radio entertainer', and on the release of *Johnny Angel* (Edwin L. Marin, 1945), Charles Emge praises his 'newly found but very real talent as a character actor'. Apart from two record reviews, the only statement on his musical activity in all four years is a report *denying* that he will be touring a live band around Hollywood. The two record reviews are also not overly concerned with Carmichael's talents as a musician. One is written 'merely to note that Hoagy has waxed another hit' (6<sup>th</sup> December 1946: 7), whilst the other claims his new version of 'Stardust' is 'skilfully waxed here in his usual twangy fashion. Mr Hoagy Carmichael may be corny, but it's very attractive corn' (26<sup>th</sup> February 1947: 19).<sup>2</sup>

The discourse about Carmichael at the time, therefore, did not construct him as an extraordinary live performer or virtuoso player, as was the norm for jazz musicians. The retrospective documentary profile of Carmichael, *The Years Have Pants* (Tillie Malnak and RA Smith, 1996), consolidates the understanding that he became an especially 'media-friendly' musician, as it concentrates solely on his movie, radio and television performances from the moment of his move to Los Angeles in the mid-30s. In his autobiography, Carmichael dedicates only a couple of paragraphs in over 50 pages to his touring activities after his Hollywood move; dismissing live performance for its own sake as 'a drag' he writes, 'I have always felt that

for the effort you put into it you have entertained too few, unlike television' (1999: 293).

This meant that a key site through which Carmichael's musical persona was developed, in its visual as well as aural aspects, was Hollywood film itself, in the 40s, and also television from the 1950s. Furthermore, his preferred performing and composing style by the mid-40s placed him at the 'pop' end of jazz, substituting the virtuoso, spontaneous values often associated with jazz with an attractive 'corniness' denoting instead a cheerful acceptance of tried and tested musical formulas. Even Gabbard's characterisation of Carmichael's extra-filmic 'trickster' musical persona omits attention to his live performing style or the specificities of his playing and singing, concentrating instead on the lyrics of his songs and his early collaborations with African-American musicians (1996: 255-260).

There was not, then, a powerful extra-textual reference point to do with musicianship for Hoagy Carmichael's film performances. If anything, it is the modesty of his musical persona that is being matched by the self-effacing bearing of the film characters he portrays. The quality of self-effacement is evident in all the audio-visual material I have seen of Carmichael, in and out of his feature film performances.<sup>3</sup> In the shorts and television appearances I have viewed, Carmichael always cedes the spotlight to other performers. One example of this is an early-40s 'soundie' featuring Carmichael performing 'Hong Kong Blues'. The song begins with just Carmichael at the piano. As he reaches the refrain, a competing visual attraction appears in a puff of smoke, in the form of a miniaturised female dancer, performing on top of the piano. She claims the viewer's attention, through her appearance as a special effect, but then Carmichael's too, as a profile shot shows him addressing the dancing figure.



In performance footage of Carmichael interacting with a band, it is always apparent that he defers to other musicians. In NBC's 1958 *Timex All-Star Jazz Show* Carmichael takes on the duties of host. He begins one of his own compositions, 'New Orleans', seated at a piano, apparently alone on the set (he plays against a blacked-out backdrop). However, after singing 'and if you ever see a Dixie band with a beat strictly from Dixieland, then you're right in it, right in New Orleans', he turns towards the back of the set and says 'take it away boss'. The lights go up to reveal a Dixieland band who take over the tune in a lively instrumental guise.

Carmichael is cast here as a performer who initiates

a rendition of one of his songs that is continued more spectacularly by other musicians. The moment in which the performance changes hands is emphasised. Carmichael stops playing, offers a verbal handover to the band, and turns towards them. The lights go up to reveal them and, finally, the camera moves towards the band over Carmichael's piano, before a cut that excludes Carmichael completely. A key aspect of Carmichael's performance here, supported by its visual framing, is the business involved in fading into the background, of staging a performance of ceasing to perform. This is part of the format of a revue show, but it is notable that Carmichael was given the role of host (one he played many times on radio and on television), casting him as a performer particularly suited to the task of presenting other people's performances.

### Hoagy Carmichael as a Movie Performer: Key Character Traits

The reticence in Carmichael's performing style is written into his roles but it is counterbalanced by the knowledge that gives his characters a position of authority within the fictional world. The knowledge is of two kinds. Firstly, it relates to the events that have taken place in the film's fictional world. In two films, *The Las Vegas Story* (Robert Stevenson, 1952) and *Young Man with a Horn* (Michael Curtiz, 1950), his characters are entrusted to guide the viewer through the story via voice-over. In *Night Song* (John Cromwell, 1947), Carmichael plays Chick, the musician friend of blind genius composer, Dan (Dana Andrews). Catherine (Merle Oberon), a would-be suitor of Dan, pretends to be blind herself to break down his defences and encourage him to exploit his musical talent. Uniquely within the film, Chick both knows the deception Catherine has contrived, *as well as* the effect she is having on Dan, in his position as Dan's confidante. This is typical of the awareness Carmichael's characters have of the overall dramatic situation.

