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## Southern Discomforts: The Racial Struggle Over Popular TV (Chapter Fourteen of The Revolution Wasn't Televised)

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Mayor Is Hot

# NOBODY'S Coming

## No Horn For 4000 — Too White

**Ben, Lil Joe Follow Hoss**

Al Hirt, "America's greatest trumpet showman," joined the "Bonanza" stars in refusing to appear before a segregated audience.

The New Orleans trumpeter and his jazz group cancelled their engagement at the Mississippi Coliseum last Saturday night just a few minutes before show time.

Since Hirt was the featured attraction of the evening, his cancellation left an audience of over 4,000 with little reason for sitting in the Coliseum. Gradually people picked up their

belongings and filed out, and by nine o'clock on Saturday night the Coliseum was empty and dark.

Hirt's refusal marks the third protest against Mississippi's "way of life" by out-of-state entertainers in less than a month. Just one week ago, Dan Blocker, star of "Bonanza," cancelled his engagement at the Mississippi Industrial Exposition. He was later joined by the two other top stars of the television show.

Together with Blocker, who plays "Hoss"; Mike Landon, known as "Little Joe"; and Lorne Green, who plays the father "Ben Cartwright"; the stars submitted a joint statement to radio

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# southern discomforts

the racial struggle  
over popular tv

s t e v e n   c l a s s e n

The assassination of NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers during the early hours of June 12, 1963 delivered a severe blow to the “Jackson movement”—a local insurgency dedicated to direct action and racial desegregation in the Mississippi capitol.<sup>1</sup> In the days following the murder and Evers’s funeral, “go slow” forces within the NAACP and the Kennedy administration employed successful strategies to curtail the movement’s sustained confrontation campaigns. Still, the deeply felt dissatisfaction of black Mississippians regarding segregation and its implications could not be quickly or strategically allayed. And in the months following Evers’s death, African American frustration with the segregationist status quo motivated further direct action attacks on the terrain of consumerism, popular culture, and entertainment in the Jackson area.<sup>2</sup>

This essay analyzes what was called the “cultural and artistic agitation” campaign carried out by student activists in Jackson, Mississippi during the

winter of 1963–64, involving popular television programs such as *Hootenany USA* and *Bonanza*. Although televised entertainment and fiction, then as now, was often dismissed as at best peripheral to the prominent issues of the day, during the early 1960s many Jackson area residents regarded the viewing of certain television shows and patronage of program sponsors as important social markers. Examination of the activism surrounding *Bonanza*, as well as other televised and local entertainment, reveals how student agitators, employing tactics often invisible to those in power, brought the artificiality and corruption of segregation into the light of public scrutiny, and in the process, disrupted the hegemonic dynamics of coercion and consent necessary to continue such practices.

Theoretically, this account and analysis makes use of Gramsci's insights regarding hegemony, coercion, and consent. Hegemony is conceptualized as the "process whereby the subordinate are led to consent to the system that subordinates them. This is achieved when they 'consent' to view the social system and its everyday embodiments as 'common sense,' [or as] self-evidently natural."<sup>3</sup> Attempting to understand how and why such consent occurs, contemporary theorists have pointed to an important connection—the link between coercive power and hegemonic consensus. An argument prominent in African American scholarship is that consensus is only naturalized or deemed "common sense" when it denies its dialectical relationship to coercion.<sup>4</sup> What is examined here, through the lens of a particular historical moment, is how activism, even with limited resources, exposed the coercive racist practices of segregation in Jackson, and in doing so temporarily disabled the creation of consensus necessary to white power.

The white community's failed segregationist responses to the black student agitation campaign also show how difficult it was for white city officials to unify and police cultural consumption, even among whites. While the reception or consumption of any product may be deemed impolitic, dangerous, unpatriotic, or immoral, this history provides another example of how officially sanctioned proclamations about the "evils" of popular culture may be publicly acknowledged yet privately ignored.

### cultural agitators

A sense of glee, if not gloating, permeated the February 1, 1964, issue of Jackson's alternative civil rights newspaper, the *Mississippi Free Press*. The periodical described trumpeter Al Hirt's last minute cancellation of a local concert as yet another blow to Mississippi's segregationist status quo. The two-inch headline announced: "Nobody's Coming: No Horn for 400—Too White." The *Free Press* described the Hirt cancellation as part of several recent

attacks on segregated entertainment initiated by Tougaloo College students and staff devoted to “cultural and artistic agitation.”<sup>5</sup> Over the course of approximately six months, the small but dedicated Tougaloo “Culture and Arts Committee” had prompted cancellations of scheduled Jackson visits by cast members of popular television shows, world-class musicians, and other prominent personalities. About a half dozen activists, primarily college undergraduates, had severely disrupted the cultural and popular entertainment calendar for a large number of white residents in the Jackson area. In response, an infuriated mayor of Jackson and thousands of Mississippians called for white reciprocation. The seemingly solid walls of segregated entertainment became a site of pitched battle.

The intensity of white backlash to these cancellations was surprising, even to the most enthusiastic activists. Public responses by Jackson Mayor Allen Thompson and other segregationists manifested deeply held convictions regarding the power and importance of popular entertainment in the maintenance of particular social formations. In fact, the mayor went so far as to define the segregationist response to this agitation campaign as “one of the most important efforts” to date. Defending the traditional, yet fragile, racial barriers of segregation alongside the mayor were the vast majority of Mississippi’s political, cultural, and economic institutions. Still, even while enjoying this dominance, many white Mississippians were inconvenienced and deprived of long anticipated cultural events by a small number of activists. The cancellations came unexpectedly, since most white Mississippians, and some of the state’s African Americans, believed strict segregation of entertainment was necessary and natural.

