

JAZZ AND THE CULTURAL
TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICA IN THE 1920S

A Dissertation

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Courtney Patterson Carney
B.A., Baylor University, 1996
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1998
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For Big

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The real truth about it is no one gets it right
The real truth about it is we're all supposed to try¹

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¹Songs: Ohia, "Farewell Transmission," *Magnolia Electric Company* (Secretly Canadian, 2003).

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ABSTRACT

In the early twentieth century jazz was a regionally based, racially defined dance music that featured solo and collective improvisation. Originating in New Orleans, jazz soon spread throughout the country as musicians left the South for better opportunities—both economic and social—elsewhere in the country. Jazz greatly increased in popularity during the 1920s. No longer a regional music dominated by African Americans, jazz in the 1920s helped define a generation torn between the Victorian society of nineteenth century America and the culture of modernity that was quickly defining the early twentieth century. Jazz and its eventual popularity represented the cultural tensions present in modern America, and the acceptance of jazz reflected the degree to which Americans rejected or accepted traditional values. This dissertation examines the historical context of this larger transformation America underwent in the 1920s and early 1930s.

In general, the narrative outlines the origins of jazz in the late 19th century, its dissemination through various means after World War I, and its eventual acceptance as a uniquely American cultural expression in the last part of the 1920s. Jazz music helped define the chaotic urban culture of America in the 1920s, and cities like Chicago, New York City, and Los Angeles nurtured and shaped the music of the period. These three cities—each with dynamic black communities—supported diverse jazz scenes as well as served as the center of a particular type of mass communication technology. Together, the rapid developments in recording technology, the growing popularity of radio, and the burgeoning film industry transformed jazz from a local, predominately African American music, to a nationally accepted cultural form identified as uniquely American. The

transformation of American culture in the 1920s forced people into a new set of relationships—social, regional, and political—and the cultural ambivalence generated by this change framed much of the debate surrounding the popularity of jazz music. By viewing mass culture and popular taste through the lens of jazz, this study attempts a more complete view of American culture in the 1920s.

INTRODUCTION

A SONG IS BORN

Where the past is . . . in the mood of any given performance, is the question to ask the music and the question the music asks.¹

In 1948, Howard Hawks directed *A Song is Born*, a late period screwball comedy centered on an out-of-touch music professor's introduction to jazz music.² The film— itself a near scene-by-scene remake of Hawks' 1941 film, *Ball of Fire*—gathered together a group of well-known jazz musicians known primarily from their music popular a decade earlier.³ The film centers on Hobart Frisbee, a naive music professor played by Danny Kaye, contracted to write an encyclopedia of music for the privately funded Totten institute. Seven older professors—each an expert in a particular field of musical history—assist in the production of the encyclopedia, and this group of scholars works diligently without much contact with the outside world. Early in the film, however, two black window washers, played by Buck and Bubbles, an African American comedy team,

¹Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 69.

²Howard Hawks, *A Song is Born* (Goodwyn, 1948).

³Hawks used many of the same sets and crew as well as the basic screenplay as *Ball of Fire*, a film produced in 1941. The only real distinction script-wise between the two films concerned the earlier film's focus on linguists discovering slang, rather than musicologists discovering jazz.

enter the institute in hopes that the professors could help them with a radio quiz concerning music. One of the window washers sits at the piano and begins to play along with the professors, adlibbing a boogie-woogie tune as an accompaniment to a classical piece by Bach. Stunned by the performance, Frisbee realizes that his section on folk music remained incomplete without the inclusion of this jazz vernacular, and he scurries off into a variety of nightclubs to recruit an array of jazz musicians to elucidate this music heretofore unknown to the professor. Frisbee eventually compels a number of famed jazz musicians, including Louis Armstrong, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Louis Bellson, Mel Powell, and Lionel Hampton, to sketch a general history of jazz music.

Although unfamiliar to Frisbee, by the late 1940s, this group of musicians represented some of the most famous jazz performers of the last fifteen years. In one scene, the jazz musicians teach Frisbee the convoluted interconnections of jazz styles—a chalkboard behind Frisbee lists a number of sub categories such as Dixieland and Swing—and then the group performs a short improvised jazz piece to illustrate their pedagogical point. Despite the history lesson, the film disregards the larger shift in values that provided the context for the creation of jazz as well as the resultant controversy stemming from the music's popularity. The director even plays the underworld connections to jazz for comedy, and Honey Swanson, the gangster moll played by Virginia Mayo, appears more for the romantic subplot than as an indicator of the immoral elements of jazz music. In addition, the elderly housekeeper for the musicologists disapproves of Swanson's temporary tenure at the institute, but has no real qualms with the music performed by the professors aside from complaints of volume. Armstrong and the Dorsey brothers serve as elder statesmen eager to educate Frisbee on

the finer points of jazz, but though only a few years removed from its prime, the music seems simply another valid step in musical evolution. Illustrating this point, Hawks cast Benny Goodman, the primary articulation of popular jazz in the 1930s, in the role of Professor Magenbruch, a classical clarinet virtuoso inherently able to adapt his classical training to the syncopated rhythms of jazz. *The King of Swing* thus plays the square, and the film distances jazz absolutely from its historical context.

Overall, the film avoided any comment of the issue of race, perhaps the defining element in the evolution (and subsequent controversy) of jazz during this period. A casual integrated spirit frames the musical numbers in the film—and a firm connection to Africa organizes the history segments—but, aside from Armstrong, the most prominent black characters in the film remain the two window washers performing a comedic role speaking jive and expressing an innate ability to play music. By removing the issue of race from the jazz narrative, the film deftly avoids a discussion of the larger controversies that accompanied jazz throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In 1948, Howard Hawks could produce a film centered on jazz and expect the audience to accept the music as an uncontroversial aspect of American musical culture. Produced a decade after the peak of the Swing Era, in other words, *A Song is Born* posited jazz as a perfectly acceptable subject for both a film as well as an academic pursuit. Twenty years earlier, however, jazz music represented the most polarizing form of musical expression in America, and in large measure, jazz reflected the cultural transformation rapidly impacting the nation during the early twentieth century.

Between the 1890s and the 1930s, the United States developed into a modern nation, and throughout this period a number of demographic, political, and economic

changes greatly impacted American culture and society. Together, increased urbanization, regional mobility, technological innovation, and a rapidly expanding economy eroded the Victorian moorings that underpinned American culture. Much of this change emerged on a national scale in the 1920s, and in many ways this decade signified a period of transition as Americans attempted to reconcile the traditional, Victorian values of commercial thrift, emotional repression, and hard work with modernism's thirst for fulfillment and connection on all levels. Aside from this shift in social and cultural values, America in the 1920s experienced a further shift in economic principles and political ideals in terms of a vibrant consumer-centered culture, and overall, a marked sense of ambivalence defined much of this period as Americans came into contact with modernity. By the 1930s, these changes had transformed America into a more interconnected and homogeneous nation.

The shift in cultural values largely defines the early decades of the twentieth century, and historian Warren Susman, in particular, posits the 1920s and 1930s as an era characterized explicitly by the cultural transformations occurring throughout the nation. "By 1922," Susman argues, "an exceptional and ever-growing number of Americans came to believe in a series of changes in the structure of their world, natural, technological, social, personal, and moral." Technology and the diffusion of cultural forms hastened much of this shift in values, but "at the same time," Susman writes, "they found themselves in the process of developing new techniques both for amassing still more knowledge and for achieving even fuller experiences."⁴ Technology played a large

⁴Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 106.

role in this transformation, and radio in particular connected millions of Americans through regular national broadcasts. Jazz music represented a major element of these broadcasts, and the creation and eventual popularity of jazz reflects much of the larger pattern of cultural change impacting America during the early twentieth century. As a nation largely defined by its culture during this period, a detailed examination of the cultural forms prominent in America during the 1920s represents a necessary avenue of inquiry. A study of jazz music, in other words, serves as a key method to observe larger historical patterns, but over the past fifty years, most jazz scholars have focused too intently on individual jazz musicians, compositional and musical practices, or on the creation of a viable narrative history of twentieth century jazz music. Effective biographies of Benny Goodman and Sidney Bechet, for example, have provided a wealth of new information concerning both performers, but the authors relate the larger cultural significance of their subjects only in passing.⁵ In addition, musicologists focus only on the musical contributions of various performers, presenting works inundated with precise notational renderings of solos, but lacking the larger historical importance of the music.⁶

⁵James Lincoln Collier, *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and John Chilton, *Sidney Bechet: The Wizard of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). One exception is Donald Marquis' biography of Buddy Bolden. Making up for sparse facts and documentation on the musician's life, Marquis focuses attentively on the social history of New Orleans. Donald M. Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden: First Man of Jazz* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).

⁶For two examples from a groundbreaking jazz musicologist, see Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); and *ibid.*, *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz, 1930-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

More often, jazz scholars emphasize the canonical aspects of the music, and place early jazz into a larger framework spanning the entire century.⁷

A number of academic studies, however, have combined musical examples with a focus on the cultural implications of jazz music. Hewing closely to Susman's approach, cultural historian Lawrence Levine used jazz to examine the broader historiographical themes of America in the 1920s. "Jazz tells us much about what was original and dynamic in American culture," Levine argues, "even as it reveals to what extent our culture, or more correctly, our cultural attitudes had not yet weaned themselves from the old colonial patterns of the past."⁸ Though other writers have shared Levine's more general approach to the interconnections of jazz and history, relatively few scholars have provided full-length accounts of the cultural role jazz music played during this period. In 1962, scholar Neil Leonard published *Jazz and the White Americans*, one of the first books underscoring the larger social implications of jazz in the 1920s.⁹ Twenty-five years later, Kathy Ogren combined Leonard's larger theoretical approach with an emphasis on the literature of the period in her book, *The Jazz Revolution*.¹⁰ Still, most jazz histories, even when emphasizing larger issues, maintain a limited scope by focusing

⁷Two recent examples are Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Alyn Shipton, *A New History of Jazz* (London: Continuum, 2001).

⁸Lawrence W. Levine, "Jazz and American Culture," reprinted in Lawrence W. Levine, *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 188.

⁹Neil Leonard, *Jazz and the White Americans: The Acceptance of a New Art Form* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

¹⁰Kathy J. Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution: Twenties America and the Meaning of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

too strongly on a specific location. Although each represents a strong contribution to jazz historiography, recent books on Chicago and Gennett records lack a consistent narrative on the national impact of jazz.¹¹ Several writers have recently returned to an examination of national trends, but in general these studies fail to address completely the reasons behind the eventual acceptance of jazz music.¹²

Maintaining a focus on the larger historical issues impacting the nation between the 1890s and the 1930s, this dissertation combines historical and musical analysis to provide a more complete view of American culture during the 1920s. During this period, jazz emerged as a particular form of black folk music from the rural South. Black migration out of the South, increased urbanization, technological innovation, and a developing commercial entertainment—in short the same mechanisms promoting the process of modernization—helped create a national audience for jazz music, and on the cusp of modernity, many Americans embraced jazz as a music symbolic of a new age. “In fact,” one writer argues, “jazz as a child of the new order uniquely represents both its own development as an art and, at the same time, reflects the eclectic coming-of-age of

¹¹William Kenney, *Chicago Jazz: A Cultural History, 1904-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Rick Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagie: Gennett Records and the Birth of Recorded Jazz* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994). Leroy Ostransky, in his 1978 book, provides an interesting study of urbanization as linked to the evolution of jazz. Leroy Ostransky, *Jazz City: The Impact of Our Cities on the Development of Jazz* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978).

¹²See for example, Burton W. Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz: Music, Race, and Culture in Urban America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Thomas J. Hennessey, *From Jazz to Swing: African-American Jazz Musicians and Their Music* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994); and Kenneth J. Bindas, *Swing That Modern Sound* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001).

all of America.”¹³ Others remained unimpressed, and the debate over the supposed immorality of jazz generally mirrored the larger concerns over the direction of American society. These tensions dissipated throughout the 1930s and 1940s, and by 1948 when a number of Americans flocked to the theater to see *A Song is Born*, jazz signified a safe and uncontroversial form of popular music. Twenty years removed from its contentious adolescence, jazz seemed perfectly harmless and perfectly American in a postwar society concerned more with consumption than fretting over the social impact of a music years past its prime. As non-threatening as jazz seemed in 1948, a half-century earlier, a number of musicians scattered throughout the Midwest and South began an ever-evolving experiment in rhythm, melody, and harmony. This new music, which eventually found a national audience, signified a revolution in sound related intrinsically to the massive transformation of values connected to the generation of modern America.

¹³Charles Nanry, “Jazz and Modernism,” *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* 1(1982): 149.

CHAPTER 1

RAGTIME, THE BLUES, AND THE REORIENTATION OF AMERICAN LIFE

At the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago Scott Joplin, a young black piano player, introduced ragtime to America. Maybe. No real evidence exists that Joplin, then in his early twenties, actually played along the Midway, nor can scholars conclusively place him in Chicago during that year at all. Nevertheless, ragtime (and its musical successor, the blues) came to dominate American popular culture during the late 19th century, and served as the major musical antecedents for the jazz music of the 1920s. A number of different styles eventually merged to produce jazz, but both ragtime and the blues help underscore the racial and class issues inherent in the creation of jazz. In particular, ragtime and the blues grew out of the same economic, social, and cultural circumstances that transformed American life in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A volatile and contradictory period, the years roughly between 1890 and 1920 represent a crucial period of change in American culture. A number of developments such as increased urbanization, a shift away from Victorianism, rapid industrialization, and the construction of a large corporate bureaucratic order challenged the way Americans perceived of life. Coupled with these larger changes in American society was a period of tremendous technological growth. With the advent of the player piano, phonograph, and radio, the music of the early twentieth century could be recorded, preserved, and

transmitted on a larger scale than ever before. Jazz, as one writer argues, “was the bastard child of several colliding cultures, of ethnic groups often at war with one another,” and the connected histories of ragtime and the blues help establish this cultural tension (and eventual resolution) inherent to jazz music.¹

American life in the late 19th century represented a marked period of transition. As Victorian America gradually took on more modern characteristics people became torn between two worlds. Although historians tend to overstate the importance of individual decades, the period from the early 1890s to the end of World War I represents a distinct change in American life, and scholars have labeled this era a “turbulent transition,” a “fundamental transformation,” a “fundamental shift,” and one of “profound cultural change.”² Within these years major shifts in economics, society, and culture unleashed a number of tremendous changes that would have important consequences for the rest of the twentieth century. Urbanization introduced city culture to what had been a predominately rural country. By 1890, 448 cities existed with populations over 8,000; 26 of these cities had populations over 100,000. Individual cities doubled, tripled, and even quadrupled their populations over a relatively short period of time. Between 1880 and 1900, for example, Chicago grew from a population of 30,000 to almost one million people. Also, America became more industrialized as an agrarian economy became more

¹Louis Bergreen, *Louis Armstrong: An Extravagant Life* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997), 51.

²Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 7 (“turbulent transition”); Thomas J. Schlereth, *Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), xv (“fundamental transformation”); Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), vii (“fundamental shift”); and William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 381 (“profound cultural change”).

factory-oriented. This transformation helped create a new bureaucratic order and emerging middle class in the nation. An increase in both European and Asian immigration altered drastically the national demographics. In addition, many black southerners left for better—if still limited—employment opportunities in the West, Midwest, and urban North. This pattern of migration led to a greater incorporation of African American culture into American life, especially through a number of technological innovations that transformed the country. Out of this period of intense cultural and social change emerged ragtime and the blues, two musical forms very much shaped by these larger cultural forces.³

As the United States emerged from an agrarian-centered society into a distinctly corporate-driven and urban existence, a large percentage of the country suffered from the immediate effects of this transition. In 1893 an economic depression hit the United States, and the failure of a number of large corporations generated a succession of business closings, bank foreclosures, and falling farm prices eventually precipitating a stock market crash. By year's end, as many as one-quarter of American workers sat idle. After a dizzying period of economic growth, the depression of the 1890s—the worst to that date—enacted four years of financial chaos and disorder.⁴ The same year as the stock market crash, Chicago hosted the World's Columbian Exposition. The technology and culture of the city remained at the center of the celebration, and as one writer has

³John Blum and others, eds., *The National Experience: A History of the United States* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1963), 442-3, 480-1; and James W. Davidson and others, eds., *Nation of Nations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 685-6, 772-3.

⁴Nell Irving Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), 116-40. Wiebe, *Search for Order*, 91; and Schlereth, *Victorian America*, 174-5.

noted, “the Chicago setting evoked a planned, albeit idealized, urban environment. Its scale, density of buildings, and municipal services all suggested a model metropolis.”⁵ At the dawn of a massive economic depression a number of Americans marveled at the wonders of electricity and chewing gum, Cream of Wheat and Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer. The Columbian Exposition celebrated the great achievements of the corporate world, but its context—the economic depression—contradicted the hosannas lauded on the country’s business leaders. During this turbulent transitory time of economics and culture, however, emerged a new style of music that allowed people a new way to define themselves in an emerging modern America. The depression of 1893 and the Columbian Exposition, and their apparent paradoxical nature had an enormous impact on American culture creating “the conditions in which America embraced ragtime music.”⁶ “As a kind of music that grew in popularity in the years following 1893,” one historian has written, “ragtime must be examined within the context of these two events and as an example of the changing components of American culture and identity.”⁷

Historians have pointed to a wide-range of musical antecedents to ragtime including marches, cakewalks, quadrilles, coon songs, and various forms of dance music popular in the Caribbean. Although originally performed only by solo piano players, larger ensembles, including both string and brass bands, gradually picked up on ragtime. Regardless of instrumentation all ragtime centered on the use of syncopation. Rhythm, therefore, served as the style’s defining characteristic, and both proponents and

⁵Schlereth, *Victorian America*, 169.

⁶Susan Curtis, *Dancing to a Black Man’s Tune: A Life of Scott Joplin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 47.