The other kind of knowledge is social. They tend to know how their particular world works. For example, even though we do not see him with them, *Young Man with a Horn* takes care to establish that his jazz pianist character, Smoke, has a solid family in Indiana to return to, thereby positioning him as a representative of the 'normal' social order. This contrasts with the film's hero Rick (Kirk Douglas), who, as a child, turns to the world of jazz trumpeting to escape his disastrous family situation. At the end of the film, just as we have seen Rick in a nervous breakdown that has robbed him of his ability to play music, Smoke provides the following direct address to camera:

You see Rick was a pretty hard guy to understand. And for a long time he didn't understand himself. But the desire to live is a great teacher and I think it taught Rick a lot of things. He learned that you can't say everything through the end of a trumpet and a man doesn't destroy himself just because he can't hit some high note that he dreamed up. Maybe that's why Rick went on to be a success as a human being first and an artist second. And what an artist!

It is noteworthy that Smoke makes a distinction between being a 'success as a human being' and being an artist. The association of Smoke with the formal device of

direct address signals a sincerity and straightforwardness to his character that suggests he is, himself, a 'success as a human being'. However, his emphatic last words 'and what an artist!' register his admiration for Rick's genius but also, by implication, his acknowledgement of his own musical limitations. Despite being played by a real-life musician, then, Smoke is cast as a role model as a citizen rather than as a musician. The awareness that distinguishes his character is to do with his understanding of acceptable social behaviour rather than his musical prowess.

Knowledge does not, however, urge Carmichael's characters into decisive action, at least of the type associated with the leading figures. Their reticence in this respect finds expression, in part, through their physical immobility. In his first feature-film performance in *Topper*, Carmichael remains rooted to his piano stool, playing and singing along with the film's two drunken protagonists, even though his boss wants them to stop so he can close up for the night. Here, Carmichael's characters' absolute commitment to their role as 'bar-room pianist' – whether literally playing the piano or some substitute – is firmly established. The tying of his character to one locale is taken to extremes in *To Have and Have Not*, when he does not even move from his piano stool as a shoot-out erupts around him in the bar.<sup>4</sup>

Another example occurs in *The Las Vegas Story*, where the continual presence in the workplace of his bar-room pianist Happy is commented on by the film's detective hero Lt. Andrews (Victor Mature). Andrews is investigating the death of the owner of the bar in which Happy works. Arriving at the bar early one morning, the detective discovers that Happy is already there, and is already playing the piano. He asks Happy: 'Why don't you do your practicing at home?' to which Happy replies: 'Got tone-deaf neighbours – here I don't disturb anybody'. Happy casts himself as part of the furniture of the bar, but his devotion to this place pays dividends, in terms of the knowledge it allows him to acquire. Happy has overheard an incriminating early morning conversation by the murderer of the bar's owner. Rather than trying to solve the case himself, Happy passes on the details of the earlier conversation to Andrews, and the detective then uses the information to make a brilliant deduction that saves the day. Happy's awareness of events is facilitated by his physical immobility. He acts on his knowledge only to the extent that he relays what he knows to the hero detective, who then does the necessary mental and physical work to solve the crime. In this way, physical immobility is accompanied by a lack of initiative, in terms of confronting the problems around which major elements of the narrative revolve.

These characteristics, a high level of knowledge versus a low level of intervention, are apparent in different ways in Carmichael's roles in *The Best Years of Our Lives* and *To Have and Have Not*. In the former his character represents an assured normality which has been made strange to the servicemen who have come back from war. *To Have and Have Not* places him at the centre of a band who throw Harry (Humphrey Bogart) and Slim's (Lauren Bacall) entanglements with the French Resistance and Gestapo into sharp relief. Whilst positioned in the middle of things, neither of these characters is seen to do very much.