For Austin C. Moore III, a newly arrived student from Chicago, such segregation seemed anything but necessary and natural. Although segregationist practices were widespread in Chicago, racial integration was more common in a limited number of social settings. And as Moore traveled to Tougaloo from Illinois in the autumn of 1962, he was immediately overwhelmed by the oppressive character of southern segregation. Dingy, poorly maintained “Negro” waiting rooms along the railway had welcomed him to Mississippi. As he was driven into Jackson, his “Aunt Sugar” pointed to a prominent downtown movie theater and remarked, “That’s a white theater—I’ll never be able to go in. . . .” Since Moore had worked as an usher at an integrated Chicago theater, he was surprised by his Aunt’s statement and silently pledged to change things in Jackson.<sup>6</sup>

Approximately a year later, Moore became the coordinator of “cultural and artistic agitation” within the small group of Tougaloo staff and students calling themselves the “Nonviolent Agitation Association of College Pupils,” a group affiliated with the national Student Nonviolent Coordinating

Committee (SNCC). At a November 11 meeting at the campus home of Ed and Jeanette King, the Association decided to “work intensively to open entertainment in Jackson.” With regard to segregated events and venues, they resolved that “if we can’t go . . . nobody should be able to attend.”<sup>7</sup>

The most recent catalyst for this meeting was the early November arrest of Tougaloo student Robert Honeysucker and Nicolas Bosanquet, a visiting Cambridge graduate, as they attempted, with tickets in hand, to attend a concert of London’s Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in downtown Jackson.<sup>8</sup> Eventually the city police dropped all charges, aware of their precarious legal position, yet unaware that their racial zealotry would have widespread consequences. Meanwhile, on the campus at Tougaloo, the “cultural and artistic agitators” began correspondence with major motion picture producers and NBC, specifically asking the television network to cancel the Jackson appearances of the *Bonanza* stars, scheduled for early February.<sup>9</sup>

Of more immediate concern to the student group was the appearance of the cast of ABC-TV’s *Original Hootenany USA* at the Jackson City Auditorium on November 15. The network television show, hosted by Jack Linkletter, took the form of “a traveling musical jamboree,” and was taped at a variety of college campuses. Pop-folk musicians such as the Limeliter, the Chad Mitchell trio and the Smothers Brothers were featured on the program, while the producers routinely “blacklisted” artists thought to be leftist, such as Pete Seeger and the Weavers. In response to these McCartheyesque practices, some prominent musicians refused to appear on the show.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, the *Hootenany* cast set to appear in Jackson were folk performers riding a wave of popularity—including Glenn Yarbrough of the Limeliter, the Journeymen, and Jo Mapes. In Mississippi, *Hootenany* fever had been spreading. Shopping malls held “Hoot-teen-nany” promotionals to attract adolescent shoppers and the town’s drive-ins offered films such as *Hootenany Hoot*.

While the pre-concert excitement mounted, the Tougaloo students telephoned the *Hootenany* cast at their Memphis hotel and arranged an informal meeting at the Jackson airport on the day of the concert. Three Tougaloo undergraduates—Austin Moore, Calvin Brown, and Steven Rutledge—met the entertainers upon their arrival in Jackson to explain their position as well as their intention to force a confrontation, if necessary, by attempting to seat Tougaloo students at the *Hootenany* concert. After intensive negotiations involving talent agents and long-distance phone calls, the group cancelled the downtown show, just three hours before the scheduled start. The cast relinquished their appearance fee and volunteered a free and integrated concert that same evening on the campus of Tougaloo. The downtown audi-

torium box office provided refunds for 1,500 ticketholders, many of whom were already dressed for the event.<sup>11</sup>

Yarbrough, speaking for the folk singers, told the local paper, "We're not here to raise moral issues. We didn't want it to happen ourselves, but it was a decision we had to reach."<sup>12</sup> Given the conservative history and management of the *Hootenany* program, it was an especially surprising decision that testified to the persuasiveness and power of the students' tactics. A few days after the incident, Steven Rutledge, who also served as president of Tougaloo's student government, sent the *Hootenany* cast a letter of appreciation for their "courageous and difficult sacrifice," adding that "our evening together with laughter and song did much to reinforce our conviction that we are not alone in the great struggle for human dignity and high principle."<sup>13</sup>

Many white residents and officials in Jackson were embarrassed by the *Hootenany* debacle, but said little publicly, hoping a calm and measured response might be the best strategy. This changed three months later, however, when similar pressure was mobilized regarding upcoming visits from trumpeter Al Hirt and the stars of *Bonanza*, one of television's most popular shows.

Advertisements for the Mississippi Commerce and Industry Exposition promised "Five Big Shows" by the "Three Great Stars of Bonanza—Little Joe, Ben Cartwright, and Hoss," to be held at the Jackson state fairgrounds during the first two days of February. What the local show promoters did not know was that the agitation committee had written letters to NBC and each of the *Bonanza* stars regarding the scheduled appearances. As Moore stated in his appeal to the network:

The American Negro is now struggling for . . . basic freedom. . . . You can play a tremendously important part in this venture. We understand that NBC is sending a group from *Bonanza* to Jackson in February. Two weeks ago a promising young musician, Robert Honeysucker, a Tougaloo music major was arrested. He walked to the same door the white people of Jackson will be entering to see the *Bonanza* cast. . . .

We cannot risk another arrest—or possible violence. Therefore, we hope that the Bonanza cast will be willing to take their stand on the issue. We are asking that you refuse to perform before a segregated audience. . . .<sup>14</sup>

In response to the Tougaloo appeal, the *Bonanza* cast contacted NAACP field secretary Charles Evers in his Jackson office to discuss the local conditions of segregation and subsequently offer their statements of cancellation. Dan Blocker ("Hoss") sent a telegram that was reprinted in the *Jackson Daily News*: "I have long been in sympathy with the Negro struggle for total citizen-

ship, therefore I would find an appearance of any sort before a segregated house completely incompatible with my moral concepts—indeed repugnant.”<sup>15</sup> Later the same day, January 22, Lorne Green (“Ben Cartwright”) and Michael Landon (“Little Joe”) joined Blocker in withdrawing from the appearance. As a last minute replacement, promoters scrambled to arrange an appearance by Donna Douglas —“Ellie Mae” of the *Beverly Hillbillies*—only to have her state that she would be unable to perform. Ironically, as the *Bonanza* cast announced its disgust with the sanctioned practices of Jackson and the South, the *Beverly Hillbillies* and *Bonanza* were among the region’s most popular TV programs. Many Mississippians came to feel that the television stars, influenced by a liberal Hollywood, had snubbed their most faithful fans.