⁷Curtis, *Dancing to a Black Man’s Tune*, 47.

opponents of ragtime focused on this issue as to why they enjoyed or despised the music. The name itself referred to its syncopated (or “ragged”) nature, and more than any other element, the controversy over ragtime usually revolved around the music’s rhythm as critics routinely referred to the music as “maddened” or “hysterical.” “Ragtime syncopation,” one historian has written, “did serve to suggest the emotional exuberance of those who had never been assimilated into or who were moving eagerly away from Victorian culture.”⁸ Furthermore, to many listeners, ragtime’s syncopation related directly to its racial origins, and stemmed (they believed) from the inability of African American musicians to play printed music smoothly. In a related attack, some moralistic detractors complained that syncopated dance music allowed for a loosening of values in young people. Decades later, ragtime would provide a broad repertoire of songs for early jazz musicians, but more significantly jazz would inherit from ragtime both its rhythmic intensity as well as the associated controversy concerning race and morals.⁹

Ragtime’s popularity peaked between the years 1897 and 1917, and a number of technological and business changes—along with larger historical developments in the country—helped make ragtime a national music. New construction techniques allowed piano production to increase dramatically after the Civil War, and by the second decade of the twentieth century American manufacturers produced roughly 400,000 pianos a year. This increased supply of instruments allowed more Americans to own a piano. “By the late 1890s,” two scholars have written, “America had become a nation of

⁸William H. Kenney, “James Scott and the Culture of Classic Ragtime,” *American Music* (Summer 1991): 167.

⁹Edward A. Berlin, *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1980), 11-3, 26-9, 40-4.

amateur piano players.”¹⁰ Capitalizing on this piano culture, music-publishing companies began producing large amounts of sheet music to attract the amateur musician. One of the methods these companies used to advertise their songs involved the theater. That is, the vaudeville stage of the late nineteenth century served as a marketing tool for a number of publishing houses—the audience would hear new songs and would then seek out the sheet music. Vaudeville, in large measure, helped make ragtime become a national craze.

Vaudeville grew out of minstrelsy, one of the most popular entertainment forms of the 19th century. Housed in saloons, minstrel shows offered predominately male audiences a bawdy form of musical theater. The shows featured singing, dancing, and a number of short skits. The skits, in particular, involved stereotypical accounts of African Americans. In the early 1800s, white performers blackened their faces and delivered parodies of black life in America, and portraying black people as buffoons and clowns. These images became refined throughout the first half of the century, and by the Civil War, black people became defined by these false stage images. After the war, black people began working in minstrel shows, and like their white counterparts, they too blackened their faces with cork and reddened their lips with grease paint. The appearance of black people on stage mocking their own race immensely affected white audience members, many of whom (especially in the North) had little contact with black people in real life. “Thus,” one historian writes, “American theatergoers received reinforcement of the perceptions of blacks as naïve, slow-witted, able to speak only in a

¹⁰David A. Jasen and Gene Jones, *That American Rag: The Story of Ragtime from Coast to Coast* (New York: Schirmer Books, 2000), xxxv.

substandard dialect, and of being marvelous dancers.”¹¹ These stereotypes would dramatically influence race relations during the late 19th century, as many white people viewed African Americans as Zip Coons and Uncle Toms instead of human beings.

In the late nineteenth century, vaudeville shows replaced minstrelsy as the country’s popular entertainment. Vaudeville shows—housed in theaters rather than saloons—represented a more genteel form of entertainment, and these new shows attracted more women and children than did minstrel shows. Although certain minstrel show staples would remain such as the “coon song” and the crude depictions of African Americans in particular, much of the overt racism inherent in minstrelsy was toned down in order to attract a larger audience. One of the largest vaudeville organizations had a chain of roughly 400 theaters spread throughout the East and Midwest by the onset of World War I. This system of interconnected theaters provided a large number of Americans with the opportunity to hear some form of ragtime music. Although not yet mass culture—only large-scale mechanically reproduced distribution methods such as phonographs and a widespread access to radio would allow for that—ragtime music had the ability to reach more people in more places than any previous type of music.¹² This web of vaudeville theater chains emerged when it did because of a large number of advancements made in both transportation and the corporate world during the late 19th century. As railroads connected more and more cities and corporations focused on economic integration and efficiency, more Americans came into contact with the same

¹¹Edward A. Berlin, *King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and His Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 11.

¹²Giles Oakley, *The Devil’s Music: A History of the Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 21-4; and Jasen, *That American Rag*, xxxvi-xxxvix.

product. The railroad allowed musicians to travel farther and more quickly than before, allowing for the dynamic nature of vaudeville shows. Minstrel shows rarely changed and had a small travel circuit. Vaudeville, in contrast, could attract larger audiences because they offered much more diversity and a quicker turnaround in acts. “A town might get a minstrel show once or twice a year,” two writers note, “but there was a new vaudeville show every Monday.”¹³ Though vaudeville shows cleaned up much of the coarseness of minstrelsy, many of the racist trappings of the minstrel show remained. Racist stereotypes notwithstanding, vaudeville offered employment opportunities for black actors and musicians to a larger degree than had minstrelsy.

Vaudeville also offered vast opportunities for music publishers to hawk their wares. Publishing houses, “were quick to capitalize on the fact that thousands of acts, almost every one of them requiring some kind of music, were barnstorming the nation.”¹⁴ Ragtime became one of the more popular forms of music featured in the shows, and through vaudeville, ragtime found a national audience. Amateur musicians, especially women who rarely went to minstrel shows, heard ragtime on the Vaudeville stage, and then went out and either purchased ragtime sheet music or wrote their own rags. Strengthening this arrangement was the network of dime store chains that sold the sheet music. Vaudeville presented new rags to the audience every few weeks, and chain stores then sold the listeners the sheet music for those songs. This combination of vaudeville theater and music publishing allowed ragtime to flourish, and this system allowed musicians to maintain fairly steady employment performing ragtime. Although limited in

¹³Jasen and Jones, *That American Rag*, xxxvii.

¹⁴Jasen and Jones, *That American Rag*, xxxvii.

size and scope in comparison to the record, radio, and film industries of the 1920s, music publishing helped create a national audience for ragtime, and the foremost ragtime composer of this era was Scott Joplin.¹⁵

Born sometime in 1868 in the piney woods of northeastern Texas, Scott Joplin grew up near the Texas and Arkansas border.¹⁶ Joplin's mother, Florence Givens—a freeperson of color from Kentucky—and his father, Giles Joplin—born a slave in North Carolina but freed before the Civil War—married in 1860 in Cass County, Texas. Born in the midst of Reconstruction, Joplin, as an African American, encountered new prospects, but a number of obstacles still remained. Shortly before Joplin's birth, Arkansas ratified the 14th Amendment granting the rights of citizenship to all Americans, white and black. Texas delayed ratification until 1870, but neither state “extended adequate protection or assistance to the new citizens.”¹⁷ In fact, during the period in which the states ratified the 14th Amendment, various terrorist groups, including most prominently the Ku Klux Klan, emerged throughout the South in an attempt to reassert white authority over African Americans. Replacing lumberyards with railroad yards, the Joplin family moved to Texarkana in the late 1870s, a transition that mirrored the migration of thousands of other American families as urban life came to define the national culture. City life afforded Joplin both educational and occupational opportunities. The education Joplin received, though limited, separated him from the

¹⁵Jasen and Jones, *That American Rag*, xxxvi-ix.

¹⁶Most sources cite November 24, 1868 as Joplin's date of birth, but as Edward Berlin has pointed out, Joplin's widow gave this date in the 1940s and must be “almost certainly incorrect” according to various census figures. Instead, Berlin places birth about six months earlier that year. See Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 4.

¹⁷Curtis, *Dancing to a Black Man's Tune*, 22.

vast number of African Americans who were not literate.¹⁸ More importantly, Joplin's life in Texarkana "began the process of education and interaction with whites and blacks that enabled him to create a new and compelling form of music at the end of the century."¹⁹ Trained in both religious and secular music, Joplin played music in a variety of places for both black and white listeners. His broad repertoire stemmed from his lessons with a German music teacher in Texarkana, and this blurring of classical sources with church hymns and popular dances allowed Joplin the opportunity to play in an assortment of venues further diversifying his music.

In 1885, Joplin moved to St. Louis and began playing in various saloons and clubs. St. Louis would later serve as an important center for the ragtime craze, and there, Joplin encountered a number of people of some influence. In particular, the young piano player met John Turpin, a local saloon owner. Turpin's son, Tom, also played piano, and Joplin spent much of his time in St. Louis at the Silver Dollar.²⁰ Turpin, who purportedly wrote "Harlem Rag" in 1892, became close friends with Joplin, and their playing preceded the supposed introduction of ragtime at the Chicago World's Fair by at least one year. Again, little evidence exists that the World's Fair included ragtime, but at least one scholar argues that part of the problem concerned the fact that ragtime "had not yet found its name."²¹ In 1897, the first instrumental rag appeared in print, and later that year, Turpin finally published "Harlem Rag," the first published ragtime composition by an

¹⁸Curtis, *Dancing to a Black Man's Tune*, 36.

¹⁹Curtis, *Dancing to a Black Man's Tune*, 38.

²⁰Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 8.

²¹Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 12.

African American. Turpin's composition, two ragtime scholars have argued, "stands as the first good rag as well as the first important one." Turpin's rag, they offer, "was the road map that showed where syncopated playing would go."²² Due to its small print run, however, "Harlem Rag" reached few piano players outside of St. Louis, and Turpin's real fame in the city stemmed from his ownership of the Rosebud Bar. The block-long Rosebud allowed a patron to pursue a variety of interests, from dining and drinking, to playing cards and playing piano. Rooms upstairs guaranteed further illicit behavior. For piano players, however, the magnetism of the Rosebud derived from the ragtime played there by Turpin, Joplin, and others.

Joplin's actions during this time remain a bit mysterious, but at some point in this period he moved to Sedalia—a railroad town in the middle of Missouri—where he initially gained some measure of success in both performing and publishing music. The reasons behind Joplin's move to Sedalia are unclear. St. Louis and Chicago would have provided many more opportunities to a young musician, but Joplin settled in Sedalia in 1894 and began playing in the town's clubs. After moving to Sedalia, Joplin published two original (non-ragtime) compositions—"Please Say You Will" and "A Picture of Her Face"—through local distributors in 1895. These early pieces "lacked the distinctive syncopation that marked his later work."²³ At least one scholar has argued that this difference may be accounted for by Joplin's unrefined notational skills rather than a compositional dissimilarity.²⁴ Now a published composer, Joplin still spent a

²²David A. Jasen and Gene Jones, *Black Bottom Stomp: Eight Masters of Ragtime and Early Jazz* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

²³Curtis, *Dancing to a Black Man's Tune*, 210.

²⁴Curtis, *Dancing to a Black Man's Tune*, 210.

considerable amount of his time playing in clubs throughout the area. In particular, Joplin found work at the Black 400 and Maple Leaf Clubs. These social clubs “had among its members some of the town’s brightest and most enterprising young black men.”²⁵ In the fall of 1898, Tony Williams, a vaudeville performer, opened the Black 400 Club in an attempt to provide respectable entertainment for Sedalia’s black community. A short time later, the Maple Leaf Club came into existence through the work of Walker and Will Williams, two brothers unrelated to the director of the Black 400. Joplin certainly performed at the Maple Leaf, if not both clubs.²⁶ By 1899, the two clubs came under attack by the black religious community as well as local law enforcement officials. That year, in two separate arrests, city officials charged both Tony Williams and Walker Williams with selling unlicensed liquor. In early 1900 Sedalia officials closed down the two clubs.²⁷

Although burdened with a relatively inauspicious history, the Maple Leaf Club would gain some amount of prominence years later with the publication of Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag.” During his tenure as club entertainer in Sedalia, Joplin wrote a number of rags and attempted to publish at least three compositions in 1898. His were not the first published rags, of course, and by 1899, when he finally published his first

²⁵Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 34.

²⁶Edward Berlin offers the most informative study of the Black 400 and the Maple Leaf Clubs. See Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 34-44. Berlin mentions that the ragtime pianist Arthur Marshall, among others, flipped the order of the two club’s creations. Curtis, in her book *Dancing to a Black Man’s Tune*, seems to indicate that Tony Williams ran the Maple Leaf in 1894 (four years earlier than Berlin indicates), and that he later opened the Black 400. Curtis further suggests that the two clubs had waning attendance in the late 1890s, a supposed period of inactivity that coincides with Berlin’s date of inception. See Curtis, *Dancing to a Black Man’s Tune*, 79-80.

²⁷Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 43-4.

ragtime pieces, “there were more than a hundred rags in print.”²⁸ Carl Hoffman, a music publisher in Kansas City, bought “Oriental Rags” from Joplin in 1899, but it was Joplin’s second published rag that would have a national impact. In acknowledgement to his Sedalia friends, Joplin entitled the piece, “Maple Leaf Rag,” and it represented “his most important composition and the best-known rag of the period.”²⁹ Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag” both summed up ragtime’s past as well as pointing towards a more complex future. Joplin used an established ragtime structure but also modified certain elements of the rag; specifically, he lopped off the standard introduction, and launched directly into the unambiguous syncopation of the first strain.³⁰ Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag” reflected a much more complex and mannered structure. The piece boasted a strong melody, evident from the beginning, but the rhythmic pulse of the song was at once more pronounced and central to the mood of the composition. “What catches our attention,” one scholar writes, “are how single notes may play rhythmic rather than melodic functions.”³¹ A further change in structure concerned Joplin’s addition of a fourth strain (most other rags contained only three), and as with the greater syncopated intricacy of the rag, this subtle variation made “Maple Leaf Rag” at once familiar and fascinatingly new. The result cemented his growing reputation as a ragtime piano player, brought him a steady royalty-

²⁸Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 47.

²⁹Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 51. Ragtime pianist Joshua Rifkin has produced several modern recordings of Joplin’s music. For a recent performance of the song that strives to capture Joplin’s spirit, see Joshua Rifkin, *Scott Joplin: Piano Rags* (Elektra Records, 1994).

³⁰Jasen and Jones, *Black Bottom Stomp*, 17.

³¹Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 62.

based income, and eventually made him famous. Thus, Joplin's publisher, John Stark, played a large role in helping spawn the eventual "ragtime craze" of the early 1900s.

Several stories exist to explain how John Stark encountered Joplin, and most early accounts credit myths and legends rather than facts. The most popular story involves Stark happening upon Joplin playing "Maple Leaf Rag" while the publisher was searching for a cold beer. The more likely scenario has Joplin actively seeking out a publisher for his new composition.³² Regardless of the circumstances, Stark agreed to publish the piece and signed Joplin to a five-year contract on August 10, 1900. Besides giving the piano player a publication outlet, the contract also provided Joplin with a royalty claim of one cent for each copy sold. As one scholar has noted, most black composers received flat rates for their songs in lieu of any royalty obligations. Joplin's situation offered a greater economic stability, and acquiring "a royalty contract for what became the best-known instrumental rag of the period, gave him sufficient income to change the conditions and course of his life."³³ "By 1905," two writers point out, "it was selling three thousand copies a month, and it was well on its way to becoming the world's most popular rag, the one that would stay in print and be recorded in every decade after its publication."³⁴ By 1909, Joplin earned roughly \$600 annually from the royalties of "Maple Leaf Rag."³⁵

³²Berlin attempts to piece together a more factual account and succeeds in debunking many of the earlier stories involving Stark "happening upon" the lucky Joplin. Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 53-4. See also Jasen and Jones, *That American Rag*, 28-31.

³³Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 56.

³⁴Jasen and Jones, *Black Bottom Stomp*, 16-7.

³⁵Although it would not make Joplin wealthy, this one song "was probably able to meet most of his basic expenses." Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, 58.

After the publication of “Maple Leaf Rag,” Joplin continued to compose and entertain. Within three years Joplin had written a number of tunes—including “Elite Syncopations” and “The Entertainer”—but he was never able to duplicate his earlier success. Over the next few years, Joplin committed himself to a large-scale “ragtime opera” entitled *Treemonisha*. An ambitious, if unsuccessful, composition, *Treemonisha* never achieved much popularity, and Joplin’s income suffered as he devoted all of his energies to this one work. Furthering Joplin’s problems, ragtime had become a musical craze, but the public clamored for “ragtime songs” not the richly textured rags that he had produced. A confusing element of ragtime relates to the somewhat arbitrary use of the term ragtime as well as the existence of two distinctive styles. Joplin composed “classic ragtime,” a primarily piano based music, but many music publishers also produced “ragtime song,” a genre connected closely to Tin Pan Alley, the center of the music publishing business in New York City. Many of these songs—written mainly by white musicians—also incorporated some of the racist imagery of minstrel songs. Related only ostensibly to the music Joplin produced, ragtime songs discovered a much larger audience by combining lyrics to a simplified ragtime beat.³⁶ Ragtime songs emphasized lyrical content and entertainment over technical proficiency or instrumental prowess; thus, the greatest success of the ragtime era proved not to be “Maple Leaf Rag,” but “Dill Pickles” a song that attracted an audience because it was “noisy, easy, and great fun to play fast.”³⁷ The sensation caused by ragtime song unleashed a myriad of ragtime songs throughout the 1910s making commercial ragtime the most popular music of the period.

³⁶Edward A. Berlin, “Cole and Johnson Brothers’ *The Evolution of ‘Ragtime’*,” *Current Musicology* 36 (1983): 31. See also Berlin, *Ragtime*, 1-60.

³⁷Jasen and Jones, *Black Bottom Stomp*, 7.