### ***The Best Years of Our Lives: The Bar-room Pianist as Figure of Normality***

The three returning war veterans of *The Best Years of Our Lives* are reintroduced to the commonplace sights of home as they are driven by taxi towards a reunion with their families. Homer (Harold Russell), the sailor who has lost both arms in battle and has metal hooks functioning as hands, is particularly pleased to see that the bar belonging to his Uncle Butch (Carmichael) has acquired a new neon sign. This is, however, the only change associated with Butch throughout the film. He takes his place in a gallery of minor characters who act as representatives of the post-war society to which the servicemen must readjust. Butch is unique, though, in that he neither confronts them with the fact of their absence (by acting in a way which shows how things have changed), nor changes his behaviour in the light of their renewed presence (by perceiving them differently because of their experiences of war). Instead he embodies a continuing normality which transcends the disruptions and transformations wrought by war, and a matter-of-factness in relation to everyday life that the main characters have to fight to reassert. Butch is a character who represents a set of values which, the film suggests, the protagonists may find it hard to adopt.

Butch first appears when Homer goes to his bar to escape from the smothering attentions of his home. Homer's embarrassment over his disability has made it impossible for him to accept his teenage sweetheart Wilma's (Cathy O'Donnell) unquestioning love for him; he finds her presence oppressive. His family have not been able to relax in their behaviour towards him. Stifling self-awareness comes to a head as they all crowd into the sitting room, the bodies of the family pressing the front and sides of the frame, with Homer at the back of the image, as if pinned against the wall.

Homer finds the space he needs with Butch. Unlike the rest of his family, Butch appraises his disability with measured poise, standing thoughtfully behind his shoulder as Homer picks up his beer, before slapping him on the back and telling him 'Kid, you're doing great'. Butch registers the change in Homer's circumstances, but then treats him as if he had never been away. Up to this point, the servicemen have all found that their war experiences have disturbed their relationship to the everyday world to which they have returned. Throughout this scene, in contrast, Butch regulates the space of the bar so that this experience is not framed as a marker of difference. He refuses to serve Homer a whiskey, despite his nephew's protestations that his spell in the navy has given him the legs for it. He soundtracks the evening with tunes that remind characters of a time before they were sent away to war: Homer asks him to play his old favourite, 'Lazy River'; and he agrees to Al's request for 'Among My Souvenirs', a song which, as well as suggesting a preoccupation with reminiscence in its title, obviously holds poignant pre-war memories for him and his wife.

Butch's monitoring of events is also suggested in his positioning within the frame. Away from his piano, he either stands over the other characters authoritatively (when they are seated at the table) or stays poised watchfully behind them (as Homer talks to Fred [(Dana Andrews)] at the bar). When playing the piano, he concentrates less on his instrument than on the effect of his performance. Whilst Al (Fredric March) leads his

wife in a drunken dance, Butch glances over his shoulder at them from the corner of the frame. A later cut to a closer shot of Butch shows him glancing away again, then directing his gaze towards Homer who is sitting next to him.

The effect of Butch's regulation of the space and sounds of the bar is not to efface the memory of war entirely. His rendition of 'Lazy River' is not merely intended as a nostalgic escape to happier times; it also accompanies a lecture to Homer on how he and his family should deal with their changed circumstances. He tells Homer that 'they'll get used to you and you'll get used to them, and then everything will settle down nicely'. By giving Homer this advice, Butch projects a sense of assurance within his environment, and he polices his bar with a view to seeing that easy stability reproduced in others.

Yet there is an extent to which Butch's affirmation of a self-assured stability is as alienating to the returning servicemen as the rhetoric of more obviously confrontational figures. Throughout *The Best Years of Our Lives* characters appear who symbolise different aspects of a post-war society which has developed in the absence of those who were sent away to fight. The film's celebrated use of deep-focus photography is integral in insinuating the tensions between the main characters and these representative types. Through deep frames, it can display with visual immediacy the discrepancy between what the war veterans expected to find in civilian life, and the physical reality offered by the individual figures who confront them. Raymond Carney has noted how the crowding of the image with such figures works in this way:

His [William Wyler's] characters are [...] oppressively embedded in groups [...]. [T]hey are framed and enclosed and their movements are circumscribed by the normative demands of wives, families and occupations (1986: 34).

Thus, there is a repeated tendency to trap the main characters at the back of the frame, facing the camera, whilst others occupy the foreground, expounding upon or demonstrating through their actions how the nation has changed during the war. I have already mentioned the crowded frame that hems Homer in and forces him to seek escape at Butch's bar. Towards the foreground of this shot, his girlfriend's father had harangued Homer with forecasts of economic gloom. Other instances





include Al's son telling his father what he has been taught about the war at school, offering a version of events which bears no relation to Al's experiences; his old boss reeling off homilies about post-war banking practice, whilst Al waits nervously to discover whether there is still a position in the company for him; and a right-wing revisionist telling Homer the 'truth' about the reasons they went to war. (See below.)