The frustration and anger of white Jackson only intensified when Al Hirt cancelled a March of Dimes benefit concert three days later. Austin Moore attempted to contact Hirt before his arrival in Jackson via a friendly columnist for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Irv Kupcinet. In his column on January 22, Kupcinet wrote, “A long distance call from Jackson, Mississippi, informed us that Al Hirt . . . is scheduled for a concert in the municipal auditorium down there. Audiences in the auditorium are segregated. And the caller wants us to so inform Hirt. Which we hereby do.”<sup>16</sup> When the trumpeter still traveled to Jackson for the January 25 concert, Moore sent a telegram to him. It read in part:

Your performance this evening at the Mississippi Coliseum will serve the purpose of perpetuating the vicious system of segregation in Jackson. We speak in behalf of many Negro citizens who would like to attend your performance in dignity but are prevented from doing so by the city’s racial policies. Other groups, including *Hootenany USA* and *Bonanza*, have cancelled their scheduled performances for this reason. We urgently request you to cancel also. . . .<sup>17</sup>

Approximately three hours prior to curtain time, Hirt asked to talk with Moore face-to-face. Accompanied by friends, Moore gained access to the musician’s room at a whites-only motel by borrowing a jacket and disguising himself as a room service waiter. Hearing that African Americans would attempt to attend the concert and that violence and arrests might ensue, Hirt finally decided to cancel. The time was 8:40, forty minutes after the scheduled performance was to start. Four thousand concert-goers sat in place as a sponsor reluctantly came onto the stage and read Moore’s telegram to Hirt, adding that the program was cancelled. Before he had finished, he was drowned out by shouting voices and obscenities. Jackson’s *Clarion Ledger*, after contacting Hirt, claimed that the musician reneged out of concern for the



safety of his crew and the audience. It went on to quote Hirt as telling Moore, "I think you're kind of using me, and so are the March of Dimes people."<sup>18</sup> Another local newspaper account stated Hirt's agent "had been worked on by Negro groups."<sup>19</sup>

However the incident was portrayed, it was the talk of Jackson, a story told with considerable resentment and anger by many white Mississippians. Not only had they been snubbed by Hollywood, but now literally "stood up" by a white Southerner of considerable fame. Further, the *Hootenany*, Hirt, and *Bonanza* incidents had established a threatening precedent. A few days later, a top administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Agency (NASA), James Webb, cancelled an appearance sponsored by the Jackson Chamber of Commerce, citing the problem of segregation. In February and April, pianist Gary Graffman and soprano Birgit Nilsson both refused to perform before all-white Jackson audiences. The musicians, each internationally renowned, had been contacted by Moore, as the Culture and Arts Committee targeted all visiting artists associated with the Jackson Music Association community concert series.

Reacting to these events, the *Mississippi Free Press* editorialized in a column titled, "Now It's Beginning to Hurt Both Ways":

It appears as though a precedent has been established that anybody that is anybody in the entertainment field does not perform in Jackson to segregated audiences. . . . So now, some of the white folks know what it is like to have the right to enjoy something kept from them. Under the circumstances, we bet that they do not like the system any better than we do. Let's get together and do something about it.<sup>20</sup>

The cancellations in Jackson also had implications outside the city, as they articulated a successful strategy for drawing national attention to the practices of various entertainers and southern communities. Prominent newspapers such as *The New York Times* began to carry articles highlighting the debates between performers, agents, and talent organizations regarding appearances before segregated audiences. During the winter months, the national SNCC leadership, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the NAACP joined in the protest against segregated entertainment in Mississippi. In March, the NAACP appealed to about sixty prominent musicians to form a committee to help make cultural events accessible to both black and white citizens in southern cities, using musician boycotts when necessary.<sup>21</sup>

Although the NAACP, CORE, and other civil rights groups had made progressive strides through legislation, law, and direct negotiation with various industries, the tactics of Tougaloo's Culture and Arts Committee were

noticeable for their relative informality, immediacy, and lack of official sanction. Frustrated by the gradualist gains of the national NAACP, the student committee and the Jackson movement chose to engage in direct action strategies that were often outside the purview and control of larger official institutions. Rather than enter into a protracted process of negotiation and compromise, the students moved quickly and decisively to achieve their goals. When various performers such as Hirt and the *Hootenany* cast initially resisted Committee appeals to cancel local segregated appearances, the group countered by threatening to appear at performances, risking violent confrontations with local patrons and police. These tactics were agreed upon without consultation from those outside the campus or within the college administration, as students knew that while Tougaloo was a "safe haven" for black Mississippians, a majority of campus residents and employees, as well as many outside the college gates, were uncomfortable with or opposed to such activism. The Committee's attacks on segregationist culture displayed a quality of spontaneity, coming from a small group that was only loosely organized, yet filled with enthusiasm, ideas, and frustration.

So while white constituents of legitimated culture planned and promoted events, Austin Moore and others quietly mounted a counterattack, using quasi-invisible practices—actions that were visible only as they disrupted public activities and consumption.<sup>22</sup> Operating on the terrain of dominant culture, the student agitators looked for, and found, points of vulnerability in a superficially stable social practice. This was, as the theoretical work of Michel de Certeau suggests, a tactical struggle in which the creativity of the subordinated was revealed and artfully practiced in hostile territory. As de Certeau theorizes:

The space of the tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. . . . It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. . . .<sup>23</sup>

While there was little the Tougaloo group could do with regard to the production of network television shows or popular music, it intervened tactically on "foreign territory" where segregation was most pronounced and also most vulnerable—in the local conditions of performance and reception. These conditions represented a momentary window of opportunity for the students and were the point of productive struggle.