As Americans obsessed over ragtime, Joplin's health and career began to decline. At some point the pianist contracted syphilis, and the illness only compounded his economic problems. After spending the early months of 1917 in various hospitals, Joplin died in early April. His death came near the end of ragtime's decade of glory, the waning of a music that he had almost single-handedly defined. The composer's last printed rag, "Magnetic Rag," appeared in 1914 when the country was beginning to pick up on a stylized form of the blues. And two months before his death, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, a group of white musicians, entered a Victor Records studio and recorded "Livery Stable Blues." This record touched off the jazz craze that would help reinvent American culture in the 1920s. As America turned to the blues and then jazz, Scott Joplin's legacy was abandoned and then forgotten. Many musicians remembered the composer, but the listening public and, importantly, the black community, looked elsewhere for their entertainment and inspiration.

The various events and tensions that gave rise to ragtime would also help to create a related yet utterly distinct form of music known as the blues. Unlike ragtime, which maintained relatively clear origins, the history of the blues remains hidden behind a shadowy curtain of rumor, speculation, and little documentary evidence. Nonetheless, sometime in the 1890s a new style of music emerged from the rural South. A distinctly African American form, this music had its rhythmic and lyrical antecedents in work songs, slave tunes, ballads, and spirituals, many of which had at least some connection to African tribal songs and rituals. Work songs had a tremendous effect on what would become the blues, and later blues musicians adopted the improvised call-and-response style of work songs in their music. As a secular African American folk music, work

songs “retained their traditional African mold while adapting to the New World environment.”³⁸ Work songs, however, received no musical accompaniment save for the blow of the hammer or stroke of the axe. In the evenings, black southerners used these songs as a form of leisure entertainment, and as one historian has written, “somehow, somewhere, there began to grow out of this leisure music a new form, one more strict than the work song, whose function was to talk about the things that a working man or woman felt about his or her life.”³⁹ Overall, work songs and the blues were “closely related in composition and theme,” and the blues incorporated many of the themes inherent in work songs.⁴⁰

More importantly, blues music related directly to the experience of black people in America. Although a predominately African American music, writers in the last half of the twentieth century usually connected ragtime (especially in its more popular, Tin Pan Alley incarnation) with white listeners. The lyrical format of ragtime song, composed predominately by white songwriters, stood in contrast with the primarily instrumental structure of classic ragtime. Thus, the connections between classic ragtime and the African American experience remained somewhat obscure. In contrast, the blues—even when watered down—maintained a close connection to the black community. “The origin and definition of the blues,” one writer has noted, “cannot be understood independent of the suffering that black people endured in the context of white

³⁸William Barlow, *“Looking Up At Down” : The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 13.

³⁹James Lincoln Collier, *The Making of Jazz: A Comprehensive History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1978), 37.

⁴⁰William R. Ferris, *Blues From the Delta* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1978), 35.

racism and hate.” “The blues,” therefore, “tells us about black people’s attempt to carve out a significant existence in a very trying situation. The purpose of the blues is to give structure to black existence in a context where color means rejection and humiliation.”⁴¹ African American musicians created ragtime, but that form spoke to the black community only in degrees. Born in the fields, the blues maintained a closeness and proximity to black life in the early twentieth century.

Complicating the early history of the blues is the fact that scholars tend to divide the styles prevalent during the early twentieth century into two types, much like the delineation between piano ragtime and ragtime song: classic (or vaudeville) blues and country (or “downhome”) blues. Classic blues—which emerged in some measure from the stage songs of vaudeville acts and both black and white minstrel performances—were much more formalized than the country blues, and became quite popular in the early 1920s through the recordings of Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Ethyl Waters, and Mamie Smith among others. This style of the blues had band arrangements and was connected to a long history of showmanship and public entertainment. The country blues, in contrast, tended to be more improvised, less strict in terms of form, and were normally performed by one musician (who also played a guitar accompaniment). Whereas women typically sang vaudeville blues, men such as Charley Patton, Son House, and Robert Johnson exemplified country blues. Nonetheless, both classic and country blues shared a common structure with three lines of verse (the second line normally repeating the first line) and twelve-bar stanzas. The beat in these early blues—particularly the country blues—tends

⁴¹James H. Cone, quoted in David Meltzer, ed., *Writing Jazz* (San Francisco: Mercury Press, 1999), 43.

to fluctuate.⁴² The traits that made the blues distinctive—blue notes (technically, the notes that represented the half-tones between piano keys), a fluctuating rhythm, and a unique vocal performance—could not be adequately notated in printed music, and what popularized the blues tended not to be sheet music sales, but record sales since the audience preferred an individual performance to an amateur reproduction.⁴³ Thus, the nascent recording technology, which would propel jazz to the nation, also helped the blues achieve widespread regional prominence at least in black communities.

In 1920, Mamie Smith and Her Jazz Hounds recorded Perry Bradford's "Crazy Blues," a session that produced the first blues record. Bradford, "a hustling composer, band leader, pianist and singer, with a city-slick line in slang," wanted a black female singer to record one of his blues songs.⁴⁴ That August, Mamie Smith and her Jazz Hounds recorded Bradford's "Crazy Blues" at an Okeh studio. "The record was a major breakthrough," one blues historian has argued, "a turning point in blues history."⁴⁵ Bradford had already published "Crazy Blues" under three different titles for three different companies, but Smith's recording became a hit, selling 75,000 copies in its first month of release. Bradford's song, and in particular Smith's recording of it, introduced

⁴²Collier, *Making of Jazz*, 27.

⁴³Defining blue notes remains somewhat difficult. Vocalists and some instrumentalists such as trombonists, can easily bend notes in and out of pitch. Piano players can also at least allude to these tones by either sliding as cleanly as possible into a certain note, or by accenting the 7th chord. Thomas Dorsey, for one, argues that "blues notes are on the piano; been on the piano just like opera and its trills and things. A blue note? There's no such thing as a blue note. Blues don't own no notes." Dorsey both negates the fact that piano players cannot achieve these notes as well as argues that the blues is a feeling, not a musical notation devise. Meltzer, *Writing Jazz*, 43.

⁴⁴Oakley, *Devil's Music*, 83.

⁴⁵Oakley, *Devil's Music*, 84.

America to the classic blues. “From the time of Mamie Smith’s first recordings,” one writer notes, “it became possible for anyone in any part of the country to hear the same blues and hear it repeated in exactly the same way and as many times as the listener wanted, until the grooves of the disc were worn smooth.”⁴⁶ Recordings allowed listeners to experience a specific performance repeatedly, and the uniqueness of Smith’s record attracted a large audience.

Mamie Smith and Perry Bradford had a hit, but W. C. Handy emerged as the most important figure in popularizing the early blues. A preacher’s son from Alabama, Handy “was one of the first to see the commercial possibilities of the blues,” and the songwriter almost single-handedly brought an African American folk music to the nation.⁴⁷ William Christopher Handy, a trained musician, played the cornet in a number of marching and dance bands, and committed himself to performing respectful music. In 1903, however, Handy’s attention to classical parlor music drifted towards a rawer, more unkempt sound, when the young musician—then traveling with a minstrel group—happened upon a black guitar player in Tutwiler, Mississippi. While waiting for a long-delayed train, Handy overheard the guitar player singing a song about the “Yellow Dog,” the Mississippi colloquialism for the Yazoo-Delta Railroad. “As he played,” Handy later noted in his memoirs, “he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars.” Handy wrote that it was “the weirdest music I

⁴⁶Oakley, *Devil’s Music*, 84. Francis Davis refers to “Crazy Blues” as “a synthesis of the blues and black vaudeville.” Francis Davis, *The History of the Blues: The Roots, The Music, The People From Charley Patton to Robert Cray* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 29, 62. It should be noted that the early blues records were entirely of the classic blues genre (mainly sung by women). The country blues of Charley Patton, Son House, and Robert Johnson would not be recorded until the late 1920s.

⁴⁷Oakley, *Devil’s Music*, 40.

had ever heard.”⁴⁸ Later, while playing a concert in Cleveland, Mississippi, Handy received a request to allow a local black band to play a few numbers. The band performed an improvised dance tune not far removed from what the Tutwiler guitarist had played, but a less than enthusiastic Handy later wrote that the “strumming attained a disturbing monotony.” Once the band finished, however, Handy realized that the young band had thoroughly impressed the audience. The dancers began showering the musicians with coins. “A rain of silver dollars began to fall around the outlandish, stomping feet,” Handy wrote, “Dollars, quarters, halves—the shower grew heavier and continued so long I strained my neck to get a better look. There before the boys lay more money than my nine musicians were being paid for the entire engagement.” He may not have appreciated the music performed by the guitar player in Tutwiler or the band in Cleveland, but Handy immediately understood its commercial power. “Then,” Handy wrote simply, “I saw the beauty of primitive music.”⁴⁹ Forty years later in his autobiography, Handy wrote in epiphanic terms about the change that occurred in him having witnessed this event. “That night,” he wrote, “a composer was born, an *American* composer.”⁵⁰

At the age of thirty, Handy embarked on a new career. His first real break arrived while living in Memphis. In 1909, Handy wrote a piece called “Mr. Crump,” concerning E. H. Crump’s candidacy for mayor of Memphis. Handy later altered the song and retitled it “Memphis Blues,” a song which he claimed “was the first of all the many

⁴⁸Handy, *Father of the Blues* (New York: MacMillan, 1941), 74.

⁴⁹Oakley, *Devil’s Music*, 40-1; Davis, *History of the Blues*, 23-8; and Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 73-7 (quotations on p.77).

⁵⁰Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 77 (italics in original).

published ‘blues.’ And it set a new fashion in American popular music and contributed to the rise of jazz.”⁵¹ For his part, Handy usually argued that he had introduced the blues to a larger audience—although he did entitle his autobiography *Father of the Blues*. In the 1930s, the self-proclaimed creator of jazz, Jelly Roll Morton, would lambaste Handy as a thief, but at least publicly (and Handy, the businessman, was nothing if not conscious of his public persona) Handy argued that he served only as the promoter of the form.⁵² Still, Handy’s publications gave the blues an identity; an identity firmly grounded in the African American experience. In fact, Handy described his blues compositions as an attempt “to combine ragtime syncopation with a real melody in the spiritual tradition.”⁵³ More than anything else, though, Handy saw a chance to make some money publishing blues songs. Handy’s music may have had “little, if anything, to do with legitimate [downhome] blues,” but by refining the idiosyncrasies of the country blues and standardizing its form, he made it palatable to a white audience eager to pay for the experience.⁵⁴

“Memphis Blues” helped establish the popular blues form, but Handy’s largest success, and the song most associated with the musician, was “St. Louis Blues.” In a sense the song represented to the blues what Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag” represented to ragtime, the one composition that would define both a style and a career. The 40-year-

⁵¹Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 93-4.

⁵²“His place in blues history,” Giles Oakley argues, “is as a popularizer and publisher rather than as a blues performer.” Oakley, *Devil’s Music*, 41.

⁵³Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 120.

⁵⁴Amira Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Quill, 1963), 148. Baraka, not too surprisingly, has little positive to say about Handy’s music,

old Handy completed “St. Louis Blues” in 1914, two years after publishing “Memphis Blues.” The song, however, had an unusual arrangement, and in some ways, “St. Louis Blues” has more explicit compositional ties to ragtime than to the country blues. “Only the first and third strains of ‘St. Louis Blues,’” one scholar points out, “employ traditional twelve-bar blues structure.” Elsewhere, the song contains “an unambiguous tango.”⁵⁵ Though later blues purists would dismiss this element of Handy’s work, the composer consistently argues in his autobiography that he endeavored to make the blues respectable. The song is far removed from the Mississippi Delta—the guitar player in Tutwiler would probably not even recognize “St. Louis Blues” as having any connection to his own songs—but in a sense, that confirmed Handy’s objective.⁵⁶

A businessman and entertainer, Handy wrote the song with the public (essentially the white dancing public) in mind, and Handy’s composition hit big. It sold well on its own as sheet music, but various recordings of the tune extended its scope. In fact, by 1925, at least five full-band versions existed. In 1916, the Prince Orchestra recorded the song as an instrumental, and three years later, singer Al Bernard released the first vocal rendition of the song. Bernard later recut “St. Louis Blues” with the Original Dixieland Jazz Band providing accompaniment. One of the stronger versions of the song came from Marion Harris in 1920. Unlike the sheet music-driven ragtime craze, the recording industry fueled the nation’s infatuation with the blues. By the early 1920s, Victrolas had

especially since Baraka sees it as only a pale imitation of the more “authentic” blues of Robert Johnson or Charley Patton.

⁵⁵Davis, *History of the Blues*, 59.

⁵⁶For a military band version of the tune that retains much of Handy’s original intent, see Jim Europe’s 369th U.S. Infantry Band, “St. Louis Blues,” *Early Jazz, 1917-1923* (Fremeaux & Associates, 2000).

begun to seep into the marketplace, and these early blues records amassed a large number of willing listeners. Again, like ragtime, the most popular blues pieces tended towards vaudeville, but the success of Handy and others underscored the emergent scope of the entertainment industry.⁵⁷

The vast number of available blues recordings has tended to obscure the role ragtime played in the creation of jazz. The less noisy cousin of the blues, ragtime failed to sustain much popularity after World War I. Thus, the near disappearance of true ragtime after World War I and the increased appearance of the blues through phonograph records helped to skew the historical record. Furthermore, outside of Joplin and a few others, the popular rags of the day tended to be composed by white musicians for Tin Pan Alley. As the issue of race clouded the history of jazz, a number of scholars wrote ragtime out of the narrative. Amiri Baraka, for example, declared ragtime “a pitiful popular debasement that was the rage of the country for about twenty years.”⁵⁸ Activists attempting to promote jazz as completely African in origin found a supporter in Gunther Schuller, a prominent white musicologist, and his book *Early Jazz* published in the late 1960s. “Every musical element [of jazz],” Schuller contends, “is essentially African in background.”⁵⁹ By defining jazz as almost entirely African in origin, these writers have removed the idea of cultural collaboration that represents one of the most remarkable aspects of early jazz. Even writers who acknowledge ragtime’s importance tend to do so somewhat tentatively. “Ragtime music,” one historian writes, “rivals the blues in

⁵⁷Davis, *History of the Blues*, 60.

⁵⁸Baraka, *Blues People*, 90.

⁵⁹Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 62.

importance—and *perhaps* surpasses it in influence—as a predecessor to early jazz.”⁶⁰ In large measure jazz epitomizes the convergence of black and white culture as the ragtime elements of harmony and composition merged with the timbre, syncopation, and improvisational qualities of the blues to produce a uniquely American form of musical expression.

Part of the confusion—racially, socially, and musically—stems from the promotional labels applied to different pieces of music, and music marketers routinely shoehorned songs into vaguely defined categories. Many jazz songs, for example, sold as rags, and a number of titular blues pieces were essentially pop songs. Early copies of Handy’s “St. Louis Blues,” for example, clearly labeled it “the most widely known ragtime composition.”⁶¹ Likewise, the distinction between blues singers and jazz singers proved to be considerably subjective in terms of marketing. The piano player and composer Jelly Roll Morton, for example, defies easy classification and illustrates the arbitrary rigidity of defining the different styles popular in the early twentieth century. As if to underscore this very point, Morton recorded Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag” as a rag, a blues, and as jazz for Alan Lomax in the 1930s. Although Morton’s legacy tends to collar him with a jazz label, the pianist played all styles of music: ragtime, the blues, popular songs, as well as jazz, and he serves as a reminder that the creation of jazz was

⁶⁰Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 20 (italics are mine). Despite a brief discussion of ragtime, most of Gioia’s emphasis remains squarely on the blues.

⁶¹Kay C. Thompson, “Ragtime Vs. the Blues,” *Jazz Journal* (November 1950): 2. Even Thompson points out that the ragtime blurb speaks more than a little to the confusing nature of genre labels during this period. Still, as Thompson writes, “it was clearly indicative of the degree to which everyone, Handy included, wanted in on Mr. Joplin’s ragtime act.” Ibid.

not a singular event nor did the music follow a straight evolutionary trajectory from one particular source.⁶²

During the period that Americans embraced ragtime and the blues, a new, yet related, form of music—eventually known as jazz—began to percolate out of the South. Jazz emerged from a number of 19th century musical developments, and would become increasingly popular in the years following World War I. Whereas the ragtime and blues crazes proved to be short-lived, the popularity of jazz came to define the national tenor of American life in the 1920s. Although certain precursors of jazz appeared throughout the United States, it was in New Orleans that everything came together. The city’s rich musical heritage, relatively fluid racial boundaries, and markedly diverse culture provided an appropriate incubatory environment for jazz music. By the late 1920s jazz had infiltrated most of urban America, but in New Orleans in the early 1900s musicians such as Buddy Bolden, Louis Armstrong, and Jelly Roll Morton conjured up a music unlike anything Americans had encountered before.

⁶²See, for example, the recordings of “Maple Leaf Rag” featured on Jelly Roll Morton, *The Library of Congress Recordings, Volume One: “Kansas City Stomp,”* (Rounder Records, 1993).

CHAPTER 2

NEW ORLEANS AND THE CREATION OF EARLY JAZZ

In early 1938, Jelly Roll Morton, self-proclaimed “Originator of Jazz and Stomps” and “World’s Greatest Hot Tune Writer,” wrote a rambling letter to the jazz magazine, *Down Beat*, announcing that “New Orleans is the cradle of jazz, and I, myself, happened to be the creator [of jazz] in the year 1902.” This year-specific boast had as its impetus an episode of Robert Ripley’s popular *Believe It or Not* radio series that claimed W. C. Handy as the “originator of jazz and the blues.” Full of vitriol, Morton’s letter was an attempt by the New Orleans piano player to place his hometown (and himself) at the center of the creation of jazz. “My contributions were many,” Morton wrote, “first clown director, with witty sayings and flashily dressed, now called master of ceremonies; first glee club in orchestra; the first washboard was recorded by me; bass fiddle, drums—which were supposed to be impossible to record.”¹ He even claimed to have invented the

¹Jelly Roll Morton, “I Created Jazz in 1902,” *Down Beat* (August 1938): 3. The black press also picked up on the story, see Baltimore *Afro-American*, April 23, 1938, p. 10. Both the magazine and newspaper edited considerably Morton’s letter, an early version of which is at the Historic New Orleans Collection. See MSS 507, “Jelly Roll Morton Correspondence,” William Russell Collection, Folder 1, Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, Louisiana. Also partially reprinted in Ralph de Toledano, *Frontiers of Jazz* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Co., 1994), 104-7; and William Russell, ed., “Oh, Mister Jelly,” *A Jelly Roll Morton Scrapbook* (Denmark: JazzMedia, 1999), 171. In their recent biography of the piano player, Howard Reich and William Gaines aver that a friend of Morton’s actually composed the letter following a lengthy conversation with the piano player. See Howard Reich and William Gaines, *Jelly’s*

style of playing drums with brushes instead of sticks. A critique of Handy coursed through the letter and Morton claimed that Handy's "Memphis Blues" borrowed (or stole) heavily from one of Jelly Roll's own compositions. A controversial letter in jazz circles, Morton's not entirely unfounded rant inspired a folklorist working for the Library of Congress to contact the pianist for a series of interviews.