Butch is pictured in profile in the foreground of a deeply focused frame in his first appearance, playing piano whilst Homer stands by the bar waiting to be noticed. The fact that Butch sees Homer only by looking away from the piano hints at the importance his glances will play in monitoring the events of the scene to come. More significantly, the relationship between Butch in the foreground and Homer at the back is not, in this

case, expressed in oppressive terms. The decision to film Butch in profile allows him to present a more human face than the right-wing activist, who is turned away from the camera. Unlike the forecast of hard times from Wilma's father, Butch's words do not cause discomfort. In keeping with his unassuming ability to disavow the distances between himself and the returning servicemen, he bridges the gap between them, for



instance by moving into the image to greet Homer. Yet his presence in the foreground in the second bar scene, where the married Fred is forced by Al to finish his affair with his daughter Peggy (Teresa Wright), does provide tension within the deeply focused frame.

Fred makes his call to Peggy from the phone booth located just inside Butch's bar. This is placed at the back of the image to the left. Al stands highest in the frame, just behind Butch's piano which occupies, as in the first scene, the right foreground. At the piano, Homer demonstrates his newly taught musical skills in duet with Butch, while Al splits his attention between appreciation of their playing and nervous looks towards Fred. Twice the camera cuts to a closer shot of Al looking on, but the main tensions of the scene are all pictured in the dominant deep-focus shot.

Whereas Butch traversed the depth of the image in his first shot, moving across space to greet Homer, here characters are isolated within their own zones. Al can only hope that Fred will take his advice, and his nervous glances towards the phone booth indicate how unsure he feels of his power to intervene in his daughter's relationships (even though, for the time being, Fred has acquiesced to Al's demand). Fred is encased in a frame within the frame, and when he leaves, he walks straight out of the adjacent exit, without looking back. Butch and Homer, meanwhile, are concentrating on their performance, unaware of the drama taking place behind them.

With Butch and Homer in the foreground, the shot indicates not only how Fred and Al have become estranged from each other, but also the extent to which the loss of conviction in their familial roles (of husband and father respectively) locks them out from a confident engagement with everyday life. The reassertion of Homer's 'normality' through his learning to play the piano again is depicted as a state to which Fred and Al have no access. Butch's presence near the foreground does not suggest confrontation in the manner of the other minor characters I have mentioned, but it does



indicate that Butch's demonstration that 'life goes on' is just as estranging to Fred and Al.

Homer's social reintegration is shown here through the medium of music. Throughout the film, Butch's musical performances work together with his movement and the framing to assert an easy connection with the norms of everyday life. Despite Carmichael's extra-textual fame as a successful songwriter, his status as a musician is constantly effaced in *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Instead of indulgent displays of individual skill, his playing is always subsumed within sociable domesticity. Thus, his music either takes the form of therapy (helping Al to bond with his wife by playing 'their' song; teaching Homer to play with his hooks) or ceremony (leading the wedding march in the final scene).<sup>5</sup> Even when Butch plays the Hoagy Carmichael composition 'Lazy River', the self-referentiality of the moment is made subservient to the advice he gives to Homer: the tune becomes a mere support for Butch's prediction of how Homer will resettle with his family. The piano becomes a locus for domestic harmony (it is placed at the forefront of the first shot of the wedding scene, children gathered around it) rather than an instrument for feats of artistry.

As we see it, Butch's bar is less a public than a domestic space. The montage which precedes its first appearance is a dizzy whirl through the dancehalls and nightclubs to which Al takes his wife and daughter on his first night home. Al has responded to the disturbing domestic changes which have confronted him on his return (his children growing up, his wife having

widened her circle of friends in his absence) by throwing himself into a drunken night of social activity. The action settles down when they reach Butch's bar, and the film reverts to its deeply focused long takes. In his intoxicated state Al believes he may have reconnected with his role as husband when Butch strikes up the song he has requested. The irony is that at the same time, Peggy and Fred are establishing a relationship which calls into question his authority as a father.

*The Best Years of Our Lives* suggests that the returning servicemen must come to terms with their domestic situations if the American society from which they suddenly feel distanced is to appear normal to them once more. Butch stands as a measure of that normality. After noting the new sign for Butch's bar, Homer tells Fred and Al that 'part of the family don't think he's respectable because he sells liquor'. However, this comment is laughed off by the servicemen and it becomes clear that Butch is a trusted family member: Wilma relies on him to bring Homer home, before closing time, after his flight to the bar; Butch is placed in charge of the children when leading the wedding march. We learn nothing of his backstory and his family tie to Homer is indicated by the simple naming of him as 'Uncle Butch'. Butch's characterisation as Homer's uncle is straightforward and uncluttered with personal detail. His music lacks a quality of personal expression, yet this is in keeping with a character who has nothing to prove: his unparaded stability shows Homer, Fred and Al how a man can act and move when the security of his familial position is taken for granted.

