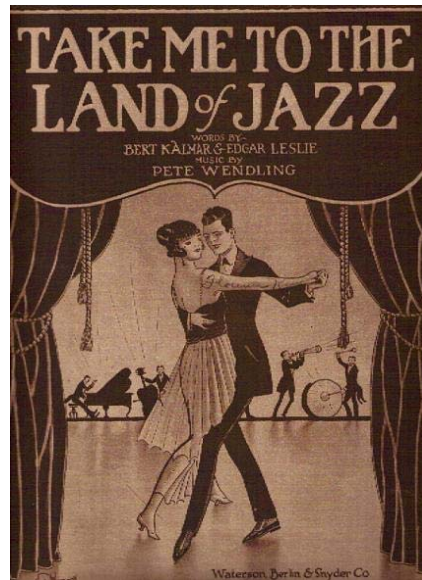


*JAZZ BEFORE JAZZ: WHAT DID IT MEAN?**A PORTRAIT OF "JAZZ" AS SLIDING SIGNIFIER IN THE 1920S*

JED RASULA



Going into *The Land of Jazz*, we begin with a question posed by an English journalist in 1919: "To Jazz or not to Jazz—that is the question." The Shakespearean echo already tells us that the answer tends toward the affirmative. To speak or think while knowing you're not all that original is to accept the condition of jazz—not a noun, but a verb. Much of the commentary on jazz before 1930 oscillates between these two poles: noun and verb. I'm going to restrict myself to the first ten or fifteen years of jazz because that period most clearly reveals the intersection of two completely different sets of assumptions. Early jazz helped to perpetuate, and to discredit, lingering nineteenth century standards of redemptive culture. But jazz history has tended to be written as an exercise in retrospective hero-worship in which the early response to

jazz has little place. That response took jazz to be not strictly a kind of music but a sliding signifier in cultural debates.

I'll begin with a list of prejudicial attributions dating from about 1915 to 1925. Jazz is characterized by its willfulness, its impudence, in which "improvisation and irresponsibility" go hand in hand. It is "a crop of immodesty," but also characterized by its "whimsical individuality" it came across as "nonsense and fun," "musical tomfoolery," or "the joke-smith in the world of tones." American commentators reassured an anxious public that it was just "hokum," manifesting a characteristic "pep and vulgarity" well known to Americans. Still, the name made many nervous, and a contest held in 1924 to supply an alternative yielded, as prizewinner, the term "syncopep."

The transgressive gaiety of jazz could of course take on quasi-political connotations. An article in *Ladies Home Journal* (1921), with the interrogative title "Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation," declared it to be "the bolshevik element of license striving for expression in music" (in the USSR it could be seen as a capitalist plot to make man live "through his sexual organs"). At the very least, jazz could be construed as a "musical vice." In the more explicit exclamation of the composer Roy Harris, hearing an early jazz-tinged piece by Aaron Copland, it was "whorehouse music." Jazz flushed cultural sewage the wrong way, at least from the perspective of polite society. "The only purpose of nigger music was to introduce obscenities into society," wrote an English critic. On both sides of the Atlantic jazz could be perceived as "ruffianism in music," "cockneyism in music," or simply "mongrel music."

Even in New Orleans it was characterized as "a low streak in man's tastes that has not yet come out in civilisation's wash."

Objections to jazz also took on a musicological veneer: it was "music in slang," "the doggerel of music"; "jazz is to real music what the caricature is to the portrait." On a slightly more positive note, it was "musical fireworks"—but of course that could backfire, justifying the view that jazz was simply "organized and calculated noise." That it struck some as "gymnastics and hula-hula" (note the exoticism here, by which the culturally remote is equated with non-music) suggested a gullibility on the part of its vast audience. Proprietary standard bearers in the arts would scoff at jazz as a "bundle of tricks," suitable for this "age of stunts," an "age of tonal debauch" dominated by the antics of "noise acrobatics," "harmonic freaks" out on a "neural spree" in reckless pursuit of an "emotional narcotic." All of this constituted nothing less than "a direct encouragement to hysteria."