Conducted over the course of four weeks that May, Alan Lomax's interviews with Morton represented the first extensive oral history of jazz produced by a musician connected to the primeval sounds of early jazz in New Orleans. In these interviews, Morton addressed a number of themes and issues related to the creation of jazz, and several years later, Lomax published these reminiscences in a book entitled *Mister Jelly Roll*. A braggart and a pimp, Morton also was one of the first real composers of jazz music, and his career points to the large variety of musical antecedents of jazz as well as the importance of New Orleans, the most cosmopolitan of southern towns. Boasting a diverse lineage of French, Spanish, African and Caribbean influences, New Orleans also developed a complex social order of white, black, and Creole inhabitants. Each of these groups maintained unique—if connected—musical performance styles, and various secular and religious traditions allowed for a large number of venues for musical performance. Although other cities maintained dynamic musical scenes, only New Orleans fostered an environment allowing for everything to come together within a few

Blues: The Life, Music, and Redemption of Jelly Roll Morton (New York: Da Capo Press, 2003), 155-7.

years at the dawn of the twentieth century. Or as Jelly Roll Morton remarked to Alan Lomax during one of his interviews, “I thought New Orleans was the whole world.”²

New Orleans played a rather unusual role as the first “jazz city.” Although both Chicago and New York would produce jazz scenes connected closely to an urban culture, New Orleans jazz never developed a strong urban identity. Vague divisions defined much of the culture in New Orleans, and even the relatively straightforward issue of race became clouded by a middle grouping of Creoles. A port city in a state with a complex history marked by international imperialism, New Orleans differed from most other southern cities by maintaining a diverse, cosmopolitan, and racially mixed population. In 1900, New Orleans stood as the twelfth largest city in the nation with just over 287,000 inhabitants, 27% of which were considered black.³ These numbers, however, obfuscate the racial and ethnic divisions of the city. In broad strokes, three basic groups of people lived in the city: white citizens from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds; English-speaking, predominately Protestant, black Americans; and a middle group of French-speaking, predominately Catholic, Creoles. The general fan-shaped geography of the city—bordered to the north by Lake Ponchartrain and to the south by the Mississippi River (which runs roughly northwest to southeast near the city)—tended to define where these various groups lived. Most Creoles, for example, resided southeast of Canal Street in the downtown area whereas the majority of the African American community lived west of Canal Street in the uptown area of the city. Many ethnic whites, on the other

²Alan Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll; the Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and Inventor of Jazz* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 8.

³Joy J. Jackson, *New Orleans in the Gilded Age: Politics and Urban Progress, 1880-1896* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1969), 9, 11.

hand, lived parallel to the river near the Magazine Street area. Wealthy whites lived primarily on or near St. Charles Avenue in the Garden District.⁴ Despite this geographical arrangement, the three-tiered divisions of New Orleans provided the city with a remarkable degree of racial fluidity. Race, however, played only a partial role in differentiating the groups as class, social background, education, and religion all played roles in constituting the middle ground between black and white.⁵

Unique in its demographic composition, the city's Creole community coupled with the blurred bifurcation of urban and rural societal elements produced a varied and distinct society, or as one jazz historian has written, "New Orleans offered a special combination of musical ingredients not to be found elsewhere."⁶ The complex mixture of New Orleans society with its white, black, and Creole identities; European, African, and Caribbean influences; and Catholic, Protestant, and non-Christian worship practices helped define the musical culture of a cosmopolitan city still heavily connected to a rural existence. Although race constituted a major defining issue dividing blacks, whites, and Creoles, the other issues of class, background, and religion played an equally important role in the stratification of New Orleans society. Perhaps the most complicated (and

⁴Thomas J. Hennessey, *From Jazz to Swing: African-American Jazz Musicians and Their Music* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 20; Burton W. Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz: Music, Race, and Culture in Urban America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 24-5. "The city was split by Canal Street," Danny Barker remembers, "with one part of the people uptown and the Creoles downtown." Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff, eds, *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya: The Story of Jazz as Told by the Men Who Made It* (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), 4.

⁵See Leroy Ostransky, *Jazz City: The Impact of Our Cities on the Development of Jazz* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978), 1-40.

⁶Rudi Blesh, *Shining Trumpets: A History of Jazz* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), 174.

controversial) aspect of New Orleans history concerned the definition and role of the Creole community. Embracing a variety of working definitions, the term Creole relates to descendents of three groups: first generation French and Spanish settlers (non-racial heritage); the small non-slave portion of black Louisianans (racial, non-mixed heritage); and the children born out of the union of French or Spanish men and Louisianan black women (racial, mixed heritage).⁷ Each of these definitions has been the focus of debate throughout the state's history, but by the late nineteenth century, the third category, centered on the idea of a racially-mixed identity, had the largest social impact on the eventual creation of jazz music. A complex jumble of cosmopolitan pretensions and rural ancestry, Creole society provided a cultural synthesis as the improvised rural blues of black Americans merged with the harmonic structure of urban America to produce a new musical form.⁸

If Creoles associated themselves with Europe and a cosmopolitan lifestyle, then African Americans related more to the former slave culture, the rural area of the Mississippi Delta, and to some degree, the continent of Africa itself. In large measure,

⁷The somewhat common term Black Creole (or Creole of Color) denotes this third group who “were a mixture of nationalities—French, Spanish, Haitian, and African.” Donald M. Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden: First Man of Jazz* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 74. To lessen confusion, this study will use only the term Creole connected to its third definition except where noted. This usage does not signify a simplification of New Orleans society, but rather should be viewed as an attempt at clarification.

⁸For definitions of Creole society, see Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 33; John Chilton, *Sidney Bechet: The Wizard of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 2; Martin T. Williams, *Jazz Masters of New Orleans* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1967), 9-10; Jackson, *New Orleans in the Gilded Age*, 14-5; and David A. Jasen and Gene Jones, *Black Bottom Stomp: Eight Masters of Ragtime and Early Jazz* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 127-8. Complicating matters

connections to a rural existence proved rather indissoluble, and many African Americans identified more readily to rural white immigrants than black Creoles. Most southern cities during this period existed somewhere along this rural-urban continuum with a permeable boundary distorting the difference between city and countryside. The unique racial divisions of New Orleans, however, amplified this rural identity allowing for a diversity uncommon in other cities. These various divisions played out in a number of ways, but in terms of the creation of jazz music this rural-urban dichotomy allowed for a wide range of related and contradictory musical elements to permeate the city.

Connecting this rural issue to the musical culture of the city, one historian argues that jazz facilitated the urbanization of rural Americans, as its attendant “male-oriented jazz fraternity,” for example, served as “a mechanism for socializing young migrants to new urban ways.”⁹ “By 1917,” he continues, “New Orleans jazz signified, among other things, a conjunction of rural and urban culture, Africa and Europe, individual skill and communal fraternization, Protestant and Creole sensibilities, and the violent past and an encouraging future.”¹⁰ This intricate array of identities created a unique cultural environment in New Orleans and the city represented a microcosm of late nineteenth century American musical trends.

Early jazz in New Orleans served a variety of functions unlike what developed later in the 1920s as jazz primarily served the needs of dancers and record buyers. New

further, “the word Creole became common parlance for any light-skinned Negro.”
Chilton, *Sidney Bechet*, 2.

⁹Peretti, *Creation of Jazz*, 36.

¹⁰Peretti, *Creation of Jazz*, 38.

Orleans musicians performed for private parties, dances, funerals, marches, and innumerable more informal events situated in bars and honkytonks. Although the setting differed, in general New Orleans jazz signified a compromise somewhere between the folk dynamics of the blues and the commercial leanings of ragtime. Not purely “folk music,” early jazz musicians performed for paying audiences not entirely comprised of their own specific milieu. Yet jazz also failed to be defined simply as commercial music. The ragtime songs of Tin Pan Alley, for example, existed in order for music publishers to sell sheet music, and the music played an essential role in the process of commercialization. Early jazz, however, sold no products and was still inherently connected to the groups—black, white, and Creole—that produced the music. Not quite folk, not quite commercial, New Orleans jazz can be more easily understood as an example of a music produced outside the framework of mass culture. Not preserved on record or in print, and not transmitted through radio, early jazz maintained the identity of the groups from which it originated. In this way, New Orleans jazz related more to the blues improvisations of the Mississippi Delta than the jazz heard on the radio in the 1920s. This blurring of folk music and commercialism defined early jazz at its creation as a number of New Orleans musicians began adapting and transforming ragtime, the blues, music for dancing, and music for marching into something unique to the city.¹¹

¹¹Collier has argued repeatedly that early jazz should be seen as a commercial music connected to a professional class of musicians. See James Lincoln Collier, *Jazz: The American Theme Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 92; and Collier, “The Faking of Jazz,” *New Republic* 193 (November 18, 1985): 33-40. Bruce Raeburn, in contrast, argues that early jazz existed somewhere between folk tradition and commercialism. See Bruce Raeburn, “New Orleans Style: The Awakening of American Jazz Scholarship and Its Cultural Implications” Ph.D. Dissertation (Tulane University, 1991), 25.

The careers of three local musicians—Jelly Roll Morton, Jack Laine, and Buddy Bolden—demonstrate the racial, social, cultural, and musical differences inherent in the New Orleans scene in the late nineteenth century as well as serve as reminders that jazz emerged from a variety of sources. Performing a blend of ragtime, dance music, and the blues, Jelly Roll Morton personified the strong piano tradition of the city as well as the complex nature of Creole society. “Papa” Jack Laine, a white bandleader and entrepreneur, helped structure and popularize white brass bands in the city. And Charles “Buddy” Bolden, a black trumpet player, prefigured the age of the soloist and serves as perhaps the most significant figure in the prehistory of New Orleans jazz. Together, the careers of these musicians underscore the diversity of both New Orleans society and its jazz scene. No single New Orleans musician created jazz—though not a few have claimed to have done so—but the city did foster a fertile environment for musical development as well as represent a microcosm of late nineteenth century music. Jazz, the modernist soundtrack of the 1920s, originated in turn-of-the-century New Orleans, and this new, weird noise had as its antecedents the primeval rhythms and myths of southern Louisiana.

Born Ferdinand Joseph LaMothe in 1890, Jelly Roll Morton persistently changed his name, family history, and date of birth throughout his career to redefine his role in the creation of jazz music.¹² The trickster hero of early jazz, Morton constantly presented himself as the founding father of jazz music. As a New Orleans Creole with an African

¹²Morton routinely gave 1885 as his year of birth, thus making him seventeen in 1902, a convincing age for his claim of creating jazz. “An 1885 birth date,” Giddens writes, “made his famous claim of having single-handedly invented jazz in 1902 seem a tad more plausible.” Gary Giddens, *Visions of Jazz: The First Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 69.

American heritage, Morton lived and worked within the fluid middle community of the city, and throughout his interviews with Alan Lomax, Morton discoursed regularly about his ancestry and his identity. Morton's own name underscores the diversity of the Creole existence as well as the importance of self-invention even in the early years of jazz. His given name, LaMenthe or LaMothe, relates directly to his French ancestry, and Morton consistently emphasized this heritage. In one interview with Lomax, for example, the piano player avers "Morton, now that doesn't sound all that French."¹³ Black life interested Morton less, but his invented sobriquet belies his mixed ancestry as well as emphasizing his determination to project himself as American, rather than some specific ethnic group. He muted the French overtones of LaMothe with the less foreign-sounding Morton, but his acquired first name connects back to his undeniable African ancestry.¹⁴ Replacing Ferdinand—a reference to the king of Spain—with Jelly Roll, Morton chose a name ripe with sexual connotations that relates clearly to the African American

¹³"All my folks," Morton once argued, "came directly from the shores . . . and I'm meanin' from France." Jelly Roll Morton interview with Alan Lomax, *Jelly Roll Morton: The Library of Congress Recordings* Volume 1. These interviews have never been released on compact disc—though Rounder Records recently released most of the musical selections—and these quotes come from an eight-volume collection of LPs released by the Classic Jazz Masters label from Sweden. Lomax cleaned up much of Morton's language for his book, *Mister Jelly Roll*, and most of Morton's appealing jazz history rambles are punctuated by musical example, an effect lost on the edited recordings.

¹⁴"I didn't want," Morton declared, "to be called Frenchy." Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, 3. A number of blues songs employ the term "jelly roll" in reference to both the sexual organ (of men and women) as well as to the act of sexual intercourse itself. Morton also referred to himself as the "winin' boy," an epithet that also relates to someone with prodigious sexual appetites. See Phil Pastras, *Dead Man Blues: Jelly Roll Morton Way Out West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 15, 105.

vernacular.¹⁵ A blend of cosmopolitan pretension and sexual innuendo, Morton created a new American identity that blurred certain elements of his ancestry while implicitly stressing other aspects.

Just as his invented name merged black and white cultures, Morton's music borrowed liberally from a number of sources. Morton's main innovation concerned the merging of ragtime syncopation with the tonalities and harmonies of the blues. "He sought," one recent scholar has noted, "to enrich blues with the gaudy melodies and thumping euphoria of ragtime."¹⁶ Improvisation played a role in Morton's music, but the piano player also highly regarded the written composition. Seemingly informal, Morton's music was based on a complex understanding of rhythm, melody, and harmony. Morton borrowed from a variety of styles, including Latin American music, which he referred to as the "Spanish tinge" in his songs. Still, his music remained rooted in the basic ragtime and blues arrangements of Scott Joplin and W. C. Handy. One source of Morton's musical synthesis was the number of piano players active in New Orleans, especially in the area known as Storyville, the local vice district where Morton apparently had found employment in 1902 (when he was twelve years old).¹⁷ Though perhaps the

¹⁵In an interesting twist on the rather complex assortment of sexual and ancestral names entwined in Morton's new identity, the piano player notes that "the King of Spain didn't do anything, it was the queen, Isabella." Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, 4. Later, Morton discusses his trepidation at claiming the piano as his instrument because he "didn't want to be called a sissy." Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, 6. Pastras alludes to Morton's possible homosexuality in Pastras, *Dead Man Blues*, 105.

¹⁶Giddens, *Visions of Jazz*, 71.

¹⁷Created in 1897 by city officials in an attempt to control prostitution, Storyville encompassed a several block area north of the French Quarter, and served as a playground for white and Creole New Orleanians. Despite date discrepancies, Morton more than likely did play in and around the Storyville, an area he referred to as "The

most infamous area of late nineteenth century New Orleans, the connection of Storyville to jazz history remains rather elusive. Early jazz scholars tended to overemphasize the role of the district perhaps because of the salacious idea of whorehouse jazz, but also because many early jazz musicians cited the area as a place for jazz performance.¹⁸ Although few if any jazz bands actually played in the district—due to size, noise, and monetary constraints—solo piano players, including Morton’s mentor Tony Jackson, certainly found some employment opportunities at various brothels.

Whereas Morton’s early career spoke to the fluidity of life as a Creole, Jack Laine’s experiences attest to the exceedingly more capacious boundaries affecting white New Orleans. Born in 1873, George Vital “Papa Jack” Laine represents the most important and influential white musician performing in nineteenth century New Orleans. Sometimes referred to as the “father of white jazz,” Laine served less as a jazz innovator than a musical organizer. Although not based in improvisation, Laine’s brass bands provided white New Orleanians (and some lighter-skinned Creoles) opportunities to learn an instrument as well as acquaint themselves with a repertoire of marching band

District” or “Tenderloin.” Black people could find service employment in Storyville, but in general local African Americans congregated a few blocks west of this main area in a district informally known as “Black Storyville.” See Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden*, 50.

¹⁸James L. Collier, one of the more iconoclastic jazz scholars of the last few decades also errs in his emphasis on Storyville. Even after noting that only piano players could find regular work in the district, Collier writes, “yet Storyville did provide employment for musicians, and it gave those who worked there an opportunity to develop their skills and refine the music itself.” James Lincoln Collier, *The Making of Jazz: A Comprehensive History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Co., 1978), 64. Leroy Ostransky makes a similar point arguing that “a considerable part of the musical synthesis [of New Orleans] took place in Storyville.” Ostransky, *Jazz City*, 32. In addition, an important early source of (mis)information is Stephen Longstreet, *Sportin’ House: A History of New Orleans Sinners and the Birth of Jazz* (Los Angeles: Sherbourne Press, 1965).

standards. Practically every major white New Orleans jazz musician of the 1910s and 1920s fulfilled tenure in one of Laine's bands creating a legacy of brass band performance and instruction in early jazz. An entrepreneur, Laine organized as many as five different bands all under the "Reliance" moniker, a system that allowed Laine to employ groups throughout the city for a variety of events. "He realized early," one historian has written, "that anyone organizing a social event that needed music would have to turn to someone who could supply musicians to order, in groups large and small."¹⁹ These brass bands performed a wide range of material—religious songs, minstrel songs, and ragtime songs—for a wide range of events—parades, civic ceremonies, dances, community concerts, and funerals. Many American cities had brass bands, but few communities rivaled New Orleans in terms of size and available venues for music, and "the key factor," one writer notes, "was simply the size of New Orleans that allowed it to support many competing brass bands instead of just one or two community groups."²⁰ The city's size and diversity allowed for Laine's success, too, as he found it commercially viable to disperse four or five bands throughout different areas of New Orleans. Laine's bands represent the strongest link between the brass bands of the nineteenth century and the early jazz of the early twentieth century.