### ***To Have and Have Not: The Bar-room Pianist as Part of the Crowd***

The main characters of *The Best Years of Our Lives* need to (re)learn to inhabit the world as Butch does. By contrast, Cricket, Carmichael's hotel pianist in *To Have and Have Not*, represents a character whose ordinariness serves to highlight the specialness of the leads.

Once again Carmichael plays a man who possesses a great awareness of narrative events, but does not exert a forceful influence on their course. The film is set during World War II on the Nazi-occupied island of Martinique, and the hotel bar, echoing that in *Casablanca*, is a public space where opposing groups fence warily. Cricket is a constant witness to the intrigues that occur there. In a narrative in which we learn almost nothing about the prehistories of the main characters, Cricket knows more than most.

Only once is he charged with a task relevant to the film's plot. In an effort to ensure Slim's safety, Harry tells him to make sure that she gets on a plane out of Martinique. A cut to a mid-shot of Cricket at his piano shows him taking the piece of straw he habitually chews out of his mouth and saying assertively 'I sure will Harry'. He also ceases playing for a second as he responds, to emphasise further that he is taking in Harry's instruction. Yet in the next scene in which he appears, we see him from Harry's point of view, still seated at his piano, with Slim standing with a group of musicians around him, singing a hymn-like chorus, with no intention of going anywhere. Cricket does not have any direct influence on events outside the orbit of his piano stool.

Harry is irritated not just to find Slim still present but also to see her as part of a group. His desire for her to secure her own preservation is undercut by an image of huddled communality. Robin Wood has stated that Harry's eventual decision to help the French Resistance stems from a resolutely individualistic attitude, individuality here defined as 'a conscious being who lives from his own feeling centre of identity' (1981: 27). This expression of individual will, also to be found in Slim's character, is played against a backdrop of groups that offset their resolve to define their own needs and duties. The Resistance and Gestapo are the two most obvious of these, but Cricket's band also provides a collective unit against which Slim and Harry's specialness can be asserted.

Cricket's band are central to the space of the bar and Cricket is himself central to the band. Yet, this centrality does not provide Cricket with a forceful physical presence within the mise-en-scène. His first appearance, singing 'Am I Blue', is mediated through a relay of looks involving Harry and Slim. The camera has dollied in towards Harry who is sitting on his own in the bar. Cricket alerts his attention when he strikes up the song's opening melody, and Harry looks up, cueing a shot of the band as he would see them from his table. Given that an interest in Cricket's musical performance has been indicated, it might be expected that a closer shot of Cricket will follow. But the film diverts attention onto Slim, who is also sitting in the bar, and dwells on the exchange of looks between her and Harry. The camera returns to the band only as Slim turns her gaze towards them.

Cricket's individual presence in the scene is further diminished as the performance goes on; there is a cut to

the drummer as he takes up his sticks and joins in, and the camera then pans back to the main group as they all pick up the tune. It was this type of 'authentic' musical interaction which so appealed to Charles Emge in his *Down Beat* column:

These sequences have an unusual air of musical reality which unquestionably stems from the fact that Hoagy and most of the other musicians seen in the band, actually recorded the music which they appear to play. That's Jesse Price playing – not just pretending to play – drums in Hoagy's band and Dave Robinson at the string bass (15<sup>th</sup> November 1944: 11).

It is also the shot which George M. Wilson claims

is the film's chief image of the kind of spontaneous, good-natured cooperation, cooperation that produces a larger harmony, which is, in the end, endorsed by the film as an ideal of human activity (1986: 214).

Yet this scene is not just a celebration of well-known musicians jamming 'spontaneously'. The performance is contained within the looks exchanged between Harry and Slim, looks which define their determined individuality against the band's easy willingness to harmonise. When Cricket asks Slim to 'take over', typically relinquishing his place in the spotlight, she glances towards Harry as she sings 'the sad and lonely one'. His amused reaction is registered in medium close-up. In none of his musical performances does the film allow Cricket an individual point of view. Slim, on the other hand, is seen to transform her numbers into personal statements of her difference from the crowd. One way the two figures are contrasted is through differences in voice, particularly noticeable when they duet during 'Am I Blue'. Hoagy Carmichael readily admitted that he 'sang through [his] nasal tract' (Mooring 1947: 12), vocalising with an unassuming lilt. Lauren Bacall, on the other hand, sings with a bluesy intonation, the depth of which has led to persistent rumours that her voice was dubbed by male singer Andy Williams.<sup>6</sup> However that may be, it is evident that no attempt has been made to replace Bacall's earthy tones with a more conventionally 'feminine' voice. Clearly her singing is intended as a marker of her extraordinary difference.