Given the size and resources of the Tougaloo group, there were relatively few opportunities for such an effective public resistance to the status-quo.

And the students' activism, more than merely "making do" within an oppressive social system, bolstered other efforts to boycott or disrupt segregationist white commerce, both in Jackson and elsewhere. The students also effectively publicized the continuing African American fight to change racial segregation.

White Mississippians were nothing if not surprised by the exposed vulnerability and instability of the segregationist tradition. Most of the state's citizens had known nothing other than a racially segregated society. Suddenly, this routine and tradition was under attack, as was the foundational myth of the happy Negro living in a world shut off from white experience and privilege. While the Evers murder, funeral, and ensuing mass marches publicized black dissatisfaction, the Tougaloo students demonstrated that this discontent was not anomalous or short-lived, but enduring and deeply rooted in the segregationist past. Recognizing this as a moment that threatened segregation, some of Mississippi's dominant institutions responded with appeals to consolidate white power and further police popular tastes and practices.

### **blackening out *bonanza***

Leading the charge to rescue Jackson's "way of life" and cultural reputation was Allen Thompson, the city's mayor. He initiated the segregationist counterattack with a lengthy speech to the city's department heads, the day after *Bonanza* stayed away:

... this "Bonanza" thing to my mind is one of the greatest insults to the intelligence and to the activities and the good works that the people of Jackson and Mississippi are doing that I have ever heard. ... But let me tell you something. We want industries, we want business, we want people to come to Jackson *only* if they like what they see—only if they like what we are doing, and only if they see the potential booming future of this City.<sup>24</sup>

The civic leader went on to read letters that Moore had sent him, outlining the Cultural and Artistic Committee's concerns and correspondence with NBC-TV regarding the *Bonanza* appearance. The mayor had underestimated the student activists, and admitted as much, with marked condescension: "Feature that—a student writing a letter like this and having more influence than all of the other conservative White people, good Colored people—one little pupil."<sup>25</sup>

Thompson concluded his attack on the Tougaloo students and "Bonanza" cast by calling for a "countermovement" that reemployed the selective buy-

ing strategy already used with great success by black Mississippians against white businesses. During the 1963 "Black Christmas" campaign, the Jackson nonviolent movement, including students and staff from Tougaloo, conducted a sustained, successful boycott of downtown merchants by discouraging the holiday purchase of decorations and gifts. The economic impact was severe, and several white businesses eventually closed or moved. Still hurting from this experience, with another embarrassment fresh on his mind, Thompson called for reciprocation, echoing a local newspaper columnist who suggested, "Why not fight them with their own weapon?"<sup>26</sup> Selective buying of goods advertised on television was to be accompanied by what he termed "selective looking" at television programming. Under such scrutiny, he was convinced programs such as *Bonanza* would fade away:

Jackson, a typical Mississippi city, and Mississippi will be here a long time after "Bonanza" is gone, a long time after "Hoss" and the others have galloped away—because TV programs come, and they go. You look at some of the wonderful people who have been stars in the past. Look at the TV programs that you wouldn't have missed a year or so ago—you won't even sit down and look at them today. "Bonanza" will be gone unless it is a great exception, and it seems to me the great exceptions are people who don't get to meddling with other people's local business. . . .<sup>27</sup>

The daily newspapers of Jackson immediately picked up and retransmitted the mayor's remarks, as did the Jackson Citizens' Council's February newsletter. Thompson admitted that he had enjoyed *Bonanza*—in fact, had "thought it was a wonderful program," but vowed that it would never come into his home again. A few days later, the *Jackson Daily News* pictured him sitting in front of a desk covered with "approximately 2,500 cards and letters . . . calling for a blackout of the *Bonanza* television show."<sup>28</sup> Heartened by this "favorable response," Mayor Thompson announced he would expand his efforts to destroy *Bonanza* across the state. In an accompanying article, the Mayor was quoted as saying:

[The blackout] will lead to the cancellation of the Bonanzas. . . . It will renew our courage to do what is right and necessary. Hundreds of thousands of people in at least several southern states will go along with us—and other millions all over the U.S. will later on regret they did not. . . . If we prevail in this—one of our most important efforts—your public officials in Mississippi and all over the South will be tremendously encouraged. . . .<sup>29</sup>

The Jackson Citizens' Council, a chapter of the segregationist white Citizens' Council, used Thompson's statements to warn Mississippians against watching "TV programs which feature . . . integrationist entertainers, or any other program which favors race-mixing." The Council's newsletter also reiterated the mayor's selective buying scheme.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, a turn of events that some might have considered trivial, or at worst, slightly frustrating, became the focus of public discourse. Concert cancellations and white boycott plans were regular front page news in Jackson's two notoriously racist dailies, the *Daily News* and *Clarion Ledger*. Going beyond expected statements of white denunciation, the mayor forced the issue: Watch *Bonanza* and further imperil southern culture and traditions, or "black out *Bonanza*," and bring honor to the state of Mississippi as well as the segregationist fight. In bringing this battle to the fore, Thompson and institutions of dominant culture called attention to the centrality of coercion in racial crises. They had, perhaps unwittingly, recirculated the knowledge that at least some, if not many, African Americans both desired and were forcibly denied cultural opportunities. The racist myth of the happy, content Negro was being eroded. Rather than ignoring, trivializing, or downplaying the Tougaloo interventions, segregationist leaders marked them as a point of primary identification, and opted for a response that only encouraged wider scrutiny and discussion of entertainment, popular culture, and their relationship to nonconsensual domination.