Critics were not shy about making quasi-medical claims for the jazz "epidemic": it was "epileptic music," a "social pestilence," and even an outright "violation of hygienic laws." One writer thought jazz was the "indecent exposure" of the less seemly aspects of certain musical instruments. Many complained about the rhythmic monotony of this "robot music"—"rhythm in a straight-jacket," or "bureaucratic rhythm"—that was not a musical misdeed at all so much as it was a "mimicry of industrial havoc": as H. L. Mencken put it, "the sound of riveting." To the numerous claims that it was a species of folk music, objections were

raised that it was "folk music from above"—that is, commercial pablum, "folkoid" at best.

In the years after the First World War jazz emerged as "the National Anthem of Civilization" (the subject of a 1922 Broadway play, *The National Anthem*). It was a *Zeitfrage*, a question of the times. "What is jazz? Is it species of music, or a method of immorality?" asked a prominent American composer, who recognized that it had become a scapegoat for all sorts of extra-musical issues. From a musical perspective jazz could be plausibly characterized as "ragtime raised to the Nth power" (1920), or "rag-time, plus 'Blues,' plus orchestral polyphony" (1922). But the term jazz quickly migrated far beyond music. Even the Russians were using it as a suffix, speaking of "theatrical jazz," "cinema-jazz," "extra-jazz," "joy-jazz," "tango-jazz," and "circus-jazz."

"'Jazzmania' has become practically a geographical term covering the whole territory of modern extravagance," wrote Sigmund Spaeth in *North American Review*; "the application of the slang coinage, 'jazz,' has become general, fitting almost every abnormality of the age. Our murders, our trials, our welcomes to Channel swimmers and transatlantic flyers, our sports, our conventions, our best-sellers...have all fallen into the idiom of jazz... 'Jazzmania' is simply the habit of thinking and acting in distorted terms; a manner of life consistently at war with conservative tradition." Spaeth went so far as to suggest that even "the stratified rock formations of America's western canyons are assuredly an overwhelming jazz of geological traditions." The flexibility of his applications already tells us that the author is on the side of jazz, affirming with many other advocates (in a cultural

tradition that goes back to mannerism and the baroque, among other things) that creation feasts on the peculiar. It was the peculiarity that struck a bedazzled London reporter for *The Times* in January 1919: "The object of a jazz band, apparently, is to provide as much noise as possible." To personify that determination was a signature trait of band photos. Noise is one of those curious words, like jazz, that simultaneously says good and bad, yes and no. The *Times* reporter at least recognized that some cognitive dissonance came with the territory.

Consider the definitions of jazz in reference books of the time. In the most brutally truncated version it is simply given as "a number of niggers surrounded by noise." A more nuanced approach characterized jazz as a "finger-snapping delirium" brought on by "bizarre effects obtained through a new grouping of instruments," or "a band eccentrically composed," foremost in which was the drummer, "a sort of one-man band [who] provides the characteristic feature of jazz, which is noise." This noise could in principle extend beyond music to any "noisy proceedings" including "loud writing" and "eccentric and discordant coloring"—the very features Clive Bell singled out when, in 1921, he declared T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf jazz masters in literature. But jazz was also, as another definition had it, "organized propaganda along commercial lines."



Let's take a look now at the source of the noise called jazz in 1920. Unorthodox instruments signified jazz. What you see here are the characteristic poses of the time, emphasizing the jazz-band as an upstart, antic organization. In the early years just after the war, everybody commented on the drummers, but this presents a profound gap in our historical reception, because it wasn't until the end of the 1920s that drums could be recorded. So other instruments loom a bit larger, like the "goofus" played by Adrian Rollini, who was also a virtuoso of the bass saxophone.



As if to compound the spellbinding impact of instrumental profusion, bands commonly recorded under many names: Rollini's group was also The University Six, the Varsity Eight, the California Ramblers, the Little Ramblers, and the Golden Gate Orchestra.

Early jazz wasn't just about unorthodox instruments, but about odd sounds that could be obtained even by familiar instruments. In some quarters, these sounds confirmed the worst that had been supposed about the musical predecessor of jazz: ragtime. In an ominous pronouncement from 1915: "Ragtime is syncopation gone mad, and its victims, in my opinion, can only be treated successfully like the dog with rabies, namely, with a dose of lead." Jazz confirmed the worst: it was an atavistic invitation "to whisk your tail around a tree" (in the words of a man of the cloth)— "a combination of nervousness, lawlessness, primitive and savage animalism and lasciviousness." The Russian writer Maxim Gorky said that, hearing jazz, "one involuntarily imagines an orchestra of sexually driven madmen conducted by a man-stallion brandishing a huge genital member."