The Reliance bands led by Laine corresponded with a larger tradition of public entertainment connected with American cities, especially in late-nineteenth-century New

¹⁹Richard M. Sudhalter, *Lost Chords: White Musicians and Their Contribution to Jazz, 1915-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 12. "Jack had as many as three brass bands at once," Ramsey writes, "with a few dance bands thrown in for good measure." Frederic Ramsey, *Jazzmen* (New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1977), 43.

²⁰Hennessey, *From Jazz to Swing*, 20.

Orleans.²¹ Brass bands, usually involved with the military, appeared in cities and towns throughout America in the late 1700s, but the “golden age of brass bands” occurred a century later and lasted roughly from 1880 to the early 1900s.²² Laine created the first Reliance band in the early 1890s, and his group amplifies the established qualities of brass bands performing in and around New Orleans. Maintaining a membership of about ten players, brass bands like the Reliance provided early jazz with several elements that would come to define in part this new style of music. The instrumentation of brass ensembles, for example, with their line-up of cornets, trombones, baritone horns, clarinets, tuba, and percussion served as the template for later jazz bands. By the 1890s, when Laine began performing with the Reliance, “brass band would mean an ensemble of mixed brasses, reeds, and percussion,” but the primary lead instrument was the cornet, the louder, easier-to-tune replacement of the bugle.²³ Brass bands usually performed with military-style outdoor instruments—horns with larger tubing and wider, deeper

²¹One oft-repeated myth concerns the Spanish-American War and the increased availability of brass instruments. Collier, for example, notes that the discharged soldiers returning home sold their instruments to local pawnshops. Collier, *Making of Jazz*, 63-4. Connie Atkinson, among others, dismisses this claim and argues that a history of brass bands exists in New Orleans and dates back almost a century before the Spanish-American War. Also, she notes, few (if any) soldiers left the service through New Orleans. Atkinson made these comments at a panel discussion entitled “The Myths of New Orleans Music History,” sponsored by the New Orleans International Music Colloquium and conducted during the French Quarter Festival, New Orleans, Louisiana, April, 11, 2003.

²²William John Schafer, *Brass Bands and New Orleans Jazz* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 2.

²³Schafer, *Brass Bands*, 6.

mouthpieces—allowing for more volume and range.²⁴ Later jazz musicians adopted these outdoor instruments, partly due to their apprenticeship with them in marching bands as well as their brash noisiness. The members of brass bands relied on the bandleader to teach the material through rehearsals rather than sheet music.²⁵ These bands played arrangements, rather than purely improvised pieces, but this method of instruction relates to the way jazz bands would rehearse a tune as well as establish a pattern of solos and accompaniment. This teaching style also underscored the importance of ensemble playing in the city. The cornet player, for example, might spell out the melody, but the harmonies and counterpoint of the ensemble were just as significant. These ensemble arrangements featuring light syncopation, melodic counterpoint, and harmonic overtones rarely included solos, improvised or not. The collective sound of the band, in other words, took precedence over individual performances, and although some of his players went on to become important soloists, Laine always emphasized the collective elements in his bands.

Although Jack Laine and Jelly Roll Morton emerged from different social backgrounds both musicians helped bring ragtime, brass band, and dance elements into the creation of early jazz. Morton's style reflected a larger emphasis on improvisation, but both he and Laine organized bands based on the importance of compositional integrity with a small ensemble performing rehearsed arrangements. Morton and Laine thus combined in varying degrees the arrangement acuity of Scott Joplin with the

²⁴Schafer, *Brass Bands*, 6-8.

²⁵Schafer argues that no real improvisation occurred until around 1900. He cites, in particular, one member of a brass band that argues that once Bolden became popular

business acumen of W. C. Handy to create a unique style of New Orleans music. Whatever musical differences existed, both Laine and Morton could admire Joplin's emphasis on the composition and Handy's gift of promotion (of his music and himself).²⁶ Laine and Morton also connected with each other through their casual dismissal of, if not explicit disdain for, black New Orleanians. Morton's "unequivocal prejudices," one writer notes, "against the black Uptown Negroes and their music were responsible for both Morton's most successful achievements and his ultimate decline as a force in jazz."²⁷ Much of this vituperation arose from Morton's Creole background, but the piano player also clearly disassociated himself from the more explicit rural elements. Laine, too, evidenced a strong racial bias as he was "loath to admit that black musicians had any effect on his music."²⁸

Despite the easy dismissal of African American contributions to jazz by Morton and Laine, black New Orleanians provided a key link between the blues music of the rural Mississippi Delta and the more ragtime-influenced syncopation of the city. Born on September 6, 1877, Charles "Buddy" Bolden personified this synthesis of urban and rural aesthetics and represents "the key figure in the formation of classic jazz."²⁹ In many

more and more bands began performing improvisational tunes. Schafer, *Brass Bands and New Orleans Jazz*, 25.

²⁶Morton regularly performed Scott Joplin's rags, and Laine's bands at least knew Joplin's "Shadow Rag." Ramsey, *Jazzmen*, 32.

²⁷Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 137-8.

²⁸Sudhalter, *Lost Chords*, 12.

²⁹Blesh, *Shining Trumpets*, 183. "He was," Louis Armstrong noted, "just a one-man genius that was ahead of 'em all." Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya*, 39.

ways, Bolden's life signified late-nineteenth-century African American life in New Orleans, both in its diversity and obstacles as well as its lack of documentation. The grandson of a slave, Bolden received some education and acquired a degree of literacy, but his occupational options remained limited.³⁰ Like many other black New Orleanians, Bolden experienced both the formality of church with its spirituals and hymns as well as the informal elements of black folk culture rooted in field hollers and the blues. Like Morton, but unlike most of the players that followed him, Bolden had much experience in various string bands, not simply brass bands.³¹ String bands allowed for a looser, less brass-heavy arrangement as well as served as a less brash complement to Bolden's playing. The most important element of Bolden's style, however, concerned his powerful solo technique.

With a loud, penetrating tone, Bolden enlivened his musical surroundings, and broke free of the restraints placed on ensemble-driven bands such as Laine's Reliance groups. Whereas Laine (and to some extent Morton) emphasized the collective ensemble, Bolden helped define the role of jazz soloist, and his commanding solos influenced most other black cornetists in the city. His neighborhood fame lasted only a few years, and by 1906 Bolden began suffering from severe headaches. Within a few

³⁰Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden*, 29-30. Scholars rarely questioned Bolden's literacy, and in fact one of the most prominent myths involving Bolden relates to his supposed authorship of "The Cricket," a local gossip sheet. Novelist Michael Ondaatje used many of these myths in the fictional retelling of Bolden's life (which came out before the Marquis study). See Michael Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter* (New York: Vintage International, 1976).

³¹String bands usually included violin and string bass players along with a guitarist and a horn and reed player. Rather than an orchestral sound, these bands produced music not unlike early country or blues bands.

months the cornet player slipped into dementia, a condition apparently caused by acute alcoholism. The next year, the state declared Bolden insane and he was transferred to the mental hospital in Jackson, Louisiana. Bolden remained there until his death almost a quarter-century later.³² A black man born in Reconstruction-era New Orleans performing a style of music that escaped preservation and producing a formidable legend that imparted a shadow across the entire history of early jazz, Bolden “may well be the most enigmatic figure the music has ever produced.”³³ Never recorded, Bolden’s legacy relates both to the heroic, paternalistic elements of jazz history as well as to the significance of myth, rumor, and speculation.³⁴

The enigma of black life during the 1890s coupled with the mythomania of early-twentieth-century New Orleans creates a number of difficulties for historians, both in terms of creating a sensible narrative of early New Orleans jazz as well as defining an unpreserved sound. Connected to Bolden’s enigmatic career stood the formational myth of Place Congo (Congo Square). As with Storyville, historians have overstated the importance of Place Congo blurring its real impact in favor of a somewhat romantic tale of cultural continuation. The setting for dancing and drumming by enslaved Africans and immigrant black Haitians living in the city, Place Congo served as a weekly meeting place for black New Orleanians for camaraderie and informal entertainment. More than any other event, then, the actions in Place Congo represent the vestigial connection to

³²Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden*, 112, 117-22.

³³Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 34.

³⁴Although the rumor of a Bolden wax cylinder routinely surfaces, no hard evidence exists to connect the cornet player to a specific recording. See Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden*, 44.

Africa and the Caribbean. One of the few surviving Africanisms maintained in slave culture, the dancing, drumming, and singing in Place Congo lasted from the early years of the nineteenth century until the mid-1830s when the city closed down the area. The dancing resumed ten years later, in 1845, as a way to confine the actions of slaves on Sundays, the traditional day of lessened work for slaves in the city. This second period of Place Congo activity lasted only a short time and ended well before the Civil War.³⁵ Still, various histories throughout the mid-twentieth century routinely connected Place Congo with Bolden.³⁶ Though a marginalized figure in his time, Bolden emerged as perhaps the most important single musician in early jazz history as the music began seeping out from the black community. The lack of recordings prevented Bolden from achieving fame during his lifetime, but innumerable New Orleans musicians consistently posited the horn player as the “the man who started the big noise in jazz.”³⁷

Together, the music and careers of Jelly Roll Morton, Jack Laine, and Buddy Bolden form a composite of New Orleans jazz, society, and myth in the late nineteenth century. These men—women rarely figure into the early jazz story—signify the variances of New Orleans life as well as the constancy of musical development within the city. The individual circumstances varied, but Morton, Laine, and Bolden each represent

³⁵Gathering together many of the early myths of Congo Square, Henry Kmen has attempted a sober (if brief) reassessment of the significance of the area. See Henry L. Kmen, “The Roots of Jazz and the Dance in Place Congo: A Re-Appraisal,” *Yearbook for Inter-American Musical Research* Volume 8 (1972): 5-16.

³⁶“The historians of jazz,” Henry Kmen notes sarcastically, “rode a long way from Congo Square to Buddy Bolden and jazz—most of it on a magic carpet.” Kmen, “The Roots of Jazz,” 15.

³⁷Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya*, 35.

a key element of early jazz development, and later musicians who discovered more immediate financial success and fame would echo their contributions implicitly and explicitly. All three musicians performed music deeply connected to nineteenth century musical styles, and this musical form would soon come to define American culture. None of these men achieved much lasting fame within their hometown, but their musical innovation, repertoire, and instruction helped create a distinctive New Orleans identity adopted by subsequent jazz musicians. The next group of jazz musicians also emerged from New Orleans, but these players encountered a city that looked remarkably different from the one only a few years before. The racial, social, and class confusion spawned by the events of the late 1890s and early 1900s inherently altered the structure of the city, a situation that would have a major impact on the evolution of jazz music.

Although the story of jazz in the late nineteenth century tends to focus on the mythic and picturesque, the 1890s represented one of the most volatile and violent periods in New Orleans history.³⁸ Throughout this decade, a series of state laws, national court rulings, and racially motivated assaults transformed the relative social fluidity experienced by many New Orleanians into a strict arrangement based upon the assumption of black inferiority. Jim Crow affected all black southerners, but the unique social gradations of New Orleans presented peculiar dilemmas to African Americans living in the city. For most of the nineteenth century, black New Orleanians (both free and enslaved) lived under the constrictions of the oft-updated *Code Noir* first enacted in

³⁸White ethnic groups also experienced violent encounters during this period. In 1891, in particular, a New Orleans mob lynched eleven Italian-Americans suspected in the murder of a police superintendent. Richard Gambino, *Vendetta: A True Story of the Worst Lynching in America, the Mass Murder of Italian-Americans in New Orleans in*

1724 by the founding governor of New Orleans. This series of laws attempted to control every detail of the enslaved African's life including restrictions on religious practices, marriage requirements, and ownership of weapons. Though emancipation severely undercut the power of these "black codes," white New Orleans still maintained control through a variety of other methods including the legal system. In 1896, for example, the United States Supreme Court, deciding a New Orleans lawsuit concerning segregated streetcars, established the legal precedent for separate facilities and services for black people. Two years later, the Louisiana legislature barred black people from the polls through constitutional disfranchisement. By 1900, only four percent of black Louisianans could vote.³⁹ White society amended these legal measures, however, with the quotidian threat of physical and mental brutality. "The first half-decade of the 1890s," one writer noted succinctly, "was a time of crisis and change in New Orleans."⁴⁰

Although New Orleans experienced fewer incidents of racial violence compared to other areas, the killing of a policeman by a local black resident touched off a five-day riot that threatened to unhinge the relatively nonviolent coexistence of black and white New Orleanians. In July 1900, Robert Charles, a black man in his mid-thirties, shot a local policeman and subsequently escaped to his home neighborhood on Saratoga Street,

1891, the Vicious Motivations Behind It, and the Tragic Repercussions That Linger to This Day (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1977).

³⁹William Ivy Hair, *Carnival of Fury: Robert Charles and the New Orleans Race Riot of 1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1976), 106-7.

⁴⁰Jackson, *New Orleans in the Gilded Age*, 258.

between Clio and Erato streets.⁴¹ The police department began harassing other black New Orleanians as they scoured the area for Charles. These actions coupled with the frenzied fear of the white community set off a race riot as hundreds of innocent African Americans became the targets of white mob violence. Over the course of five days, mobs murdered dozens of African Americans and injured hundreds more. The police, tipped off by a member of the black community, finally surrounded Charles on July 27 and commenced to besiege the humble, wood house where he had found asylum. Charles continued to shoot down police officers and angry bystanders until officers torched his house, which finally impelled him to attempt an escape before being shot dead by several policemen. After his death the mobs disappeared and New Orleans regained its outwardly pacific social environment.⁴²

The Robert Charles incident underscores a number of issues impacting New Orleans society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Though forever connected to New Orleans, Charles actually maintained strong connections to his family in Copiah, Mississippi where he was born the son of a sharecropper. Charles amended this affinity for his rural roots with more urban concerns stemming from his literacy and his exposure to contemporary political ideas. Charles, in particular, became an “active

⁴¹In 1900, this neighborhood was near the center of the local black community, located northwest from the French Quarter and west of Canal Street. Today, this area stands near the Super Dome in the shadow of a major interstate.

⁴²The most complete study of the Robert Charles story remains Hair, *Carnival of Fury*. See also, Joel Williamson, *A Rage for Order: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 133-41.

and earnest advocate of the emigration of American blacks to Liberia.”⁴³ The news of recent lynchings and the disfranchisement of black Louisianans only heightened Charles’s racial consciousness, and when accosted by a white police officer on a July evening, Charles snapped. Although the explicit use of violence differentiated Charles from other black New Orleanians, this rural association, which he maintained “until the very end of his life,” coupled with his political activism accentuate the diverse combination of influences that helped define the city’s black community.⁴⁴ The riot also illustrates to some degree the racial stratification that had already occurred as the city divided itself into two basic segments: a white community, and an embattled black community. A certain amount of solidarity existed as black New Orleanians—save one—hid Charles from the white mobs, and afterwards the black community saw Charles as a folk hero. A song honoring Charles, for example, gained some popularity and notoriety in the years following his death, and Jelly Roll Morton recalls that he “once knew the Robert Charles song, but I found out it was best for me to forget it and that I did to go along with the world on the peaceful side.”⁴⁵ In his interviews with Lomax, Morton also segued his discussion of Robert Charles—and other “swell people”—into his thoughts on Buddy Bolden. On one level, Morton the Creole, identifies with the careers and activities of Charles and Bolden, but the piano player also subtly distances himself from these two men. Morton can simply forget the Robert Charles song and continue on with his life again signifying the differences that defined the Creole and black

⁴³Williamson, *Rage for Order*, 136.

⁴⁴Williamson, *Rage for Order*, 133.

⁴⁵Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, 57.

communities. These differences affected the creation of jazz music as black culture and Creole culture became conflated. A simplified explanation of the origins of jazz emphasizes the synergy of urban, ragtime-influenced Creoles coming into contact with black musicians more connected to the rural sounds of the blues.

The developments of the 1890s along with the Robert Charles incident of 1900 impacted greatly the rather laissez-faire racial attitudes of the city. By the early 1900s New Orleans society had lost the racial fluidity that had marked much of its history, and over the course of a few years the unique middle caste of black Creoles disappeared as the city narrowed the definition of race down to the two categories of black and white. This constriction of Creole culture and the construction of a two-tiered racial system stemmed from a number of larger issues rather than one single legislative act, but by the early twentieth century the complex diversity of New Orleans devolved into a simplified racial caste system comprised of white and black New Orleanians. No longer a vaunted, if mysterious, middle class, Creoles became identified simply as African Americans by the white community. If white New Orleans came to see Creoles as black, the Creole community still attempted to maintain a dual identity. During the Robert Charles affair, for example, one historian argues that Creoles and blacks shared a common disdain for the overbearing (and violent) white community.⁴⁶ Other historians focus on different divisions within New Orleans society arguing instead that Creoles and whites “increasingly perceived the entire colored population as a common enemy, and temporarily subordinated the Creole/American opposition for the sake of fighting

⁴⁶Hair argues that the anger of lower class whites towards more economically successful, middle class Creoles only complicated an already tenuous social arrangement. Hair, *Carnival of Fury*, 71-2.

together for white supremacy.”⁴⁷ Instead of contradicting one another, these writers underscore the racial, social, and class complexities impacting New Orleans at the dawn of the twentieth century. In large measure, turn of the century New Orleans represented a city in turmoil. And though later histories would point to the closing of Storyville in 1917 as the impetus for the exodus of musicians out of the city, this decade of social and racial constriction had an impact on New Orleans far greater than the closing of an area of whorehouses.⁴⁸

A second group of musicians came of age in New Orleans following this period of racial and social confusion and experienced a social scene and musical culture much different from the one encountered by the earlier group.⁴⁹ These players—most notably Sidney Bechet, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band (ODJB), and Joe Oliver—helped develop the sound first brought together by earlier musicians, but their main contribution to the history jazz concerned their diffusion of the form. Through their widespread traveling and various recordings, Bechet, the ODJB, and Oliver brought the proto-commercial folk music of New Orleans into the national musical culture. None of these men experienced much success until after leaving New Orleans, and each of these

⁴⁷Virginia R. Dominguez, *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 136.