Letters to the editors of the Jackson dailies reflected some of the issues converging at this point in time. A majority of the letters printed in the *Clarion Ledger* and *Daily News* repeated the mayor's call for a "Bonanza blackout," while asserting that such programs were unneeded and unwanted. One letter, written by a resident of Vicksburg, Mississippi, and reprinted in different forms by both Jackson papers, epitomized much of the published correspondence:

When the Hollywood stars of *Bonanza* refused to appear in Jackson recently, I immediately cut that show off my list. I am sure most of my fellow Mississippians feel as I do. Who gives a tinker's damn about Hollywood stars, or that rat race in Hollywood anyway, and who needs some Hollywood actor or actress in Mississippi to be happy, or to put over any show in Mississippi when we have Mississippi people with the best talent in the U.S.A., and our Mississippi girls are the most beautiful in the world. . . . I predict television won't last, just as the movies didn't. Some of the TV shows are terrible and the singing commercials and other stupid commercials get on an adult's nerves as well as children and sometimes they feel like busting the TV up, and it probably

would be a good idea. . . . If the actors from Hollywood do not want to come to our wonderful state, I say good riddance. Let Al Hirt blow his trumpet in the French Quarter in New Orleans or on Ed Sullivan's show.<sup>31</sup>

Along the same lines, a Jackson citizen wrote a letter combining the common "who needs them" theme, with an inflection of Christianity that was also standard to segregationist arguments, juxtaposing the purity of white Bible belters with the heathens outside:

Speaking of the Cartwright family of the *Bonanza* Chevrolet show, we got along fine before we ever heard of them, and we can get along fine without them or the products they advertise, as long as they feel the way they do. They should stay away from Mississippi, or some good, kind, warmhearted Christian may get to them and convert them to a real clean way of living and loving. I feel sorry for them because they need some teaching on God's Word, because they do not practice what they preach. I watch their show mainly because I haven't seen any Negroes on it. But from now on my TV set will be turned off during this and Ed Sullivan's shows—and neither will I buy their sponsor's products.<sup>32</sup>

Throughout the newspaper coverage and official comments on the cancellations, as well as letters to the editor, were condemnations of "promises broken" by the stars that failed to appear. In connection with the broken promises theme, several letters aimed at Hirt claimed he had abandoned sick children by failing to appear at the March of Dimes fundraiser. For example, one Jackson resident opined:

It has been really amusing to watch the NAACP frighten the Ol Hoss mules and Hootenany goats into tucking their tails and littering the air with heel dust. . . . But the amusement was turned into "Hirt" horror to find that there exists, anywhere in the civilized world, a group or any kind of being capable of striking such a low blow to little sick and helpless, crippled children, in need of medical aid, as Al Hirt did here. . . . Civilized people should not tolerate an entertainer with that kind of a heart.<sup>33</sup>

Throughout the letters, mayoral statements, and periodicals of the white Citizens' Council, there were similar characterizations of Al Hirt, the *Bonanza* cast, and other artists as immoral, unethical, untrustworthy, un-Christian, and liberal or "communistic." Tremendously popular personalities were

transformed into dishonest cowardly villains, virtually overnight. As *Clarion Ledger* columnist Tom Ethridge wrote with regard to *Bonanza*:

These famous “Cartwrights” portray he-men of courage and honor on television every Sunday night—heroes who brave all manner of dangers and threats in routine manner. But now, they stampede when the NAACP whispers “Boo” off camera. It is well known to all “Bonanza” fans that the word of a “Cartwright” is as good as his written bond. On the screen, that is. But in real life, it now develops that the “Cartwright” word can’t be trusted any further than a Ponderosa bull can be tossed by the tail.<sup>34</sup>

A few days later, the *Clarion Ledger* took the unusual step of publishing a response to Ethridge from Charles Evers, the state’s NAACP field secretary. Evers directly challenged the hero/villain theme advanced by Ethridge and others. Speaking of Dan Blocker, Lorne Green, and Michael Landon, Evers argued:

That these three men have indicated that they will not aid or abet “age old customs in Mississippi” is not astonishing. It is astonishing, however, that the people of Mississippi continue to believe that they can expect to be treated with respect while they treat nearly 50 percent of their native Mississippians with disrespect. Sorry, Mr. Ethridge, any way you read this incident, Mississippi can’t be made the hero.<sup>35</sup>

Although the published letters of support for the “Bonanza blackout” far outnumbered correspondents critical or skeptical of the crusade, a few letters provided unusual perspectives on the cancellations. For example, after folksinger Joan Baez had made a successful concert appearance at integrated Tougaloo College, a Biloxi resident concluded his letter with tongue firmly in cheek: “If many more renowned artists cancel Jackson performances, we may all have to go to Tougaloo for our cultural and aesthetic pleasures. But, of course we could always watch TV—or could we?” Weeks earlier, this same writer had penned:

Another drab week has passed without *Bonanza*. Tell me again, now, just what is the difference between white and Negro boycotts? Of course, this dilemma would never have arisen if we pure white Christians had been attending our segregated worship services on Sunday evenings.

P.S. Rumor has it that some Jackson citizens have lowered their shades and watched *Bonanza* anyway. . . .<sup>36</sup>

Finally, after weeks of angry letters to the editor decrying the actions of Hirt, *Hootenany*, and the Ponderosa gang, one reader said “enough”:

Quit sending in those letters concerning “fat old Hoss Cartwright.” Don’t you realize that this is just what that communistic NAACP wants you to do? Nothing could make them happier than to see all you learned sociologists, politicians, and philosophers out there in prejudice land squirming. All this outraged uproar is just what Mr. [Medgar] Evers would have wanted—had he not been murdered in cold blood. If you had just ignored the whole situation and acted as if you didn’t care, you would have defeated the NAACP.<sup>37</sup>

This reader’s assessment was largely correct. Although the Jackson movement and Tougaloo students would not have been simply stopped by white apathy and silence, aggressive white reaction called attention to the operations of white power and domination. These previously naturalized operations of power were put into public debate, discussed on the streets of Jackson, and detailed in popular media accounts both outside and within Mississippi.