Behind these derogatory appraisals was the phenomenon that really propelled jazz, which was dance. The so-called animal dances of the late ragtime, but pre-war period, included not only those you see here but also the Dizzy Drag, Wriggly Worm, Lemon Squeeze, Puppy Snuggle, Chicken Flip, Formaldehyde Flop, Arizona Anguish, the Kitchen Sink, Ostrich Scratch, Sea Gull Swoop, Pollywog Wiggle, and the Terrapin Toddle.



The frivolity suggested by this zoological panorama was beyond the imagination of moral custodians of the time, like the author of *The Modern Dance: A Fearless Discussion of a Social Menace* (1922): "He presses her to him till every curve in the contour of her form tingles with the amorous contact. Her eyes look into his, but behold nothing.... Her tall and lithe body he bends to and fro in his embrace, but she knows it not. His hot breath is upon her face, but she does not shrink. His eyes, gleaming with intolerable lust, gloat satyr-like over her, yet she does not quail." As the author complained, facing such sybarite practices, "The average man wants a woman for a wife who has not been fondled and hugged by dancing rowdies."

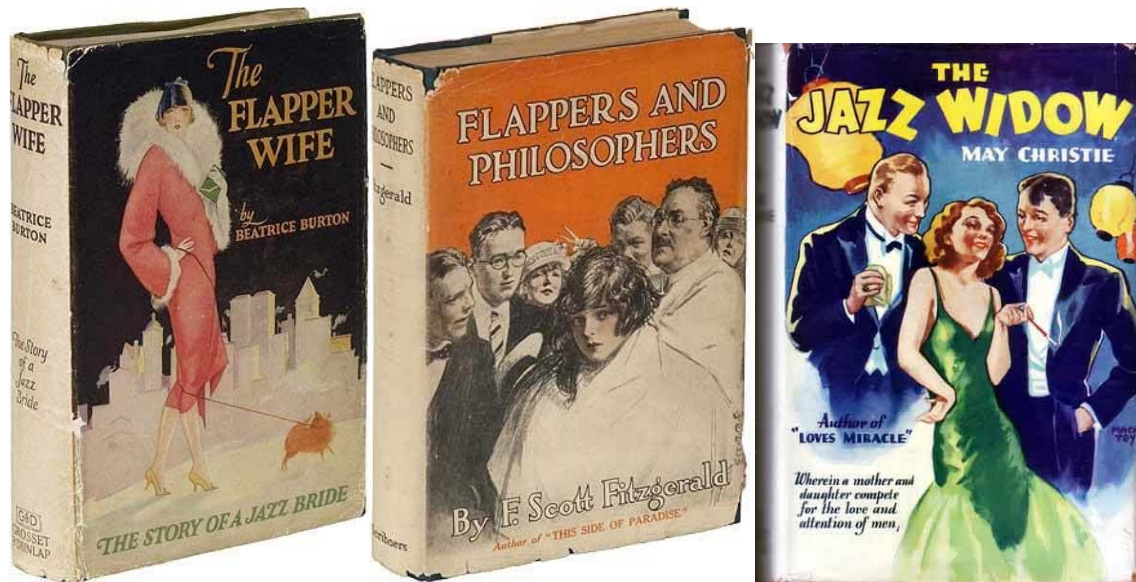
Jeremiads from the pulpit had little influence, however, as wave after wave of new dances convulsed public life. The ragged strenuousness of modern dances could, in fact, be the target of mild satire, as in an Italian Futurist spoof of the foxtrot, the dance that was virtually synonymous with jazz—spoofed as a species of athleticism in a German cartoon, "Box Trot."