⁴⁸“If Storyville hadn’t closed,” two influential early jazz scholars argued, “a lot of the musicians would have stayed on in New Orleans.” Ramsey and Smith, *Jazzmen*, 58. In contrast, Danny Barker argues “that there were always, in New Orleans, both before and after Storyville closed, there were always so many musicians, so many great cats all the way down the line.” Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya*, 66-7.

⁴⁹It should be noted here that although Jelly Roll Morton belonged to this second generation in terms of age, his music was more transitional than most of his contemporaries allowing for his earlier grouping with Laine and Bolden.

musicians traveled a great deal with Bechet playing throughout the country (and eventually Europe), the ODJB popularized jazz in New York City, and Oliver defined the burgeoning jazz scene in Chicago. If Morton, Laine, and Bolden helped bridge the past to the future, then Bechet, the ODJB, and Oliver took jazz music to a national audience. Diffusion coupled with innovation thus defined the essence of the contributions of this second group.

Born in New Orleans on May 14, 1897, Sidney Bechet blended ragtime with the blues and developed a striking clarinet technique built around his strong vibrato. As a Creole growing up in New Orleans in the late 1890s, Bechet experienced few of the bourgeois elements that marked earlier Creole life, as the city crept towards a newly compressed society. “The changing laws and restrictions introduced in the 1890s meant that the Bechets,” one biographer has written, “found themselves reclassified in a way that they themselves considered to be a form of relegation.”⁵⁰ One obvious change involved music education as Creole instructors began teaching black students, and although Bechet rarely took formalized lessons, this convergence of black and Creole musical cultures would have an impact on early jazz. This amalgamation of different styles, the hallmark of early jazz in New Orleans, only increased during the early 1900s. In general, Bechet merged the ragtime rhythms of Jelly Roll Morton with the brash soloing of Buddy Bolden to represent “probably the greatest instrumentalist to come out of New Orleans after Louis Armstrong.”⁵¹ Although his playing style defied easy

⁵⁰John Chilton, *Sidney Bechet*, 2.

⁵¹Martin T. Williams, *Jazz Masters of New Orleans*, 136.

characterization, Bechet helped define further the role of jazz soloist as well as disseminate early jazz throughout the world.

A fife player as a child, Bechet soon graduated to the clarinet, the instrument most associated with the musician. Although he received only a few formal lessons, Bechet listened to and learned from a number of older clarinetists active in the city. In particular, Bechet repeatedly heard George Baquet, Lorenzo Tio, Jr., Alphonse Picou, and Louis “Big Eye” Nelson. Both Baquet and Picou claimed to have tutored Bechet, but the young clarinetist had little patience for standard lessons.⁵² Bechet did appreciate, however, Nelson’s “ratty” sound and the syncopated, rhythmic thrust of his playing, a style Bechet quickly incorporated into his own playing. A precocious player, Bechet evidently began playing with various local bands as early as 1908. These groups—which included an apparent stint with Bunk Johnson in Bolden’s old band—performed a combination of ragtime and the blues, and Bechet continued his jazz apprenticeship in New Orleans until 1912 when he set out for Texas. Beginning with this trip, Bechet embarked on a travel-heavy career, rarely staying too long in any given city. Throughout the 1910s, Bechet traveled in and out of New Orleans and eventually made his way to Chicago in 1917, where he acquired his first soprano saxophone. The soprano sax, now a fairly standard reed instrument in jazz, allowed Bechet to produce an even brasher tone than he had on the clarinet. Despite his admiration of improvised, blues-based music, Bechet accepted an invitation from Will Marion Cook, the director of the Southern Syncopated Orchestra,

⁵²Chilton, *Sidney Bechet*, 5-7.

to play in Europe in 1919.⁵³ Bechet's constant travels echoed Jelly Roll Morton, his Creole forbear, as well as served as an important disseminating element in early jazz, and in conjunction with his many recording dates in the 1920s, Bechet introduced jazz to a much wider audience than previous black or Creole musicians.

As Sidney Bechet found remarkable success playing with a variety of bands, and eventually discovered some degree of fame in France, another group of local musicians helped set off a raucous revolution of sound that infected an entire generation of listeners. A five-piece band comprised of native New Orleanians, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band represented the most important white jazz band active in the early years of the jazz age, and their success represents the beginning of the diffusion of early jazz from New Orleans to the rest of the country. Not the most technically proficient white band, nor the most original, the ODJB nevertheless brought New Orleans jazz music to an audience heretofore foreign to this style of music: white, urban, college kids. Undervalued routinely by many jazz scholars, the ODJB signifies in large measure the transition between the brass bands of late nineteenth century New Orleans and the cabaret jazz bands popular in urban American during the 1920s. The band's combination of ragtime rhythms, brass band instrumentation, minstrel show antics, and youthful enthusiasm quickly won over young, white Americans anxious for a music unique to their generation. Like rock and roll in the 1950s, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band produced music larger than itself; a sound with social implications at times more important than any specific musical contributions. A noisy generational divide, the music of the ODJB "shocked,

⁵³This first soprano sax was a curved model with a regular saxophone shape. A few years later in London, Bechet purchased the more distinctive (and currently standard) straight model of the sax. See Chilton, *Sidney Bechet*, 45.

frightened, confused, and finally captivated the listener.”⁵⁴ The Original Dixieland Jazz Band did not invent jazz (as has been claimed—mainly by members of the band), they did not perfect jazz, and within the evolution of jazz as a musical style, the ODJB remain a brief footnote. As the band that broke jazz to the American record-buying public in the late 1910s, however, the impact of the ODJB remains incalculable

Cornetist Dominic “Nick” LaRocca established the Original Dixieland Jazz Band in New Orleans in the 1910s along with fellow local musicians Eddie Edwards (trombone), Larry Shields (clarinet), Henry Ragas (piano) and Tony Sbarbaro (drums). Though each band member had certain strengths, LaRocca led the group, and more than any other player, LaRocca’s vision served as the template for ODJB performances. Born into an Italian immigrant family on Magazine Street in the Garden District neighborhood of the city, LaRocca began playing the cornet as a child despite his father’s disapproval.⁵⁵ In the early 1910s, LaRocca encountered Edwards, a struggling, local trombone player. The two young musicians practiced often, and eventually LaRocca and Edwards both began playing with one of Laine’s Reliance bands. At some point around 1915, LaRocca, Edwards, Sbarbaro, Shields, and Ragas began playing separately from Laine’s group under the name of “Stein’s Dixie Jass Band.” The origins of the word “jass” remain hidden, but most sources contend that it “was an obscene word” that had been

⁵⁴Harry O. Brunn, *The Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960), xv. Although one of the only full length studies of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, Brunn’s work devolves too easily into a rather hagiographic portrait of the band.

⁵⁵Oddly, LaRocca’s father also played cornet, but the elder LaRocca did not want his son to become a professional musician. Brunn, *Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band*, 2-5.

“applied to almost anything and everything.”⁵⁶ In early 1916, the group accepted an invitation to play a six-week engagement in Chicago, but within a year, the band had relocated to New York City.⁵⁷ Early that year, the band, now called the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, began a stint at a new dance club in the Reisenweber Building, and the word “jazz” appeared for the first time in a major newspaper.⁵⁸ Proclaiming explicitly their originality, the ODJB combined a regional affiliation (Dixieland) with the promise of something that seemed intriguingly foreign (jazz). New York audiences immediately clamored for this oddly named band, and this intense popularity attracted New York-based Columbia Records, a company eager to cash in on a fad, even if the “Columbia people did not seem to grasp the idea of jazz.”⁵⁹ Their recordings shelved, the ODJB then recorded for Columbia’s rival, Victor, a much more successful session that spawned their most important song, “Livery Stable Blues.” Within weeks of moving to New York, the ODJB produced a record that would soon set off a mini jazz craze that prefigured the Jazz Age of the 1920s.

⁵⁶Brunn, *Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band*, 30. “LaRocca,” Brunn writes, “avers that the word ‘jazz’ was changed because children, as well as a few impish adults, could not resist the temptation to obliterate the letter ‘j’ from the poster.” Ibid., 57. For the origins of the term, see Robert Walser, ed., *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13, 53; David Meltzer, ed., *Reading Jazz* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1993), 37-70; and Macdonald Smith Moore, *Yankee Blues: Musical Culture and American Identity* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1985), 185.

⁵⁷Brunn, *Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band*, 26-50.

⁵⁸New York Times, February 2, 1918. At one point prior to 1917, some posters even used the term “jasz.” Brunn, *Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band*, 52.

⁵⁹Brunn, *Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band*, 64.

The Original Dixieland Jazz Band performed a style of New Orleans music borrowed equally from the brass band tradition of Jack Laine as well as the minstrel show style of musical entertainment. Unlike later bands, the ODJB played a rather fast paced, if stiff, form of jazz that featured the measured chaos of communal improvisation. The group, in other words, would decide on a certain chord sequence and then improvise individual melodies in the decided key. Like Laine's Reliance bands, the ODJB eschewed solos (save for a few instrumental breaks) for an emphasis on the ensemble. Their most famous song, "Livery Stable Blues," was an old LaRocca composition that developed out of an improvisation on the chords of a church hymn.⁶⁰ During the verses, each instrument would improvise various melodies, but the real attraction of the tune by the record-buying audience was the short breaks in the chorus where the band imitated barnyard animals, hence the title. Featuring a trombone donkey, clarinet rooster, and a cornet horse, "Livery Stable Blues" related to minstrel show corn instead of the improvised blues of the rural South. Still, although none of the members achieved any level of instrumental virtuosity, the band's combination of quick tempos, energized improvisation, and minstrel trickery signified something quite novel in New York City.⁶¹

Within seven years of their heyday, however, the ODJB had faded into obscurity. The group continued to have a strong influence on popular jazz in the 1920s as it influenced practically every major white jazz band active during that period, including

⁶⁰Original Dixieland Jazz Band, "Livery Stable Blues," (Columbia Records, 1917) on *Early Jazz, 1917-1923* (Fremeaux & Associates, 2000). Brunn points to "The Holy City" as the hymn that inspired LaRocca. Brunn, *Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band*, 70.

⁶¹Brunn, *Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band*, 71.

the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, the Original Memphis Five, and Paul Whiteman's Orchestra. The Dixieland Revival of the 1940s revitalized some of the ODJB's music, but in general the most consistent supporter of the group remained Nick LaRocca.⁶² The cornet player's declarations notwithstanding, scholars often argue that the ODJB only simplified a complex African American musical form and gained fame with a pale imitation of jazz music.⁶³ Although not an entirely incorrect assertion, the ODJB also emerged from a musical culture different from what black and Creole New Orleanians had experienced. Their blend of brass band instrumentation and minstrel show hokum, though short-lived, played itself out in a more commercial vein than folk music. Rather than a clattery aberration, the ODJB instead underscore the variances inherent in New Orleans jazz. Still, the primary influence imparted by the band concerned their discovery of the college-age, northern audience for their music and thus the commercial possibilities of jazz.

Whereas the Original Dixieland Jazz Band helped introduce jazz to white listeners and Sidney Bechet helped evolve the role of the iconoclastic soloist, the cornetist Joe "King" Oliver represented the most important and influential jazz musician of early jazz in New Orleans. Born into a similar socio-economic environment as Buddy Bolden in 1885, Joe Oliver emerged as the most important soloist and bandleader to leave the city

⁶²In the 1950s, LaRocca wrote a number of letters to various critics and scholars who dismissed his old band. See Brunn, *Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band*, 250-1.

⁶³Gunther Schuller, for example, argues that "the ODJB reduced New Orleans Negro music to a simplified formula. It took a new idea, an innovation, and reduced it to a kind of compressed, rigid format that could appeal to a mass audience." Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 180.

and broadcast jazz throughout the Midwest.⁶⁴ Unlike Bolden, however, Oliver left behind a large body of recorded work indicating elements of the music played in New Orleans. Eclipsed early on by his protégé, Louis Armstrong, many of Oliver's innovations sound less startling due to their eventual commonplace nature in 1920s jazz. Still, more than any other musician, Oliver represents the acme of the polyphonic, improvised jazz that came to define the New Orleans music scene. Oliver favored the ensemble style of jazz like the ODJB, but unlike LaRocca's band, Oliver emphasized a controlled and (somewhat paradoxically) arranged approach to improvisation. Instead of five instrumentalists wailing along in the same key, Oliver's groups maintained a collective polyphonic feel without devolving into chaotic braying. Short solo breaks punctuated the proceedings producing a sonic blend of structured improvisation, syncopated rhythms, innovative soloing, and blues-influenced tonalities. Despite his individual achievements, "what [Oliver] could do better than anyone else was drive an ensemble that specialized in improvised polyphony."⁶⁵

A relatively late start notwithstanding, Oliver became one of the strongest soloists in the city boasting a brash, melodic style. Like Bechet, Oliver developed a distinctive and easily recognizable sound, and the cornetist combined a strong rhythmic pulse with a large number dips, slurs, and growls. These coloring effects shared both minstrel show and rural blues antecedents, but Oliver also employed various mutes to achieve a different timbre as well as a distinctive "wah-wah" effect. His improvisations hewed

⁶⁴Like most of these early jazz musicians, Oliver's date and place of birth as well as his early life remain shrouded in mystery. See Giddens, *Visions of Jazz*, 77.

⁶⁵Giddens, *Visions of Jazz*, 80.

rather closely to the melody, but his technical flourishes turned many of his recorded solos of the 1920s into practice etudes for countless jazz followers. Unlike Bechet, however, Oliver combined brilliant solo playing with equally brilliant ensemble work especially with his Creole Jazz Band.⁶⁶ Although the Original Dixieland Jazz Band found fame first, Oliver's Creole Jazz Band presented a clearer example of the New Orleans style. The ODJB tended towards a polyrhythmic, chaotic style of jazz that eschewed any real arrangement as each member improvised on a basic chord sequence. Oliver's band, in contrast, adhered to a more arranged sound with each instrumentalist performing a predetermined role. In general, Oliver played the melody on cornet, the second cornetist supplied a basic harmony part, the trombone and clarinet provided counterpoint, and the rhythm section (bass, banjo, piano, and drums) propelled the entire endeavor. Not simply a creative instrumentalist, Oliver established the map that jazz music followed over the next decade.

In 1917, Joe Oliver left New Orleans to seek fame elsewhere, and that year proved to be perhaps the most important period in early jazz history. No one person or event brought jazz to the American people, but in 1917 a number of forces coalesced that helped transform jazz from a type of southern folk music into a mass-produced popular commodity in the 1920s. The nation's entrance that year in World War I spurred the creation of defense plants throughout the country. These plants, in turn, offered new employment opportunities for black southerners tired of low wage agricultural work. Northern industrial opportunities coupled with the renewed racism of the turn of the century South helped instigate a large pattern of black migration into the Midwest and

⁶⁶Collier, *Making of Jazz*, 85.

North. Various black newspapers further fueled the Great Migration through the publication of enticing articles proclaiming such cities as Chicago as the Promised Land. In New Orleans, the year 1917 also marked the end of Storyville as the United States Navy closed down the district of vice and illicit entertainment. Despite the work of many early jazz historians who tended to present the termination of Storyville as the final impetus for the propulsion of jazz out of the South, the larger pattern of emigration already existed and the closing of the district played no role in the process. More importantly, the success in the Midwest and North of those first emigrating musicians hastened the travel plans of others. Jazz began to breakout from the folk environs of New Orleans and entered the commercial world of American popular music, a transformation only hastened by one other event from 1917: the sudden acceptability of jazz by at least some Americans following the success of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. A musical form barely two decades old (and only recently given a name) by 1917 jazz the southern folk music became jazz the profitable commodity.

The events of 1917 signaled the beginning of the end of the city's early jazz scene, and although bands would remain active locally throughout the 1920s, other cities—primarily Chicago and New York—would be the centers for musical innovation and transmission. Between 1908 and 1919, most of the leading jazz players left New Orleans for better opportunities elsewhere and signaled the first wave of jazz emigration from the city. Jelly Roll Morton left in 1908 as did bassist Bill Johnson, bandleader Freddie Keppard and trumpeter Bunk Johnson both left in 1914, members of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band left in 1915 and 1916, clarinetist Big Eye Louis Nelson and Sidney Bechet left in 1916, trombonist Honore Dutrey, clarinetist Jimmie Noone, and trumpeter

Tommy Ladnier left in 1917, and trombonist Edward “Kid” Ory left in 1919.⁶⁷ Some of these players such as Ory headed out west to California, most spent at least sometime in Chicago, but many simply drifted from job to job, city to city. Most of these players were born in the early 1890s—though some like Bill Johnson were much older, and some like Tommy Ladnier were still in their mid-teens—and came of age during the period of tremendous social and racial change in the city. This informal group foreshadowed a second wave of departing younger musicians including Louis Armstrong. New Orleans, “already a city in decline” in the 1890s, lost most of its jazz scene by the early 1920s, and though New Orleanians would continue to have a tremendous impact on the jazz of the 1920s, their hometown simply receded back into the shadows. Or as one writer contends, “one of the supreme ironies of the history of New Orleans jazz is that so much of it took place in Chicago.”⁶⁸

In the summer of 1923, Jelly Roll Morton joined the New Orleans Rhythm Kings (NORK), a group of white New Orleanians, for a series of recording sessions at the Gennett studios in Richmond, Indiana.⁶⁹ Signifying the first interracial jazz performance preserved on record, the Morton-NORK recordings also helped bring New Orleans music to a large audience. Unlike the Original Dixieland Jazz Band records six years earlier,

⁶⁷Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 45. See also Barry Kernfeld, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 88, 319, 615-7, 649, 670, 804, 833, 917, 935, 942, 945.