Earlier Jackson activism, such as Tougaloo student sit-ins, had received little, if any, local media attention, and the agitation group expected more of the same in the *Bonanza* incident—unofficial censorship and nonrecognition. In fact, nonrecognition had long been at the heart of segregationist strategy, in reaction to individual African Americans as well as the larger black freedom fight. White supremacist violence against rights activists was certainly a constant threat and reality, but publicly both it and the voices of dissent were either ignored or explained away. The Jackson police had an informal agreement with the local broadcast media that any scenes of racial confrontation or violence were not to be aired, in order to maintain “public safety.” The local censorship of any broadcast materials deemed communist, integrationist, or otherwise unsettling to the status quo was commonly justified by the seemingly ambiguous, yet quite revealing, call to “maintain the public order.” At Jackson’s powerful ABC and NBC affiliate, WLBT-TV, the news policy was that controversial or confrontational news footage would not be broadcast, nor would any programs discussing issues of “segregation or integration.”<sup>38</sup> So it was to the students’ considerable delight that the mayor and local media loudly articulated the counterattack in the case of *Bonanza*—confirming the importance of entertainment and the struggle for its control. What was usually dismissed as “just entertainment” now became a vital social concern.



While dozens of Mississippi residents spoke of their disdain for *Bonanza*, Al Hirt, and others, they took the time and energy to write letters to publications for months after the initial incidents. The issue had incredible salience and resonance within the white community. For at least two years after the cancellations, letters were being received by the newspapers, denouncing the performers and advising boycotts. Moore received letters from detractors outside Mississippi that obviously had heard of the agitation campaign and had taken the time to rebuke his “dangerous” activities. For all the language about not “giving a damn,” many people did care, and some admitted they were forgoing their favorite shows. Others said nothing, or perhaps publicly toed the segregationist line, but kept the TV on and the shades down.

### watching out of sight

While claiming a dedication to segregation and a “southern way of life,” many Jacksonians were loath to give up Sunday evenings with the Cartwrights. In Jackson, and around the nation, the popularity of *Bonanza* had grown with its move in 1961 to the nine o’clock Sunday evening slot. In fact, shortly before the cast cancelled in Jackson, a local newspaper described the program as Jackson’s top-rated television show.<sup>39</sup> Even those most committed to killing integrationist efforts, such as the mayor, admitted that the program was a personal favorite.

It is understandable, then, that the rumors regarding secretive viewing of *Bonanza* behind closed doors had considerable substance. Despite the mayor’s plea, invoking all things good and southern, and perhaps feelings of guilt, the pleasures of the Ponderosa often privately won out. Watching the program was nothing to announce in church or to talk about with friends in restaurants, but people still enjoyed it outside the surveillance of institutionalized segregationism. The show’s local ratings remained strong, in the midst of a publicly well-supported campaign against it.

Even as fallen segregationists watched in privacy behind drawn shades, Jackson’s WLBT-TV refused to disrupt airing of the weekly program, and local businesses continued to air advertising alongside the show. This is somewhat surprising, as the station was a well-established foe to all integration and civil rights efforts, and eventually lost its license after investigations into accusations of racial discrimination. The station’s manager, Fred Beard, was a prominent member of the Jackson Citizens’ Council, and had publicly gloated about interrupting or blocking network television programs featuring African Americans. But in this instance, WLBT, as well as thousands of viewers, had only a deaf ear for the mayor’s appeal. The station’s program-

ming director, Hewett Griffin, recalled that the show continued to be a strong performer for the local broadcaster. In short, people continued to watch, and businesses persisted in their pursuit of profit.

By repeating widespread calls for boycotts of *Bonanza* and network sponsors, Jackson's mayor and many white Mississippians hoped to "boycott the boycotters"—to wound the civil rights movement with one of its own weapons. Hundreds, if not thousands, of Mississippians publicly vowed in newspapers and meetings to undercut integrationist interests through the power of white dollars. Published letters carried promises not to purchase Chevrolet cars or other products advertised on *Bonanza*. Writers argued that a unified white Mississippi would be a crushing economic force opposing civil rights activity.

However, despite the best efforts of Mayor Thompson and the pleas of the supremacist press and prominent Jackson citizens, the white counter-boycott never achieved its goal—*Bonanza* was never "blackened out." In practice, the "southern way of life" was quite at odds with its romantic and politicized abstraction. WLBT continued to air *Bonanza*, with local advertising support, and thousands of Mississippians remained at least privately loyal to a publicly discredited practice, despite the fact that published segregationist voices spoke out against those who failed to fully support Thompson's boycott call. As the various factions of Mississippi's white establishment argued among themselves and failed to form strategic alliances, the fissures in racial segregation grew large and more vulnerable to attack.

In terms of economic interests, Jackson commerce and industry followed a pattern common throughout the South. Businesses at first reacted to local activism with shock and resentment, followed by a period of silence (allowing extremists to fill the vacuum), and finally took back a degree of civic leadership through opposition to extremist activities that threatened economic progress.<sup>40</sup> As one historian has argued, while southern businesses previously believed that economic progress and southern racial practices could be simultaneously supported, civil rights activism forced a choice, and in the "new ordering of their values and priorities," economic imperatives were placed above those of race.<sup>41</sup> In Jackson, for example, the Chamber of Commerce publicly urged compliance with the 1964 Civil Rights Act following its Congressional codification, and the white Citizens' Council grew resentful of what it called the "surrender" by prominent city businesses.<sup>42</sup> Even while Mayor Thompson urged wide-scale boycotting of *Bonanza* and its sponsors, many conservative state politicians remained mum. Behind such actions, or inaction, was an abiding fear that in the absence of legal obedience and order, new capital investments would be discouraged and/or economic stability and progress would be imperiled.