English composer Constant Lambert memorably evokes the prurient censure of jazz by “the crusty old colonels, the choleric judges and beer-sodden columnists who imagine they represent the European tradition, murmuring ‘swamp stuff,’ ‘jungle rhythms,’ ‘negro decadence’ whenever they hear the

innocent and anodyne strains of the average English jazz band, hugely enjoying their position of Cassandra prophesying the downfall of the white woman." To put this in perspective, the kind of hit songs that had swelled the coffers of Tin Pan Alley hucksters before jazz arrived were things like "Daddy Wouldn't Buy Me a Bow-Wow," "Fairy Kisses," "Faded Love Letters" and the like. The custodial presumptions behind the public outcry against jazz attest to the lingering legacy of nineteenth century standards and vocabulary of redemptive culture. It's a legacy that was lampooned in Hollywood during the 1930s by such films as *Theodora Goes Wild* and the great Billy Wilder remake of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Ball of Fire* (in which Gene Krupa plays a drum solo with a box of matchsticks). Jazz had pioneered a changing of the cultural guard. Nowhere in my experience was this put more vividly than in an article for *The Nation* in 1922, in which the author applauds the role of jazz in scuttling the last residues of a sickly sentimentality (much in evidence in these songs): jazz is "vulgar, but it is healthily frank—as frank as the conversation of a group of young people who cleanly and intelligently discuss birth control."

The spokesman for this generation, of course, was the American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald. Retrospectively, he said: "The word 'jazz,' in its progress toward respectability, has meant first sex, then dancing, then music. It is associated with a state of nervous stimulation, not unlike that of big cities behind the lines of war." Fitzgerald's subsequent eminence has obscured the vast shoals of topical novelists for whom "jazz" was a convenient peg on which to hang their timeworn headgear.

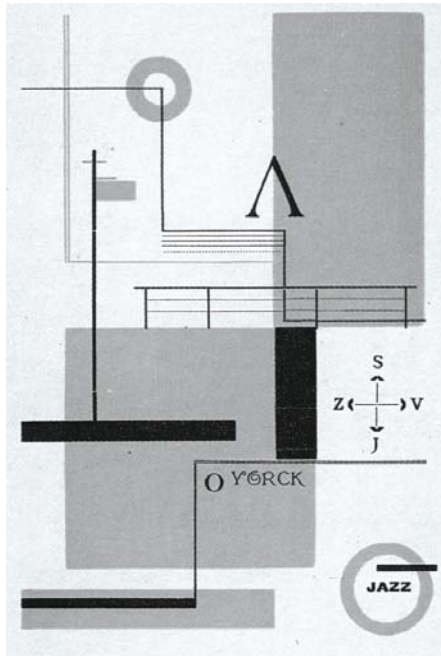
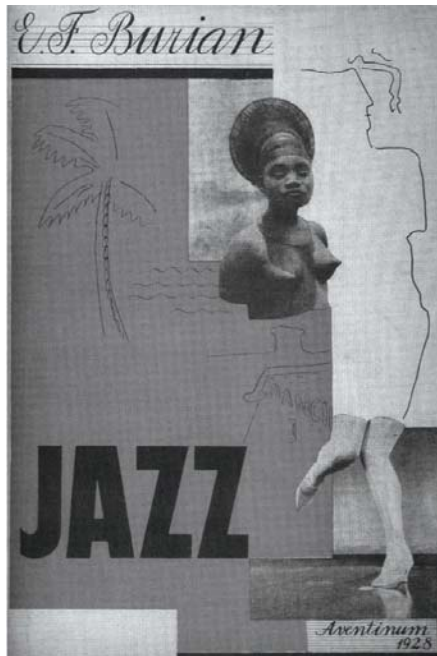
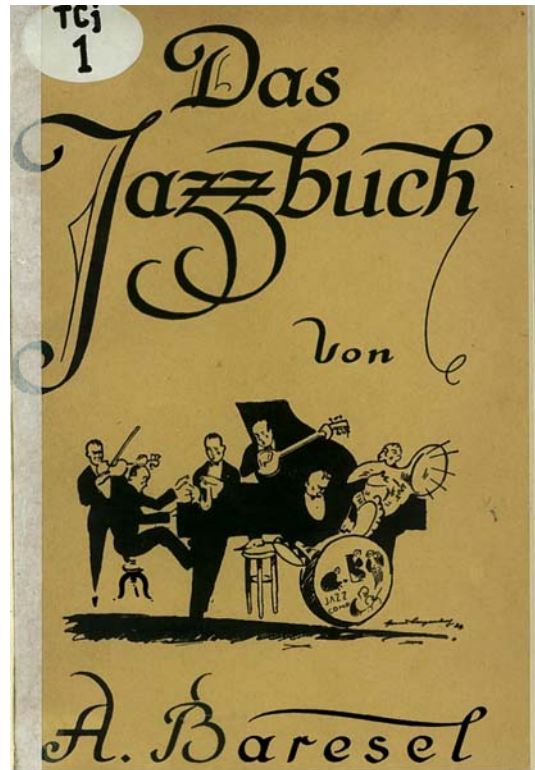


