

‘An American riddle’: the black music trailblazer who died a white man

A fascinating new podcast delves into the life of Harry Pace, forgotten founder of the first black-owned record label in the US – and unlocks a shocking and prescient story about race



Harry Pace, lawyer and cultural entrepreneur, thought by his family to have been Italian.

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There are, according to the academic Emmett Price, “six degrees of Harry Pace”. He is referring to the man born in 1884 who founded America’s first black-owned major record label; desegregated part of Chicago; mentored the founder of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines and spearheaded the career of blues singer Ethel Waters. Pace is a figure who is seemingly everywhere at once, yet his name has been suspiciously absent from the history books.

“This story encapsulates how progress comes about in America – and it is never in a straight line,” says Jad Abumrad. “It is often a cycle – one that contains hope and despair, smashed together.”

Best known for their work on *Radiolab* and its hit spin-off, Dolly Parton’s *America*, Abumrad and his co-producer Shima Oliaee are speaking from New York about their latest podcast, *The Vanishing of Harry Pace*. The six-part series examines the life and legacy of its titular character – the founder of Black Swan records, who had a hand in coining the term “rock ‘n’ roll”. Pace was also a civil rights lawyer, a collaborator of WEB Du Bois, and, you might think, a pioneering black American erased from history because of his race.

But that isn't how this story goes; this was "an American riddle, wrapped in a family secret". Pace wasn't a forgotten trailblazer, but a man who decided to spend the final years of his life passing as white for fear of persecution.

The first two episodes recount Pace's life, from his years at Atlanta University to founding Black Swan then retraining as a lawyer. The third examines the impact his passing has had on his children and grandchildren, while later episodes trace the musical legacy of Black Swan. Throughout, Abumrad and Oliaee are an easygoing presence, gasping as each revelation is uncovered, while more than 40 expert voices – from writer Margo Jefferson to musician Terrance McKnight – bolster their research with reflections on the story's racial and cultural significance in the US.

This series follows Dolly Parton's America, which chronicled the country singer's impact on American life, and Pace's story chimes strangely with Parton's. "They are both figures who blurred the boundaries that we see in culture – those distinctions that say a certain type of music is for a certain type of person," Abumrad says. "Harry encapsulated an in-between space of being black and yet ultimately passing for white, of being a 'race man' then seemingly turning his back on his achievements in a way that has affected his descendants today."

Pace's story was only discovered by his family in 2006. We hear in the opening minutes how a family meeting was called when it emerged that great-grandfather Harry was not in fact an Italian lawyer (Pace previously thought to be an Anglicisation of the pronunciation *Pache*), but rather a mixed-race descendant of enslaved people and a slave owner. "Everyone was very proud of Harry and also devastated at the loss for their family, in not knowing who he really was," says Oliaee. "The revelation has since caused a falling out because some wanted everyone to know Harry's story, and others didn't for fear of what it could have done to their status in the world. It really felt like watching people wrestle with the complicated issues of race in America in real time. And it shows us that this historical time of slavery, emancipation and Jim Crow is much closer than we think."

As Abumrad and Oliaee were researching Pace's story in summer 2020, this sense of historical proximity was also heightened by global Black Lives Matter protests sparked by the murder of George Floyd. "When we started reporting, it felt like a very revolutionary time," says Oliaee. "There was a possibility for change in the air, but there was also the stark reality of people of colour being murdered. Harry was the first generation post-emancipation, so he had the potential to build a different society for people of colour from scratch. But that excitement was coupled with the harshness of reality."

Abumrad adds: "I felt like he could have been a young person living in 2021."

Whereas Abumrad and Oliaee had ample interview time with Parton for their previous series, the fact that much of Pace's life occurred before the commercial advent of recorded sound was a challenge. "We scoured the world trying to find any bit of Harry on tape," says Abumrad, "but he didn't even keep diaries, so there's nothing to give you any interiority. That makes deciphering his motives so much harder."

The largest unanswered question that hangs over the series is why Pace is listed as “white” on the 1940 US census. Two decades earlier, he had been visibly promoting his race, pushing Black Swan records as black-owned and black-run, before selling it after a period of success with Ethel Waters, Louis Armstrong and Ma Rainey. He then trained as a lawyer in Chicago and successfully desegregated the neighbourhood of Woodlawn by representing black real estate broker Carl Hansberry – father of the playwright Lorraine – in a case against the white neighbourhood landowners who had tried to enforce a racially restrictive covenant in their area.

After moving to Woodlawn, it appears that Pace began passing, and the podcast lists lots of possible reasons: so his fair-skinned children could marry white partners; so he could progress in his business; so he wouldn’t be outed in a neighbourhood still extremely hostile to black people.

“He was standing at this moment where no one wanted him,” Abumrad says. “The white world didn’t want him, and his success had made him transcend the typically oppressed depictions that black people had then, also. But he didn’t want to be seen as oppressed – so he was stranded, wrestling between truths.”

“Passing was not that rare at the time,” says Imani Perry, professor of African American studies at Princeton. “What’s interesting is that it was seen by many as a form of betrayal. It ultimately speaks of an inherent tragedy in the fact that these extraordinary people like Harry Pace were still never able to avoid the reality of a racist society.”

One of the editorial consultants on the series, Perry sees Pace’s life as an example of the nuanced history we should be striving towards. “His story is a window into a largely uncovered world,” she says. “I’m hungry for a time when we start to understand the histories of people of colour as much more complex and colourful, in addition to all the tragedies of the transatlantic slave trade. Historical forces can flatten the individual, but misunderstanding the individual is one of the greatest impediments to moving towards a more just world.”

For Abumrad and Oliaee, Pace’s story acts as both a parable of a tumultuous period in US history and one that resonates with the continuing fight for racial equality today. “We can all feel like we’re the only ones having our experiences at this particular moment in time, but then you learn about people like Pace and you see that what they went through was not only what you are going through, it was amplified,” Abumrad says. “The fact that there is a continuum can be comforting. We can always learn from what came before and strive for better – even if that means living with hope and despair.”