In this instance, the contradictory impulses of capitalism, though fraught with their own histories of racism and oppression, prompted Mississippi business interests to prioritize the pursuit of profit over adherence to a particular white supremacist agenda. To pursue a hard segregationist line was to risk the appearance of political and racial extremism, jeopardizing cooperative efforts with interests outside the state as well as long-term development and growth. Eventually, southern business people began to further acknowledge and appreciate the economic power of African American patronage. And gradually, a desire to gain a larger share in the national economic prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s diluted southern segregationist zeal.<sup>43</sup>

## conclusion

When considered within the larger context of the '60s civil rights movement, the Tougaloo students' "cultural and artistic agitation" bears similarities to integrationist campaigns waged elsewhere. As in other parts of the South, many of the agitators that called for change and risked segregationist retaliation were youths and college students that had grown impatient with gradualist agendas that looked to law and official governmental institutions. In Mississippi and elsewhere, these direct action and confrontation campaigns signaled the rise of SNCC and altered the course of the black freedom fight.

The activism and reactionism in Jackson put the lie to the notion that popular culture, its productions, or pleasures could be perfectly disciplined or managed by a particular social formation. Integration activists intervened in cultural productions they neither owned nor permanently controlled. Popular entertainment, such as *Hootenany*, *Bonanza*, and Al Hirt, were both sites of and resources for racial struggle, appreciated and employed by both oppressor and oppressed.

Somewhat ironically, it was the voice and communicative power of white Mississippians that aided the disruption of segregationist practices. As one letter writer in the *Clarion Ledger* noted, white reaction worked to the advantage of the activists, calling wider attention both to the segregationist position and the reality of coercion. In doing so, it forced a veiled contradiction into public view. Contrary to the fundamental tenets of segregationism and the "southern way of life," African Americans were not satisfied with limited cultural opportunities and resources, but were forced to adapt under the threats of police violence and jail. For decades consent had been enabled and encouraged through the coerced segregation of popular entertainment, a system that came to be widely regarded as natural and inevitable. But as knowledge regarding the coercive nature of segregated entertainment gained wider circulation and attention, consent and cooperation with segregation began to

fragment. The struggle over entertainment revealed that which the system had worked so hard to conceal.

Although Austin Moore left Tougaloo College shortly after the agitation campaign, he stayed in touch with family and friends, including his Aunt Sugar, and heard regular reports about the changes slowly occurring in Jackson. One such report was a memorable telephone call he received from his aunt several years later. Something she had thought impossible in 1963 had occurred: She had attended a movie at one of the previously white, segregated theaters in downtown Jackson. Gradually—too gradually for many—the ideas and beliefs that undergirded racial oppression were being more fully revealed and challenged. While Moore and the other “cultural and artistic agitators” had not brought an immediate halt to segregationist practices or racist policies, they had prompted progressive change by further eroding what one “agitator” termed “the self-serving segregationist myth of Mississippi black satisfaction.”<sup>44</sup> Calling attention to the nonconsensual domination that accompanied such mythology was but one part of the larger, ongoing struggle against white supremacy and its institutions.

#### notes

For their generosity, help and encouragement, I wish to thank the staff of the L. Zenobia Coleman Library at Tougaloo College, Austin C. Moore III, Jeanette King, and Rev. R. Edwin King, Jr. Reverend King graciously offered his own unpublished manuscript describing this activism, in addition to the wealth of archival holdings in his name. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1994 conference of the International Communication Association.

1. Before he was shot in the back in his own driveway, Medgar Evers was one of a handful of civil rights activists that dared challenge the powerful cultural institutions of segregationist, white supremacist Mississippi. During the late 1950s, as “Mississippi stood still,” Myrlie Evers remembers that her husband worked tirelessly with the press, “literally dragged reporters to the scenes of crimes,” issued press releases that challenged segregationist narratives, and in a challenge to one of the state’s most powerful broadcast stations, WLBT-TV in Jackson, filed official complaints with the FCC. These memories are recorded in Myrlie Evers’ *For Us, the Living* (New York: Ace, 1970) 176–94.

In John Salter’s primary account of the Jackson movement, *Jackson, Mississippi: An American Chronicle of Struggle and Schism* (Malabar, Florida: Kreiger, 1987), civil rights activist and Tougaloo chaplain Reverend R. Edwin King, Jr. recalls the Evers assassination and defines the early ‘60s as “times of madness” in Mississippi and elsewhere (xvii). In his recent history, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), former Tougaloo College professor John Dittmer provides an excellent overview of the battle against white supremacy in the Magnolia state. He notes that the perceived failures of the legally “respectable” white Citizens’ Council during the late 1950s and early 1960s provided racist rationales for increasing violence and intimidation. The prospect of federal civil rights legislation, promises of additional integrationist activism within the state, and expectations regarding the enforced desegregation of local schools all exacerbated white supremacist fears and frustration (217). The Mississippi chapter of the Ku Klux Klan, officially inactive since the 1930s, was

revived in late 1963. And in ensuing months, while white business leaders and state government officials rhetorically opposed Klan revival, murder and white supremacist violence swept largely unchecked through the state (215–18).