But even before it had settled down into a general moniker, The Jazz Age haunted pundits with the sense that cultural standards modelled on jazz (whatever that meant) were being set impossibly low. "What would be the reaction to a proposal that the Great American Novel should be built up from the 100 Best Jokes?" one writer wondered.

Fitzgerald's reference to jazz as a "nervous stimulation" like that experienced during wartime was historically relevant, as the author of the first English book on jazz testified: "the elemental passions which were aroused by the war" were answered by jazz. "The violently syncopated strains ... were themselves, in their own way, a reflection of the elemental instincts of war fever." For strictly geopolitical reasons, France was exposed during the war to the syncopated symptoms of jazz by way of the official military band of the American army, the Hellfighters led by James Reese Europe. By the end of the war Paris was convulsed in jazzmania, which happened to coincide with Dada.



In the early Twenties, jazz and the European avant-garde went hand in hand. Alexander Rodchenko supplied a jazz age montage for a book of poems by Mayakovsky in 1923, at which point no actual jazz bands had been to Russia (although the USSR had a state sanctioned outfit called The First Eccentric Orchestra of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, which was known for producing noise—in both the sense theorized by the Italian Futurists, and by analogy with jazz). Most of the early books about jazz were written by members of the European avant-garde, like Emil Burian who was associated with the Poetism movement in Prague led by Karel Teige, whose design for a book of poetry includes the word “jazz” just dropped in as a freestanding signifier, like a decal. The first instruction manual on jazz was published here in Berlin in 1925. Artists depicted themselves with jazz instruments.



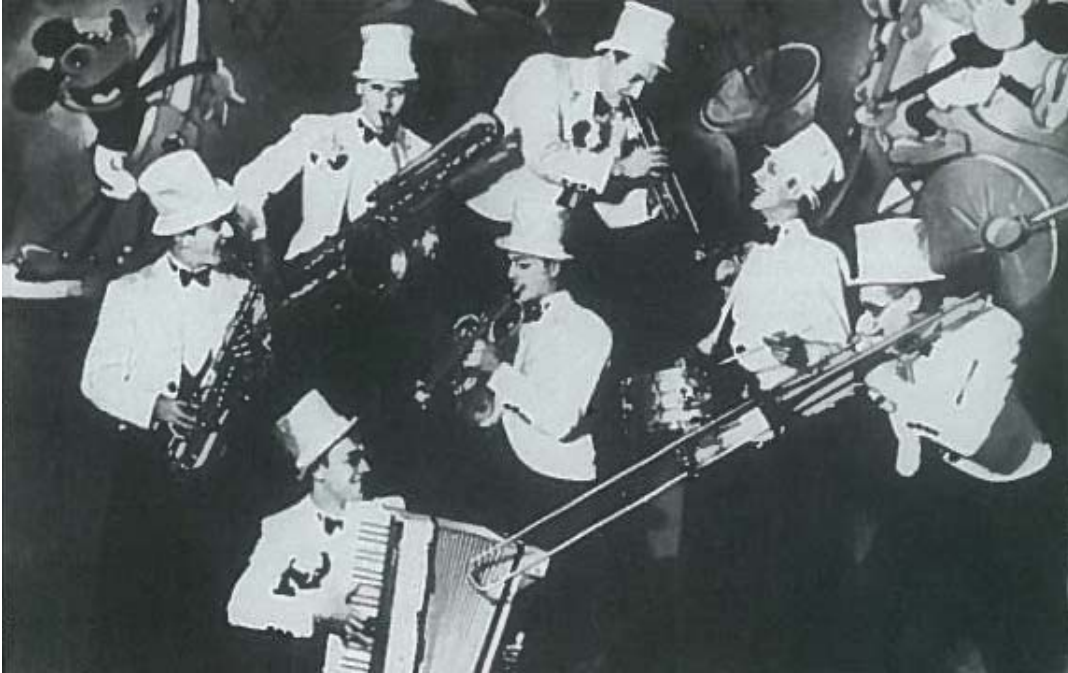
The Bauhaus had its own jazz band from 1923 until it was closed by the Nazis. As the Bauhaus theatre workshop director Oskar Schlemmer observed in 1925: "The artistic climate here cannot support anything that is not the

latest, the most modern, up-to-the-minute, Dadaism, circus, variety, jazz, hectic pace, movies, America, airplanes, the automobile. Those are the terms in which people here think."