⁶⁸Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 45. “As a mainstream tradition,” Gunther Schuller argues, “the New Orleans style in its earliest form did not survive the 1920s.” Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 86.

⁶⁹Some writers have referred to the New Orleans Rhythm Kings as “the most important white band after the Dixieland Jazz Band.” Ramsey and Smith, *Jazzmen*, 57.

these sessions transcended novelty clichés and underscored certain defining elements of New Orleans jazz. The Morton tune “Milenberg Joys,” in particular, represents a synthesis of early jazz music.⁷⁰ Featuring Paul Mares on cornet, Leon Ropollo on clarinet, Georg Brunis on trombone, and Jelly Roll Morton on piano, “Milenberg Joys” starts out as a straightforward mid-tempo dance piece.⁷¹ Boasting a strong melody, the song maintains a steady rehearsed feel until the cornet solo in which Mares produces a growling, Joe Oliver-inspired break.⁷² Although not as improvisationally inventive as Oliver, Mares shares with his cornet hero a warm tone and a penchant for playing in the middle registers of the instrument. This section leads into a strong, vibrato-fueled clarinet solo by Ropollo supported by a rhythmic counterpoint figure performed by Morton. Connecting the music to its roots, a glimpse of traditional New Orleans music appears near the end of “Milenberg Joys,” as the band provides a rousing conclusion by launching into a short, blaring example of collective improvisation. Lacking the flaccid gimmickry of the ODJB, “Milenberg Joys” maintains a melodic and rhythmically

⁷⁰Rick Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagie: Gennett Records and the Birth of Recorded Jazz* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 75-7.

⁷¹Much confusion surrounds the names of two of the principle players in the New Orleans Rhythm Kings. Leon Ropollo, for example, is often referred to as Leon Rapollo, and Georg Brunis apparently altered the spelling of his given name (George Brunies) after consulting a numerologist. “Milenberg Joys” refers (through a misspelling) to the Lake Ponchartrain town of Milneburg, Louisiana. See Kernfeld, *New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, 163, 1061. Also see “Producer’s Note,” *New Orleans Rhythm Kings and Jelly Roll Morton* (Berkeley, CA: Fantasy Records, 1992), 4 (liner notes to compact disc).

⁷²New Orleans Rhythm Kings and Jelly Roll Morton, “Milenberg Joys,” (Gennett Records, 1923) on *New Orleans Rhythm Kings and Jelly Roll Morton* (Fantasy, 1992). I am referring here to the first take of “Milenberg Joys”—included on both the vinyl and compact disc version of *New Orleans Rhythm Kings and Jelly Roll Morton*. The compact disc adds a fourth take of the song that boasts a cleaner sound, but the solos are not as strong and Morton’s playing is less audible.

forceful feel, and serves as a summation of the various styles that helped define early jazz. Although his piano playing on this piece relates little to the ragtime of Scott Joplin, Morton shares Joplin's concern for a moderate tempo and an emphasis on composition over improvisation. Paul Mares, in contrast, produces a blues-inflected solo that corresponds to the mannered blues of W. C. Handy, if not directly to the more innovative sounds of Oliver. The collective improvisation near the end references the sounds of their hometown, but without the sense of novelty instilled by earlier bands. A small-piece band performing a mixture of arranged and improvised jazz in a Midwestern recording studio, the New Orleans Rhythm Kings with Jelly Roll Morton reiterated the past while constructing the context for jazz in the future.⁷³

Fifteen years after these sessions, Morton sat in front of Alan Lomax's microphone and narrated his history of jazz. Despite the braggadocio, Morton's story hinted at some of the basic truths behind the creation of this new style of music. The Lomax interviews emphasized the importance of ragtime and the blues, the role Creole culture played on early jazz, and the variety of clubs that featured jazz performers in the early 1900s. Forgotten for most of the 1920s and 1930s, New Orleans fell into favor with historians and listeners interested in traditional jazz music and tired of swing's rather formulaic progression into popular music. This Dixieland revival of the 1940s helped create a rather picturesque take on early jazz history as colorful tales eclipsed documented fact. Congo Square and Storyville came to dominate these early narratives,

⁷³The New Orleans Rhythm Kings, however, never capitalized on these 1923 sessions and the group disbanded in the mid-1920s. Morton, in contrast, would hit his creative peak three years later with his Red Hot Peppers recordings in 1926.

and the rather complicated reduction of Creole culture or the upheaval of the 1890s simply faded into historical myopia. “A once admirable music,” one scholar notes, “was reduced to the precincts of tourism, complete with moniker (Dixieland), costume (straw boater and garter belt), and snacks (peanuts and beer).”⁷⁴ Mid-century remembrances aside, the early jazz of New Orleans existed in the shadows—never recorded, preserved, or transmitted. Chicago (and expatriate New Orleanians) connected the dotted lines of early jazz history by placing the proto-commercial, quasi-folk music into the hands of record-buying Midwesterners. Defined only in retrospect, the New Orleans jazz scene found its identity 1,000 miles away in Chicago.

⁷⁴Giddens, *Visions of Jazz*, 70.

CHAPTER 3

CHICAGO AND THE RECORDING OF JAZZ IN THE 1920S

In the spring of 1923, Joe “King” Oliver and his Creole Jazz Band traveled from Chicago to Richmond, Indiana, for a two-day recording session for Gennett Records. Oliver’s regular band, now augmented by Louis Armstrong on second cornet, hoped to produce a few sides for Gennett, and on April 5th the band recorded nearly thirty numbers before retiring for the evening.¹ The sessions proved grueling. The long, narrow studio, located near railroad tracks, possessed awkward acoustics for recording, and many times musicians would find it impossible to hear each other even if within a few feet of one another. Heavy curtains and sawdust-filled walls dampened and partially soundproofed the room, and the band would project their sound into a large megaphone. Studio engineers also kept the room quite warm and humid to preserve the integrity of the wax used for recording. This notoriously volatile acoustic method of recording picked up only certain instruments and routinely rendered low-frequency rhythm instruments, such as the tuba, inaudible. Furthermore, the conditions forced drummer Warren “Baby” Dodds to replace his trap sets with wood blocks to avoid disrupting the recording stylus.

¹For these sessions the Creole Jazz Band consisted of Joe Oliver (cornet), Louis Armstrong (cornet), Honore Dutrey (trombone), Lil Hardin (piano), Bill Johnson (banjo), and Warren “Baby” Dodds (drums). Liner notes for Louis Armstrong, “Louis Armstrong/King Oliver” (Milestone Records, 1992). See also Laurence Bergreen, *Louis Armstrong: An Extravagant Life* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997), 218, 499.

Only the clarinet, banjo, and trumpet could be recorded with any degree of consistency.² Nervousness, humidity, and sound problems notwithstanding, the Gennett sessions provided Armstrong's initiation to the recording studio and would cement his position in a band that he had joined only two months earlier. More importantly, these sessions (along with the Jelly Roll Morton and New Orleans Rhythm Kings recordings that same year) helped usher in the era of recorded jazz. These records may not reflect the live sounds of the bands—the acoustic recording format skewed the audible instrumentation—but they provide a useful account of the evolution of early jazz.

In the two days spent in Richmond, the band set down a number of recordings, though Gennett only saved a handful for release for their 1923 catalog, “Snappy Dance Hits on Gennett Records by Exclusive Gennett Colored Artists.”³ These 1923 records serve as an introduction to the Chicago-style jazz that would be the prominent form of jazz in the 1920s. Whereas New Orleans music proved ephemeral, Chicago jazz made it onto records creating a tangible document of 1920s jazz. Over the span of five years, the elegant chaos of New Orleans jazz would evolve into a more arranged style, and Oliver's recordings allow for a basis of comparison for future developments. With the exception of Lil Hardin all of the members of the Creole Jazz Band came from New Orleans, and

²Rick Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagy: Gennett Records and the Birth of Recorded Jazz* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 29. According to legend, Armstrong's cornet proved too loud, and engineers moved the young musician to a spot fifteen feet away from the rest of the band in order to achieve a decent mix. If true—Dodds never mentions the incident, and Armstrong changed it during his life—the story attests to the lack of balance control in acoustic recordings. Armstrong may have been placed a few feet behind Oliver, but the idea of Armstrong blaring, somewhat self-consciously, from the corner of the studio is more myth than reality. *Ibid.*, 64.

³Bergreen, *Louis Armstrong*, 215-7.

the band represents the transplanted nature of black Chicagoans. This fusion of New Orleans and Chicago resulted in a unique style heard particularly in a song recorded by Oliver's band at the Gennett sessions. On the second day of recording, the Creole Jazz Band waxed a version of "Snake Rag," an improvised tune created specifically for the session.⁴ "Snake Rag" features a traditional arrangement of ensemble improvisation along with several brief stop-time solos. Oliver and Armstrong played several harmonized cornet breaks throughout the songs. Performed for an audience, the horn players would expand and elaborate on these breaks, but in the studio, Oliver and Armstrong settled for more conservative solos in order to stay within the firm three-minute time limit imposed on songs by the recording process. "The Gennett session," one writer has noted, "froze in time a brief period when Oliver, still near the height of his expressive powers, collaborates with his successor as king of the jazz cornet."⁵ The improvised melodies and rhythmic propulsion of "Snake Rag" place it within the New Orleans style, but the song also resonates back throughout all of African American music connecting to work songs and the country blues, Scott Joplin and Buddy Bolden.⁶ In all, "Snake Rag" encapsulated New Orleans jazz with its insinuations of ragtime and blues serving as a snapshot of African American musical expression in the years immediately following World War I. For all of its potency, however, the influence of jazz such as

⁴King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band, "Snake Rag," (Gennett Records, 1923) on *Louis Armstrong/King Oliver* (Fantasy, 1992).

⁵Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagie*, 65-6.

⁶Brian Priestly, *Jazz on Record: A History* (London: Elm Tree Books, 1988), 15-6. Shortly after the Gennett sessions, Oliver's band recorded "Snake Rag" for OKeh and emphasized the ragtime rhythm even further. Bergreen, *Louis Armstrong*, 217-220, 499.

“Snake Rag” proved to be limited, and within five years musical invention and technological innovation would produce a new more arranged and stylized form of jazz that would intrigue, shock, and entice black and white Americans alike. At the center of this revolution in sound stood a twenty-three year old cornet player fresh from the rough neighborhoods of New Orleans.

Louis Armstrong arrived in Chicago in the late summer of 1922, after receiving a telegraphed invitation to play second cornet for his old mentor Joe Oliver, who had moved north in the late 1910s. Within hours of his arrival, Armstrong stood inside Lincoln Gardens astonished by the crowd’s response to his old friend’s band. This rushed orientation to Oliver’s band served as Armstrong’s introduction to Chicago, the city that would foster the trumpet player’s career for much of the next five years.

Armstrong’s relocation placed him within one of the largest and most dynamic black communities in the country during this period. Between 1910 and 1920, Chicago’s black population increased by almost 150%, from 44,103 to 109,594.⁷ Attracted to the city’s railroad connections, industrial capacity, and image of the “Promised Land,” southern African Americans flocked to Chicago in the years following World War I in order to improve their situation. Located primarily on the South Side of the city, Chicago’s black neighborhoods harbored a wide-range of socio-economic conditions. Separated from white neighborhoods, black Chicagoans encountered housing shortages, high rents, and limited job opportunities. Still, the city offered a number of opportunities for African Americans to function successfully and independently. The black community benefited

⁷Leroy Ostransky, *Jazz City: The Impact of Our Cities on the Development of Jazz* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 83.

from the presence of a supportive middle class, black-owned social clubs, and assertive black churches. Countering racism and white animosity, Chicago's black leadership on the South Side helped create a vital African American community as well as foster a diverse and influential group of jazz musicians.⁸

Although early histories tend to emphasize the uniformity of Chicago jazz, racial and musical differences produced several distinct styles of jazz. On one level, race became a defining issue in that black bands generally played a different style of jazz, to different audiences, and in different venues than did white bands. From the mid-1910s to the mid-1920s the most important black musicians playing in Chicago were Jelly Roll Morton, Joe Oliver, and Erskine Tate. These three men represent the three main styles of black jazz: solo piano, small band hot jazz, and large band arranged jazz. The history of solo piano playing that dated back at least to the 1890s resonated in the playing of Jelly Roll Morton. Morton, who had moved to Chicago in the 1910s, continued to play his amalgamation of ragtime, blues, and jazz in small clubs throughout Chicago. Joe Oliver's various bands represent the small band style of jazz that included between five and eight musicians and performed improvised jazz in the cabarets and smaller clubs in the city.⁹ Erskine Tate's group, in contrast, exemplifies the larger (25- to 30-piece) black

⁸Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 11-27, 91-110, 129-146; St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Clayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945) 58-64, 174-214, 379-397; Dempsey, J. Travis, *An Autobiography of Black Chicago* (Chicago: Urban Research Institute, 1981), 13-7, 35-40.

⁹One writer has claimed that the "greatest single event in Chicago's early jazz history was the arrival of King Oliver in Chicago." Ostransky, *Jazz City*, 107.

bands that entered the theater circuit and provided music for silent films, ballroom dancers, and various vaudeville acts. These jobs used written arrangements rather than improvised parts and thus required players to have strong music reading skills. These divisions remained fairly evident for a large part of the 1920s, and although certain players—most notably Louis Armstrong—found success in both styles, most players found work predominately in one or the other genres.

The white musicians in Chicago had more employment opportunities and fewer stylistic divisions. The most important white band playing in Chicago in the early 1920s was the New Orleans Rhythm Kings. The New Orleans Rhythm Kings respected musicians like Joe Oliver and Louis Armstrong and regularly went to see them play in the South Side clubs. The band played a smooth style of improvised jazz, and has been described as the “most powerful, most pervasive influence on Chicago’s young, white, aspiring jazzmen.”¹⁰ Although their styles of jazz differed, the New Orleans Rhythm Kings shared at least two similarities with Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band: the two bands consisted of New Orleans musicians living in Chicago, and both groups tremendously influenced a generation of jazz players through their recordings. The success of the New Orleans Rhythm Kings stimulated a number of white, college-aged musicians to create their own bands and records, most notably Bix Beiderbecke, the ill-fated trumpet hero of white Chicago.

¹⁰Ostransky, *Jazz City*, 111.

Immortalized as “the sensitive, musical genius who drank himself to death before the world could fully recognize his command of a misunderstood art form,” Bix Beiderbecke produced a handful of auspicious records before collapsing into the bottle.¹¹ Born in Davenport, Iowa, in 1903, Beiderbecke first came into contact with jazz music through the riverboats that coursed up and down the Mississippi River. Some of these boats employed jazz bands and Beiderbecke would get to hear these bands once they made it to Iowa. Many musicians first encountered jazz via live performance, but Bix also represents the first generation of jazz musicians to learn jazz through phonograph records. As a teenager, Beiderbecke (who had played piano since the age of five) became captivated by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band and taught himself the cornet by playing along with the New York group’s records. Beiderbecke, for instance, “spent hours recreating the solos by the band’s cornetist, Nick LaRocca, by pushing the turntable speed on the family’s spring-wound phonograph to the slowest level, to where he could pick up LaRocca’s improvisations on the piano note for note.”¹² This novel method of instruction resulted in Beiderbecke’s unorthodox embouchure and cornet fingering style.

In the early 1920s, Beiderbecke moved to Chicago where he began listening to the New Orleans Rhythm Kings at their gigs in the Loop. Beiderbecke formed the Wolverines in 1923, and the band soon began recording for Gennett Records. Two elements stand out in Beiderbecke’s playing on these recordings: his tone and his lyricism. Whereas Armstrong excelled in all aspects of his playing, Beiderbecke concentrated on the middle range of the cornet and developed a rich, smooth tone that set

¹¹Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagie*, 91.

¹²Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagie*, 92.

him apart from most other horn players in the 1920s. His melodicism (and, to be sure, his race) made Beiderbecke the hero of white jazz fans in the Midwest. Mercurial by nature, Beiderbecke sought out other forms of jazz and soon left the Wolverines. By 1927, Beiderbecke had developed an interest in harmonic exploration (seen most prominently in his piano composition, “In a Mist”), and had become attracted to the harmonic possibilities of larger orchestras. That same year, Beiderbecke joined the Paul Whiteman orchestra, and spent the last few years of his life playing in a large band format. Although he lived in Chicago for only a few years, Beiderbecke had a profound influence on midwestern jazz musicians and epitomizes white jazz in the 1920s.¹³

Not only musical differences existed between black and white jazz bands, but divergent employment opportunities also characterized the two groups. To some degree the type of job and demographics of the audience dictated the type of band, but racism also played a substantial deciding factor. The type of racism experienced by black musicians in Chicago mirrored the larger social/racial realities facing African Americans living in the Midwest and North during the first half of the twentieth century, most notably de facto segregation. For transplanted New Orleans natives, the virulent racism prevalent in the South dissolved into a more implicit form of racial prejudice. In particular, black Chicagoans faced certain limitations in employment opportunities as well as racially based wage differentials. Black musicians found some support through the city’s Local 208 of the musicians’ union, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. During the mid-1920s, Verona Biggs served as union president, and he strove to

¹³Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 187-194; Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagie*, 92-9,

protect the issues confronting working black performers. His main antagonist was James Petrillo, the aggressive leader of the white musicians' union, Local 10. In general, the nightlife of Chicago was dispersed geographically in two main areas: the Loop and Bronzeville. Located near the main commerce area of Chicago, the Loop housed the greatest concentration of white hotels, ballrooms, and theaters. White club owners might hire black bands—especially famous ones—but the audience would consist solely of white patrons. In Bronzeville, on the South Side, the clubs and cabarets employed only black bands, and the audience would be almost exclusively black, although white jazz enthusiasts could be seen in the clubs when Armstrong or Oliver played. The center of the jazz scene in Bronzeville—known as “The Stroll”—was on State Street between 31st and 35th Streets, and on these blocks were the most important black clubs in Chicago, including the Dreamland, Elite #1, Elite #2, Plantation, and the Royal Garden. Union regulations and racial prejudice, however, tempered this geographic distinction as Petrillo and Local 10 forced out black bands from the Loop at various times during the 1920s. Biggs and Local 208 had little recourse against these actions, but Petrillo's arbitrary avoidance of standard hiring practices helped unite black musicians to some degree.¹⁴

In conjunction with the work of Local 208 and Verona Biggs, black musicians found support in the *Chicago Defender*, the most influential black newspaper during this period. Robert S. Abbott, the publisher of the *Defender*, endeavored to provide black

102-23; and William Kenney, *Chicago Jazz: A Cultural History, 1904-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 100-1.