Slim's mobility also contrasts with the consistent placement of Cricket at his piano stool. During her rendition of 'How Little We Know', the camera dollied backwards to accommodate her movement through the bar, and then follows her in medium close-up as she returns to the piano. The song's lyric admits to the impossibility of predicting the future of a relationship, no matter how binding the intensity of it may seem. Slim sings it as a typically cool reaction to her preceding declaration of love to Harry, and, as in 'Am I Blue', her directing of lines towards him provokes reaction shots registering his wry response.

Cricket, on the other hand, directs his musical performance to an undifferentiated audience from a securely fixed position in the mise-en-scène. The 'Hong Kong Blues' sequence showcases a familiar Hoagy Carmichael composition (a hit in 1938), the perform-



ance of which was promised in publicity leading up to the release of the film.<sup>7</sup> None of the main characters is present for much of the song, and when Harry does appear on the scene, his dialogue is slotted into the instrumental break, the film returning to the band when the singing resumes. Yet, even as Cricket / Carmichael performs a 'star turn', this is framed as something that takes place, and finds its significance, in a group situation.

The first shot tracks out from a close up of Cricket's hands on the piano to a full shot of the whole group clustered around him, a combination of musicians and spectators. Typically, this shot contextualises Cricket's performance within a crowd. The song is a comical tale of a man desperately trying to escape to America from Hong Kong, and Cricket lends it a mock-dramatic air by addressing particular members of the audience individually (as if to force them into acknowledging the tragedy of the story). As he prepares for the first chorus, he is singing specifically to the woman sitting behind him. There is a cut to register the direction of his gaze, but it is not of the same type as the individuating reaction shots of Harry when Slim sings to him. Instead, the film moves from a side view of Cricket to a fuller frontal shot, which incorporates the woman behind him on the left of the frame, but also the whole audience behind her and his fellow musicians on the right. In the left foreground stands a woman, in whose general direction Cricket reorientates his gaze. The next shot is the mirror image of the previous one. The woman to whom he had originally been singing now occupies the left foreground, whilst the spectators leaning on the piano are in the background. Cricket is in the centre of the image, seen from behind. Cricket is clearly a magnet for these women but at no point does the film encourage us to see his gaze as fixing on, or returning to, any one of them so as to suggest the fact of, or the desire for, a personal connection. (See right.)

The intervention of Harry, whilst choreographed so as not to distract from Cricket's singing, provides another dynamic with which to emphasise the communal, rather than individually expressive, nature of his performance. Harry is looking for his friend Eddie (Walter Brennan), who has been kidnapped by the Gestapo. His concern for his drunken friend is one of the ways in which Harry asserts his responsibilities in personal terms; his actions in the final scenes are spurred by a desire to protect Eddie rather than to further the Resistance cause. The embedding of this concern within Cricket's comic musical performance is not just an example of the 'anempathetic' potential of diegetic music to play on indifferently to the drama elsewhere in the scene (Chion 1994: 8-9). It also shows how Harry's adherence to his 'own feeling centre of identity' bestows upon him an energetic movement and potential for individually conceived action. In contrast Cricket sits at the centre of a collective identity, his acts of creativity contained within the band.

A small exception to this is the mini-narrative detailing Cricket's writing of 'How Little We Know'. The viewer is made aware he is composing this song midway through the film, with three versions of it heard in relatively close succession towards the end (Slim's vocal version and a romantic instrumental take that is interrupted by Slim saying goodbye to Cricket and then immediately reprised, in an upbeat register, to





accompany Harry, Slim and Eddie's departure). The initial compositional process, then, is identified as Cricket's alone.

However, this process is introduced as one with which Cricket is struggling. His playing of the song's melody on his piano attracts Slim's attention, but when she asks him 'what's the name of that tune', he replies 'hasn't got a name yet, I've just been fooling around with the lyrics – they're not so hot either'. He proceeds to sing an introductory stanza that is written from the perspective of someone lamenting the lack of romance in his life (the first lines capture the moping tone: 'I run to the telephone whenever it rings / I can't be alone, it's one of those things'). Despite Slim's approval, he reiterates that he is still trying to find the right lyric. He continues to play the song instrumentally after Harry comes in and has a needling discussion with Slim that ends with Harry asking Cricket to make sure she gets on the plane out of Martinique. After Harry has gone, Cricket takes up the melody on his piano again, while Slim comments ruefully, 'well it was nice while it lasted'. Cricket replies, 'maybe it's better this way, Slim'.