One of the reasons jazz circled the globe so rapidly—turning jazz latitudes into jazz platitudes (in the pun of one commentator)—was its cosmopolitanism. This is reflected in the exotic locales of songs like *Shanghai Shuffle*, *Algiers Stomp*, *Borneo*, *Bombay*, *China Boy*, *Copenhagen*, *Egyptian Fantasy*, *Ethiopian Nightmare*, *Honolulu Blues*, *Lady of Havana*, *Nagasaki*, *Senegalese Stomp*, *Panama*, *The Sheik of Araby*, *Singapore Sorrows*, *Stockholm Stomp*, *Zulu Wail*—all saying in their own way *There's a Wah-Wah Gal in Agua Caliente*. The major jazz cities like Chicago, New Orleans and Kansas City spread around the world in song titles; none more so than Harlem. *Harlem Congo* and *Harlem's Araby* gave jazz a passport stamped with Harlem heat, madness, twist, shuffle, hunch, hospitality, drag, and strut. The incessant commemoration of the *Dear Old Southland* gave the world a misleadingly rosy portrait of Georgia, Mississippi, Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana, to which I should add Indiana (home of the Ku Klux Klan)—all places that black musicians dreaded. African Americans were leaving the South in droves. The black population of Chicago increased 150% between 1910 and 1920, by which point the population of Harlem exceeded that of the three most populous southern cities.

Some of them came to Europe in traveling shows like *The Chocolate Kiddies* (which opened in Berlin in 1925) and stayed, like Josephine Baker—who personified the ultraprimitive and the ultramodern. The band for *Chocolate Kiddies* was led by Sam Wooding, whose extensive travels

exposed Europeans to black jazz (although the longer he stayed, the more out of touch he got, and one of his musicians later characterized Wooding's approach as "corny"). German bands eagerly adopted the postures seen in photos of American bands: here the Regina Orchestra poses with Mickey Mouse in 1928.

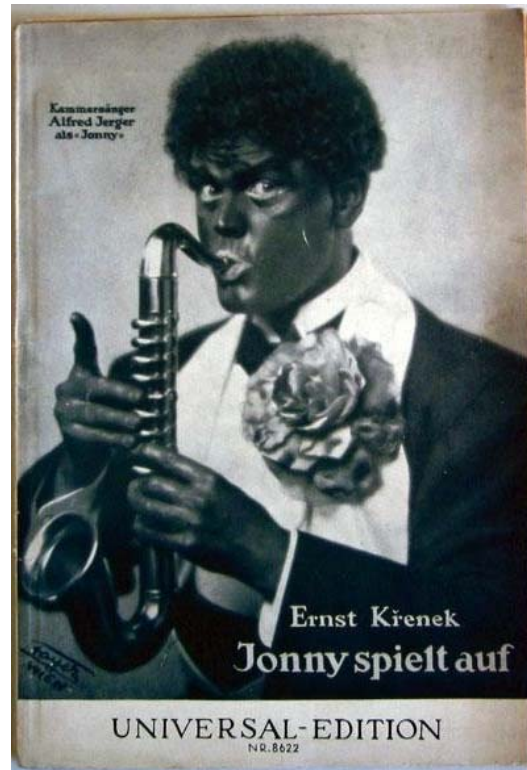


Some German bandleaders even pretended to be American in order to get engagements. Still, there's something *volkisch* in the record label here that suggests a vast discrepancy between Birmingham and Berlin.



An anxious European credulity is wonderfully expressed in a French ad for banjo lessons: "Are you black? NO. Is it necessary to be black in order to play banjo. NO."