2. In addition to the activities discussed in this chapter, the Jackson movement engaged in extensive boycott campaigns, aimed primarily at downtown merchants, that provided strong financial and political support for segregationist practices and policies. Among the demands made by the movement were calls for respect of, and courtesy toward, African American consumers.
3. John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Methuen, 1987), 40. Also see Antonio Gramsci's *The Prison Notebooks*, portions of which have been published in English, edited by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Quintin Hoare, under the title *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International, 1971).
4. For an excellent discussion of these theoretical points, see Kimberlee Crenshaw, "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law," *Harvard Law Review* 101 (1988): 1331–87.
5. Tougaloo College is a small liberal arts institution located in Tougaloo, Mississippi, just outside the city limits of Jackson. It was founded in 1869 by the American Missionary Association "to respond to the needs of emancipated blacks immediately following the end of the civil war," and in the twentieth century has operated as a private, integrated, majority black institution. See Clarice Campbell and Oscar Rogers, Jr., *Mississippi: The View from Tougaloo* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1979), xi.
6. Austin C. Moore III, interview with the author, 21 July 1993.
7. See papers of R. Edwin King, Jr., Box 2: Folder 69, Lillian Pierce Benbow Room of Special Collections, Coleman Library, Tougaloo College, Tougaloo, Mississippi.
8. Dittmer, 226.
9. Paramount, Desilu, MGM, Buena Vista, and Twentieth Century were among the major motion picture producers contacted by Moore in November of 1963. His letter to the studios stated, in part, "We are asking all the major film producers to withhold their films from segregated theaters in the Jackson area. This would be what is needed to enlarge the audiences of our theaters to include Negroes. Please help us. We cannot risk arrest again—or possible violence. We can't do it alone. The key is yours." See papers of R. Edwin King, Jr., Box 2: Folder 68. Moore does not remember receiving any response from any of the motion picture producers, and there are no documents in the Tougaloo archives to suggest otherwise.
10. Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network Shows, 1946–Present* (New York, Ballantine, 1979), 409–10.
11. This description of the Hootenany cancellation, as well as the situations surrounding the cast of *Bonanza* and the Al Hirt show, come from a combination of primary sources. Jackson's daily newspapers, the *Daily News* and *Clarion Ledger*, as well as a local civil rights publication, the *Mississippi Free Press*, were relied upon heavily. In addition, materials from the papers of R. Edwin King, Jr. at Tougaloo College provided key insights regarding Tougaloo activism.
12. "Hootenany Called Off in Jackson," *Clarion Ledger* (16 November 1963) 2.
13. Letter of Stephen Rutledge, 19 November 1963, in papers of R. Edwin King, Jr., Box 2: Folder 68.
14. Letter of Austin Moore, 11 November 1963, in papers of R. Edwin King, Jr., Box 2: Folder 68.
15. "Bonanza Family Won't Come Here," *Clarion Ledger* (23 January 1964): 6.
16. Irv Kupciet, "Kup's Column," *Chicago Sun-Times* (22 January 1964): 44.
17. Copy of telegram sent to Al Hirt, 25 January 1964, Box 9: Folder 450, Papers of R. Edwin King, Jr.
18. "Furor Grows Hotter Over Hirt's Pullout," *Clarion Ledger* (27 January 1964): 8.
19. "Another Performer Cancels Show Here," *Jackson Daily News* (26 January 1964): 1.

20. "Now It's Beginning to Hurt Both Ways," *Mississippi Free Press* (1 February 1964): 2.
21. "Nonviolent Agitation Association of College Pupils," *Voice of the Movement Newsletter* (27 March 1964): 5–6.
22. I borrow these terms and ideas from *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), in which Michel de Certeau offers an analysis of the ways in which the marginalized make use of that which is imposed upon them.
23. de Certeau, 37.
24. Press release of Mayor Allen Thompson in papers of Reverend R.L.T. Smith, Box 6: Folder 117, Lillian Pierce Benbow Room of Special Collections, Coleman Library, Tougaloo College, Tougaloo, Mississippi.
25. Press release of Mayor Allen Thompson, Papers of Reverend R.L.T. Smith.
26. Tom Ethridge, "Mississippi Notebook," *Clarion Ledger* (6 February 1964): 8.
27. Press release of Mayor Allen Thompson, Box 6: Folder 117, Papers of Reverend R.L.T. Smith.
28. "Ask Bonanza Blackout," *Jackson Daily News* (31 January 1964): 1.
29. "Ask Bonanza Blackout."
30. Jackson Citizens' Council, *Aspect*, February 1964, 1.
31. "Hollywood Stars Not Needed Here," *Jackson Daily News* (28 January 1964): 6. As Edwin King has noted in his unpublished account, "For about ten years some white Mississippians had refused to watch the Ed Sullivan show because Negro entertainers appeared frequently (and were frequently blocked out by the local station claiming cable trouble)." King recalls some whites called the show the "N.L. Sullivan" show—the N.L. meaning "nigger lover." See R. Edwin King, Jr., "1964 Concerts," unpublished manuscript, 31.
32. "Dislikes Sullivan and the Cartwrights," *Jackson Daily News* (28 January 1964): 6.
33. "Hirt Hurts Sick Children by Runout," *Jackson Daily News* (28 January 1964): 6. Although the reader nominates the NAACP as the activist force behind the cancellations, the NAACP had little to do with these interventions, at least in their initial stages. This attack on the organization was typical, as distinct integration efforts or civil rights organizations were frequently conflated by white Mississippians.
34. Tom Ethridge, "Mississippi Notebook," *Clarion Ledger* (24 January 1964): 8.
35. "Voice of the People," *Clarion Ledger* (28 January 1964): 6.
36. "Voice of the People," *Clarion Ledger* (10 April 1964): 12; "Voice of the People," *Clarion Ledger* (20 February 1964): 10.
37. "Voice of the People," *Clarion Ledger* (24 February 1964): 13.
38. Testimony of Robert L. McRaney, Jr., general manager of WLBT-TV, in Federal Communications Commission Records, 27 July 1971, Docket 18845, Box 24, Volume 22, Folder 56, 6514–16, U.S. National Archives, Suitland, Maryland Branch.
39. "Bonanza Family Will Appear Here," *Clarion Ledger* (9 January 1964): 2.
40. Elizabeth Jacoway, "An Introduction," *Southern Businessmen and Desegregation*, ed. Elizabeth Jacoway and David Coburn (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 8–9.
41. Jacoway, 6.
42. Charles Sallis and John Quincy Adams, "Desegregation in Jackson, Mississippi," *Southern Businessmen and Desegregation*, 242–44.
43. Jacoway, 12–14.
44. Salter, *Jackson, Mississippi*, xxiv.