'How Little We Know' is next heard in its completed version, whereupon it becomes clear that the original first stanza has been discarded. Instead, the song begins with a line reminiscent of Cricket's earlier words to Slim: 'Maybe it happens this way'. The lyrics of the song are now in the first-person plural, rather than singular, and are noticeably more worldly-wise, whilst still romantic, than the original stanza. As previously mentioned, Slim sings it as a cool musical reiteration of the declaration of love she has just made to Harry and the lyrics fit the temperament of their relationship. In fact, the playing of the tune underneath Harry and Slim's earlier terse conversation and the approximation of Cricket's spoken line at that point to the first line of the completed song, suggest that Cricket drew inspiration from that exchange, causing him to replace the original lyrics with more sophisticated ones.

In this way, the process of writing 'How Little We Know' is cast as a collaborative effort between Cricket, Harry and Slim, even if the latter pair remain unaware of the fact. The song was, in fact, co-written by Carmichael (music) and Johnny Mercer (lyrics) especially for the film, and its appearance is signalled in the opening credits. However, in the same way Carmichael is shown to remain in character as he performs his own composition 'Hong Kong Blues', the songwriting process associated in the film with 'How Little We Know' is also consistent with Cricket's overall characterisation: as a figure who draws inspiration from his interactions with others and whose activities (musical and otherwise) serve to support the leads (through her performance, Slim turns 'How Little We Know' into her and Harry's song). Cricket may be able to provide the soundtrack for Slim and Harry as they exit the hotel, but his integration within a group makes it appropriate that he does not go with them. The band are left to close the film, and Cricket's final action is characteristically effacing and collegial. It consists of a nod towards a fellow musician that acknowledges the collective effort that has generated the musical support for the now departed leads.

## Conclusion

In his account of the supporting plots of *Shadow of a Doubt* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1943), Andrew Klevan claims that the secondary performers 'signal some other stories, never properly told' (2005: 90). This is another possibility for supporting figures, but Carmichael's characters do not intimate untold stories in this way: their actions, such as they are, are dedicated to present circumstances (so we do not get a sense of their backstories) and their energies are invested in supporting others (so their own drives, desires and more self-centred experiences are not presented). Even when Carmichael sings his own songs, potentially intimating a story about his extra-textual fame, the films avoid presenting his musical performances as star turns, though they might develop into star turns for someone else. I have suggested that this type of musical performance is perfectly appropriate when considered in relation to Carmichael's low-key extra-filmic musical persona of the time and with reference to the traits displayed by Carmichael's characters in the non-musical passages of the films. Unlike Gabbard, I do not view these roles as compromising an extra-textual musical persona. Rather, the characters can be seen to occupy integral positions within the films' fictional worlds. Typically they combine authority, in terms of knowledge, with inactivity, in view of their lack of impact on the dramatic situations.

I have noted the fact of Carmichael's racial identity without making it the focus of my analysis. As Gabbard suggests, however, Carmichael was cast in 'servant' roles that were often filled by African-American performers (1996: 264). The routine casting of African-Americans in supporting roles as servants to white protagonists has obvious racist implications (see Bogle 2001: 35-100). One way to extend my case study of Carmichael would be to consider the significance of his whiteness in light of the fact that, at the time he was appearing in films, the particular character type associated with him, the supporting musical figure, was routinely played by African-American performers (Bogle 2001: 117-136).

Thomas Cripps privileges the question of race in his analysis of Sam in *Casablanca*. As with my reading of Carmichael's performances, Cripps notes the combination of knowledge and inactivity that marks Sam's character:

He knows all about running guns in Ethiopia and the fighting in Spain and the rainy farewell in Paris. But in the end he is left only with a piece of Rick's place in partnership with Ferrari, the master black marketeer of Casablanca.

It is this uninvolved Sam that marks him as a creature of the old racial order: No grail regained for him, no quest attained, no cause to be won. And yet, like the black deckhand in Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*, he holds a firm place in the plot and therefore stands on the verge of a new racial order (2000: 17).