The most resounding theatrical success of Twenties jazz wasn't jazz at all, it was *Jonny spielt auf* by Ernst Krenek, a dyed-in-the-wool blackface masquerade that had five hundred performances at opera houses throughout Europe between 1926 and 1929. Already in 1930 the state of Thuringia outlawed blacks and anything associated with them, a prohibition extended to all of Germany by 1937.



Although jazz was by no means exclusively associated with African Americans, it was nevertheless a medium in which racism was tacitly challenged. In the matter of race relations, of course, ragtime had presented white America with the model of Negro dignity. But the heyday of ragtime coincided with the heyday of coon shows and blackface perpetuation of stereotypes.



The dance celebrity couple Vernon and Irene Castle personified, and led, the prewar dance craze; and it happened that their bandleader was James Reese Europe, who we've already seen as leader of the Harlem Hellfighters during the war. His Clef Club Orchestra, shown here, was just the beginning of his management of Harlem orchestras for high society engagements. (He initially resisted jazz as a vulgarity that would compromise professional standards.) His wartime eminence was such that he was a national hero by 1919, when the *Chicago Defender* declared "he is jazzing away the barriers of prejudice." He would certainly have been the guiding force in the subsequent development of jazz but for his murder by a band member that same year.

Even before the war the question could be posed by the *New York Herald*: "Can it be said that America is falling prey to the collective soul of the negro?" Insofar as American music throughout the twentieth century has been derived from African American idioms, the answer would have to be yes, although the phrase "falling prey" suggests some

racial anxiety. An English writer in the late Twenties evoked the specter of a "gigantic black man striding over the world with a banjo in one hand and a saxophone in the other, disintegrating the British Empire." As corresponding visual symptoms indicate, African Americans were barely visible without accompanying stereotypes, even as the music was avidly sought out. A depiction of the collective soul of the Negro vanquishing the Hellenistic foundations of western civilization is dramatized in John Souter's 1926 painting, *Breakdown*, in which a black musician happily blows on his saxophone amidst the broken columns and pediments of a Greek temple. It's surely not coincidental that the Ku Klux Klan was revived in 1915, the very year that a band purporting to play "jazz" first appeared in Chicago. By 1924 there were nearly five million Klan members.

American industrialist Henry Ford denounced jazz as "monkey talk, jungle squeals, grunts and squeaks and gasps suggestive of cave love"; "the waves upon waves of musical slush that invaded decent parlors and set the young people of this generation imitating the drivel of morons." Racist slurs were hardly confined to the United States. Even in Paris, where Negrophilia was at its peak in 1920, we read this appraisal of jazz in *Revue Musicale*: "It is entirely excess...the monkey is left to his own devices, without morals, without discipline, thrown back to all the groves of instinct, showing his meat still more obscene. These slaves must be subjugated, or there will be no more master." In a sobering formulation, a Norwegian journalist reviewing one of the first American groups to perform in Oslo comments that the band consisted of "four Negroes and a man."

The issue of race in jazz was complicated by the new media available to disseminate it. The earliest recordings were of white musicians, but in 1920 the first recorded blues revealed a vast market among African Americans, for whom so-called "race records" were produced. Radio broadcasting in the United States was commercialized in 1922, after which jazz could penetrate any household without the race card being presented. The technical innovation of electrical recording in 1926 meant that the full sound of the jazz-band, drums included, could be heard for the first time on phonographs.

As it happens, this commercial dimension of jazz re-introduced race into the mix in another way, because Jews were often entrepreneurial leaders of the newer industries like film, radio broadcasting and the music industry at large. The northern diaspora of southern blacks was matched, in demographic terms, by the immigration of millions of Eastern European Jews and Italians, without whom jazz would have remained a strictly marginal "race" music inaccessible to the white world. It was Jewish managers and promoters, by and large, who helped relieve black musicians from the stereotypical trappings of public display and make them visible emblems of professionalism, as in the transformation of King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band as depicted here.



Waldo Frank ventured the following explanation for the success of jazz: "Jazz expresses a personal maladjustment to this world. And this, doubtless, is why the races at once most flexible and most maladjusted—the Negro and the Jew—give the best jazz-masters." Jews were conspicuous not only in the business side of things—someone called Tin Pan Alley a "commercialized Wailing Wall"—but also as bandleaders and musicians. The most famous would be Benny Goodman who rose to national prominence in 1935, when he was crowned King of Swing. But he had been a professional musician since he was 13, and by the age of 20 was sufficiently well known to publish a book. Henry Ford, whose racist animus was applied to African Americans and Jews alike, thought the "the abandoned sensuousness of sliding notes" typical of early jazz was "of Jewish origin."

The first big jazz success—the phenomenon that put jazz on the map—was achieved by Italian Americans from New Orleans, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, whose *Livery Stable Blues* sold an astonishing million copies in 1917. In 1918 they played at a ball opening the Versailles peace talks, after which their travels played a significant role in convincing Europeans that jazz was as much white as

black. The success of the band resulted in a classic malady of supergroups ever since: internal conflicts broke them up, even as their legend launched jazz as a going commercial enterprise. "Jazz is the triumph of American advertising," wrote one observer in 1923. In one of the more delusional assertions of the time, a 1922 critic assured readers that "Jazz was the voice of the Money-Changer in music. Jazz has ceased to be profitable, and hence we shall hear of it no more." The announcement that jazz was dead was repeated so often that the repetition itself was the occasion for commentary by the mid-Twenties, by which point the decade was officially The Jazz Age, and a few years later it was inevitable that Hollywood would link its venture into sound films with *The Jazz Singer*—a Jewish story on which a blackface scenario from the coon song era was anachronistically imposed.

In 1926 the English musicologist Ernest Newman characterized as "not an art, but an industry; the whirring of a standardized machine endlessly turning out a standardized article." Commercially speaking, this was true. By that point there were something like 60,000 jazzbands in the United States, and over twenty thousand cabarets, nightclubs, and dance halls in Chicago and New York. The visible personification of success was Paul Whiteman, whose very name gave allegorical weight to his moniker, King of Jazz (which was the title of a film about him, in the making of which he pioneered the use of pre-recorded music to be matched with a simulated on-screen performance). As an international celebrity, his encounters with other celebrities were news items—whether at the piano is Maurice Ravel, sparring with baseball titan Babe Ruth in boxing gloves, and with Charlie Chaplin (who had a penchant

for posing with jazz band leaders). He could even cavort with cartoon figures. As Whiteman's profile suggests on the cover of his book, he was affectionally known as the "jiggling jelly of jazz."



Jazz history has not treated Whiteman well. After all, he pioneered the smooth, saccharine orchestral style that made jazz palatable to a genteel clientele. His avowed mission was "to make a lady out of jazz." To that end he put together a legendary concert in New York in 1924 purporting to document the (then very brief) history of jazz, demonstrating how ladylike she had become. The evening culminated in the premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue* by George Gershwin.

I conclude with Whiteman not to suggest reinstating him in the pantheon, but as a case in point of how slippery the criteria that were applied to jazz were at that time. Whiteman offered a tantalizing solution craved by genteel America, having to do with its longstanding cultural inferiority complex. Who would be the American Beethoven, the American Wagner? The problem was exacerbated by the prominence of European composers, foremost of whom was Stravinsky. The American premiere of *The Rite of Spring* came as late as 1922, when it was ridiculed as jungle music: "a New Year's Eve rally of moonshine addicts"—"a

tone picture of spring-fever in a zoo." Whiteman's tepidly peppy dance music, mingled with occasional bouts of "jazzing the classics," was welcomed because it deflected attention from the "ultra-modern" trends represented by the likes of Stravinsky and Schoenberg, whose music "makes faces at our ears" as one critic put it. Whiteman personified the trend described by orchestral conductor Walter Damrosch: "Various composers have been walking around jazz like a cat around a plate of hot soup, waiting for it to cool off, so that they could enjoy it without burning their tongues."

The alternative to Whiteman, of course, is what has subsequently been celebrated as *the history of jazz*, a tale so dominated in hindsight by its African American core that we've only lately come to appreciate its broader varieties, not only in the USA but around the world. Jazz can now be seen as part of a continuum with other arts: from Wagnerism to Jazzbandism: "evidence of a new vitality in music," attested a radio programmer in 1925, "a struggle after a new form of expression, crude as the hieroglyphic of Cubism, but genuine art, nevertheless." As he said this, Duke Ellington was making his first recordings in an adventure that would span the next fifty years.