Cripps divides the twin character traits I have identified in Carmichael's performances along racial lines: Sam's knowledge indicates a more progressive racial order; his

uninvolvement registers the continuing influence of a regressive one. This distinction is complicated if the mixture of knowledge and uninvolvement is taken as a fundamental component of a stock character, rather than as a combination unique to Sam. The similarities between my reading of Carmichael's characters and Cripps' of Sam intimate this might be the case. This may not be surprising given *To Have and Have Not's* evident debt to *Casablanca* (in fact Hoagy Carmichael played the role of Sam in a TV version of *Casablanca* in 1955). A wider survey of supporting musical figures would be needed to demonstrate the existence of a distinct type, but here are a few examples: Oscar Levant's musical sidekicks in *Rhapsody in Blue* (Irving Rapper, 1945) and *Humoresque* (Jean Negulesco, 1946); Perry Blackwell's bar-room pianist in *Pillow Talk* (Michael Gordon, 1959); and Louis Armstrong's fictionalised performance of himself in *High Society* (Charles Walters, 1956). These performers, variously white, African-American, male and female, all play musical characters who know a lot, but do little, suggesting that the mere presence of these attributes is not, in itself, a significant marker of a film's identity politics.

However, in my analysis of Carmichael, I have sought to demonstrate how these broad traits are given a specific inflection through the details of mise-en-scène and (musical) sound associated with the character: race may be a divisive factor in determining the way a performance is 'fleshed out' in its details. To offer just one example, Louis Armstrong's character in *High Society* shares with Carmichael's characters the qualities of being highly knowledgeable about narrative events, but ineffectual in terms of influencing the course of the action. Unlike Carmichael's characters, who are central to the dramatically charged spaces of his films, Armstrong's omniscient impotence is exercised very much from the sidelines. For most of the film, he and his band stand around in a parlour, while the action develops in an adjacent estate.

From this position, Armstrong acts as a Greek Chorus figure, introducing and closing the story and interjecting commentary at various stages. His sidelining is justified narratively by his adoption of this storytelling role, but inconsistencies arise when sidelining also becomes a feature of his musical representation in the film. His musical performances are either circumscribed by the spatial marginalisation of the character (with shots of him initiating a musical performance being followed by a movement elsewhere) or are presented via the agency of Dexter (Bing Crosby), the (white) character who has invited him to perform as part of a jazz festival. This marginalisation occurs despite the film's constant references to Armstrong's extra-textual musical fame (his character shares his name and there is a whole number, 'Now You Has Jazz', which celebrates his musical talents and names the members of his band). In *High Society*, there remains a visibly and audibly unresolved tension between the presence Armstrong's music is said to have, and the presence it is shown to have.

These comments suggest that Carmichael might enjoy a form of white privilege in the roles he was allowed to perform. In *To Have and Have Not*, the specific siting of Cricket's band as central to the space of their bar is thrown into sharp relief by the appearance

of the musicians, presented as indigenous to the island of Martinique, in the other bar Harry and Slim visit. They appear as blurs in the foreground as the camera tracks across with the main characters, no attempt being made to represent the relations between them. Within the fictional world of *To Have and Have Not*, Carmichael's character occupies a more central position than these other musical performers, who are clearly relegated to a tertiary level. Across fictional worlds created in the same industrial context, his characters may hold a distinctively unassuming centrality in comparison to supporting musical figures ostensibly operating on the *same* narrative level. Cripps cites as evidence of Sam's 'privileged status' his occupation with Rick (Humphrey Bogart) of a shadowy 'male "keep"', after 'the public rooms of the Café Americain have been invaded by figures from a world Rick wants no part of' (2000: 20). This suggests an intimacy between the bar-room pianist and protagonist that can only be expressed in private, in circumstances where the natural order has been overturned. By contrast, the privilege of Carmichael's characters is much more pervasive: despite the infrequency of their narrative interventions and the modesty of their expression, their interactions with the protagonists are made without furtiveness and they adopt with composure a central position within their films' most public spaces.

Ian Garwood

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<sup>1</sup> For example, many of the essays in the academic anthology *Representing Jazz* seek to describe how Hollywood has diluted the performances of various jazz practitioners in their films or to confront the problems filmmakers have faced when attempting to incorporate 'uncompromised' versions of the music into their narratives.

<sup>2</sup> Apart from the quotes from Charles Emge (who had a regular column in *Down Beat*) the other comments will have been written by staff writers.

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to the keepers of the Altman Koss collection of audio-visual recordings of jazz performances for allowing me access to their archives.

<sup>4</sup> In his comments on the first draft of this article, Victor Perkins made the valuable observation that Carmichael was a 'personality' rather than professional actor and, as such, 'immobilising' his characters provided one way of reducing the demands placed upon his acting skills.

<sup>5</sup> Krin Gabbard also notes the therapeutic role Carmichael's characters often play (1996: 263).

<sup>6</sup> In Joseph McBride's *Hawks on Hawks*, Hawks claims Bacall ended up doing all her own singing, although he admits Andy Williams did make recordings that were not eventually used (1982: 130).

<sup>7</sup> The song's appearance was promised in a report in *Down Beat* on 1st May, 1944, six months before the film was released.