¹⁴Travis, *Autobiography of Black Chicago*, 39-40. None of the clubs in Bronzeville exist today, and most of the Stroll is currently the site of the Illinois Institute of Technology.

Americans with a print media advocate. Operating on a local and national level—the newspaper ran several different editions during this period—the *Defender* played a large role in enticing black southerners to travel northward as well as provided news on housing and employment opportunities. The newspaper also reported on various racially charged employment issues. On a national level, the newspaper persistently supported an anti-lynching law, and regularly covered racially motivated crimes throughout the country. Still, the *Defender* reflected the conservative values of the African American elite. A major theme running throughout the newspaper concerned social uplift, and during this period the *Defender* combined a commitment to national civil rights with a local concern for social refinement. The economic and social concerns of the black middle and upper class took priority, and the *Defender* received much of its advertising revenue from products that claimed to straighten black hair and offer African Americans a whiter appearance. Throughout the 1920s editorials blasting lynching abutted ads for “Bleacho,” a skin lightening cream that promised to “remove the greatest obstacle to your success.”¹⁵

In terms of jazz, one of the most important elements of the *Defender* was “The Musical Bunch,” a weekly column written by Dave Peyton for the newspaper from 1925 to 1929.¹⁶ Devoted to the jazz culture of Chicago, Peyton’s “The Musical Bunch” served several functions: a method of publicizing up-coming concerts, an opportunity to deliver

¹⁵Chicago *Defender* January 12, 1924, p. 9. See also Kenney, *Chicago Jazz*, 15, 26-7; Spears, *Black Chicago*, 81-2, 114-5, 134-6, 184-5; and St. Clair, *Black Metropolis*, 400-12.

¹⁶Peyton wrote for the *Defender* from September 26, 1925 to July 27, 1929. My comments on Peyton are based on an examination of his columns during this period.

news concerning the jazz scene, and as a forum for Peyton's views on the expected responsibilities of musicians. Peyton's pervasiveness in the Chicago music scene and his ardent, if slightly idiosyncratic, opinions on jazz make his column a vital testament to the diversity of jazz during the 1920s. A piano player and bandleader, Peyton also contracted out musicians to other orchestras, and many of his columns detail the appropriate behavior working musicians must maintain to be successful. Some of these lessons were primarily musical as Peyton exhorted players to practice their scales and hone their music reading skills. Many of these columns, however, also dictated certain social values by which jazz musicians should abide. Peyton's social views clearly complement those of the *Defender*, and his numerous lectures on the proper behavior of musicians attest to his commitment to professionalism and respectability. Above all else, Peyton valued tactfulness, patience, selflessness, punctuality, sobriety, and cleanliness. The columnist respected a musician's shined shoes as much as their performance skills. "When the public learns that you are ratty and without culture," Peyton warned in 1928, "they learn to dislike your work."¹⁷ Sobriety on the bandstand accompanied temperance in finances,

Missing columns include: November 14, 1925, December 25, 1926, December 31, 1926, July 6, 1929, and portions of December 24, 1927 and December 22, 1928.

¹⁷Chicago *Defender*, April 21, 1928, p. 8. See also Chicago *Defender*, October 24, 1925, p. 6; October 31, 1925, p. 6; December 5, 1925, p. 6; December 26, 1925, p. 6; January 9, 1926, p. 9; January 30, 1926, p. 6; March 20, 1926, p. 6; March 27, 1926, p. 6; July 31, 1926, p. 7; September 11, 1926, p. 6; November 6, 1926, p. 7; November 20, 1926, p. 6; December 11, 1926, p. 6; December 18, 1926, p. 6; January 8, 1927, p. 7; January 22, 1927, p. 6; February 26, 1927, p. 7; May 7, 1927, p. 8; June 11, 1927, p. 8; October 8, 1927, p. 8; October 29, 1927, p. 10; December 10, 1927, p. 10; December 17, 1927, p. 10; January 28, 1928, p. 8; March 2, 1928, p. 8; March 10, 1928, p. 8; March 17, 1928, p. 10; April 7, 1928, p. 10; April 28, 1928, p. 8; June 9, 1928, p. 10; July 14, 1928, p. 8; and August 4, 1928, p. 8. Peyton also warned of a poor musical education. Peyton believed that many of the ills he saw in jazz musicians stemmed at least in part from sub

and in a 1926 column, Peyton implored musicians not to buy automobiles. Instead, he urged them to invest in gold bonds or real estate. Saving for the future—both in finance as well as learning a trade—constitute a major theme running throughout his columns. This commitment to respectability and responsibility mirrored the middle class values of the *Defender* and governed his views on race.

The issue of race usually appeared in “The Musical Bunch” when Peyton dealt with employment opportunities. The livelihood of working musicians rested on available employment opportunities, and Peyton used his column to promote black bands in the Chicago area, and congratulated black bands when they obtained gigs in the Loop. Racial tension certainly affected the work environment. “The rottenest kind of white orchestra,” he wrote in 1927, “can get the best jobs when they in no way compare with our crack Race orchestras.”¹⁸ Still, Peyton rarely blamed racism as the only cause of black bands losing jobs to white groups. With his constant admonitions to practice scales and learn theory, Peyton usually added that many white players had an edge due to their classical background. White players, Peyton believed, sometimes received better opportunities because of their talent—not simply due to a racist system. The atmosphere in Chicago, however, was not always conducive to pleasant racial interaction, and in 1925, Peyton wrote an extended piece on the maneuverings of white booking agencies to prevent black people from obtaining jobs in white venues. “The calls come to the booking agent’s office,” Peyton wrote, “and he replies that he is sorry, but he doesn’t

par teachers. See Chicago *Defender*, October 24, 1925, p. 6; February 20, 1926, p. 6; July 17, 1926, p. 7; December 3, 1927, p. 8; and April 13, 1929, p. 10.

¹⁸Chicago *Defender*, October 8, 1927, p. 8.

book *Race orchestras* because they are unreliable, barbaric and huge liquor indulgents.”¹⁹ Peyton then argued for black musicians to use “advertising and propaganda to offset these untruths.” “Opportunity,” Peyton once wrote, “is all we want.” He firmly believed that given a chance, black bands could be at least as successful as white bands. Once employed, however, the musicians needed to present themselves professionally. “Now that we are getting our share of the work,” Peyton concluded, “let us hold it by giving the service desired, and by all means watch your attire: have your shoes shining, collar white and clothes pressed.” Peyton rarely strayed far from his core beliefs of ambition and thrift.²⁰

In addition to issues of employment, Peyton addressed race in his comments on jazz history and his take on the ideal style of jazz. On the one hand, he pointedly notes “as usual, the white man has taken credit for the birth of jazz and its development.” However, he also greatly admired Paul Whiteman, and in 1929 argued that a Whiteman recording of “St. Louis Blues” surpassed a recording of the tune by a black band. The black band’s recording, Peyton declared, included “all sorts of freakish, weird tones.” Whiteman’s record, on the other hand, had sold millions, a sales record that indicated, at least to some extent, its popular worth to Peyton. Of course, this remark directly followed Peyton’s concern that black bands usually become “jim-crowed in some Race

¹⁹Chicago *Defender*, October 31, 1925, p. 6.

²⁰Chicago *Defender*, January 9, 1926, p. 6. See also Chicago *Defender*, October 17, 1925, p. 6; January 2, 1926, p. 6; and February 27, 1926, p. 7.

pamphlet.”²¹ “Because you can attract attention with a few weird eccentric tricks on your instrument,” Peyton wrote, “and the audience raves over it, does not make you a musician by any means.”²² Peyton would often praise white bands and use them as an illustration of how black musicians should play. Elsewhere, however, he would argue that black people exhibit certain characteristics that eluded most white people. “There is a vast difference,” he wrote in 1926, “between the two races when it comes to playing music. Our group seems to put more soul into the work, especially modern syncopation. The white musician does everything mechanically: he adheres to theory, while our musicians know how to improvise [and] add to the composer’s ideas.”²³

Jazz obviously served as a major focus of “The Musical Bunch,” and Peyton’s column represents one of the few long-running forums of the 1920s that discussed jazz from an African American perspective. Peyton had strong opinions on the history of jazz arguing that ragtime represented a more valuable precursor than the blues. Peyton’s view of jazz, in many ways, remains somewhat idiosyncratic. Peyton certainly admired Louis Armstrong, Fletcher Henderson, and Bennie Moten, but he also equally praised conductors such as Paul Whiteman and Guy Lombardo, two figures much derided by later jazz scholars. The writer respected Whiteman for his “polite syncopation” as well as his “beautiful melodies, garnished with eccentric figurations propelled by strict

²¹Chicago *Defender*, February 5, 1927, p. 6 (quotation); and March 9, 1929, p. 10. See also Chicago *Defender* October 24, 1925, p. 6; September 18, 1926, p. 7; May 21, 1927, p. 8; May 12, 1928, p. 10; August 11, 1928, p. 8; and November 3, 1928, p. 10.

²²Chicago *Defender*, October 29, 1927, p. 10.

²³Chicago *Defender*, September 18, 1926, p. 7.

rhythm.”²⁴ Peyton often commended Whiteman for his leadership skills and in a column in 1928, Peyton summed up his admiration for Whiteman with the claim that “to know Paul Whiteman is to understand at last the phenomenon of American jazz.”²⁵ Peyton was drawn to jazz that featured clean playing, good dynamics, limited improvisation, and strong arrangements. Thus, Peyton appreciated not only Fletcher Henderson but also Paul Whiteman. Overall, Peyton dismissed the traditional style of jazz featuring group improvisation as “clown jazz.” “The day of clown jazz is over,” Peyton wrote in 1925, “and I would like to see the day come when our musicians realize this fact. It was the custom about five years ago for the leader of the dance band to yell out the key and stamp off the tempo, and every one in the band would fake his own part, and when all was over the dance fans would yell for more. But since that time the dance music has journeyed through a revolutionary stage until it now requires real first-class musicianship to be able to line up in first rank.”²⁶ Musicianship and subtlety marked first-class jazz for Peyton. “The style of jazz the public has gone wild about,” Peyton wrote, “is that which Paul Whiteman, Vincent Lopez, the late James Reese Europe, Leroy Smith, and Fletcher Henderson’s orchestras are putting out—beautiful melodies, garnished with eccentric

²⁴Chicago *Defender*, August 7, 1926, p. 7 (first quotation); February 27, 1926 (second quotation).

²⁵Chicago *Defender*, May 19, 1928, p. 10. See also Chicago *Defender*, February 20, 1926, p. 6; May 22, 1926, p. 6; December 4, 1926, p. 7; May 28, 1927, p. 8; October 22, 1927, p. 8; October 29, 1927, p. 10; and July 7, 1928, p. 9.

²⁶Chicago *Defender*, October 10, 1925, p.6.

figurations propelled by strict rhythm.”²⁷ Peyton summed up his views on jazz in 1927 stating simply that “I am not against jazz music, but I do think it belongs in its place.”²⁸

A social and cultural ambivalence marked Peyton’s writing, and as much as he enjoyed jazz and urged musicians to be more prescient about the future, two issues—the social consequences of jazz and the effect of new technology—made him nervous. The social effects of jazz, or at least a less restrained variant of jazz, alarmed Peyton. Jazz could, Peyton believed, help uplift both the audience and the musician, but “dangerous jazz,” he wrote in 1927, “is the barbaric, filthy, discordant, wild and shrieky music, that should be eliminated from the public dance halls and should be disqualified by the decent element.”²⁹ Aware of its power, but fearful of its consequences, Peyton argued that jazz music needed to be restrained. His columns relate, at least in degrees, to the larger, more virulent protest by critics who struggled to proscribe all forms of jazz, but they diverge sharply from many of the black writers active in Harlem during this period. Langston Hughes and others saw in jazz the unfilled promise of American life for black people. As an example of African American creative expression, jazz music, the writers of the Harlem Renaissance argued, represented a key element in obtaining cultural equality. Peyton conceded elements of this argument, but still fretted about the loosening of moral boundaries, which many saw as the natural result of jazz music.

²⁷Chicago *Defender*, February 27, 1926, p. 7.

²⁸Chicago *Defender*, March 12, 1927, p. 8. For definitions of “good jazz” see Chicago *Defender*, February 20, 1926, p. 6; February 27, 1926, p. 7; August 7, 1926, p. 7; and December 29, 1928, p. 10.

²⁹Chicago *Defender*, July 16, 1927, p. 8.

The impact of new technology on jazz music also underscores Peyton's hesitancy to embrace fully new ideas. During the silent film era, Peyton unequivocally supported the use of black bands in the theater, and often argued that black bands needed to become a fixture in Chicago's movie houses. In a related attack, Peyton warned of technological advances in recorded music. An invention called the Vitaphone particularly worried Peyton, and in 1926 he wrote, "the greatest menace in the musician's future today is the Vitaphone."³⁰ Again, his concerns dealt with employment, as Peyton did not want to see bands replaced by machines. Even when he admired the results—as when he heard a Louis Armstrong record played on an "Amplivox"—Peyton strongly urged theater owners to retain live music. However, in 1927, Peyton noted "there is too much jazz music played in the picture theater today."³¹ Part of his criticism stemmed from his disapproval of wildly improvised hot jazz, the type that many of the bands played during movies. But Peyton also exhibits a larger concern for new technology taking the place of live musicians. In a column in 1928, Peyton condemned canned music and its effect on the employment of jazz musicians. Peyton's aversion stemmed explicitly from technology's impact on employment opportunities, but it also demonstrates his inability to accept resolutely new ideas.³²

³⁰Chicago *Defender*, November 6, 1926, p. 7. For his views on jazz in movie theaters see also Chicago *Defender*, April 14, 1928, p. 10; October 6, 1928, p. 10; July 28, 1928, p. 8; and November 24, 1928, p. 10. On the controversy surrounding the Vitaphone, see Chicago *Defender*, November 27, 1926, p. 8; February 19, 1927, p. 6; October 27, 1928, p. 10; and May 4, 1929, p.9.

³¹Chicago *Defender*, March 12, 1927, p. 8.

³²Chicago *Defender*, July 21, 1928, p. 10.

Peyton may have expressed reservations over the impact of new technology on music, but the improved ability of companies to produce records allowed more people to hear jazz music, and Chicago stood at the center of this development in the 1920s. The theoretical elements behind the phonograph dated back to Thomas Edison's experiments in the 1870s and dealt primarily with the etching of sound waves onto wax cylinders. By the 1890s, as Edison's company (later Columbia Records) patented and then mass-produced this wax-based system, Emile Berliner was marketing a more practical machine that replaced Edison's cylinders with flat shellac discs. A court battle eventually erupted between Columbia and Berliner's Victor Talking Machine Company. During the protracted proceedings Columbia and Victor reached a compromise effectively monopolizing the production of phonograph records. Once the records proved popular to the buying public a number of smaller companies emerged and used (legally and illegally) patented technology to seize a share of the commerce. More legal battles ensued as Victor and Columbia attempted to maintain industry control. By the early 1920s, however, a number of court decisions ruled against the two major corporations and effectively empowered a number of small companies to expand their manufacturing and distribution interests. The burgeoning recording industry drastically altered the transmission of popular music. Sheet music—the traditional mainstay of popular musical distribution—conveyed neither the improvisational structure of jazz nor the emotional temper of the blues, and these two genres brought record companies their first national successes since they offered a type of music not found on printed sheets. Some sheet music companies, however, sought out a different audience, and rather than focusing on the home pianist—the traditional consumer of ragtime songs—focused on marketing to

the amateur and professional jazz musician. In 1928, for example, Chicago-based Melrose Publishing found much success with a collection of Louis Armstrong solos transcribed from his records. The sheet music, in this case, followed the recordings.³³ Throughout the 1920s the primary mode of transmission was through the recording and distribution of records, and although New York City served as the business center for the music industry, several smaller labels produced some of the most definitive records of early jazz. The most successful of these “independent” labels took advantage of the markets of the Midwest, and although the center of the music business remained ensconced in New York City, Chicago quickly became an important city in the recording of early jazz.³⁴

Record companies had been recording jazz bands since the Original Dixieland Jazz Band introduced a type of jazz music to record buyers through their 1917 sessions for Columbia and Victor Records in New York City. These early recordings, primarily “Livery Stable Blues” and “Dixie Jass Band One-Step,” became quite popular, but overall, the major record companies “were generally lukewarm to white jazz bands and virtually ignored the black jazz ensembles.”³⁵ Despite the Original Dixieland Jazz Band’s success, the major studios recorded little jazz in the late 1910s. In the early 1920s, Okeh and Paramount (a Wisconsin based company) sparked a blues craze with their records featuring black female blues singers like Mamie Smith. Record companies

³³See the advertisements for *125 Jazz Breaks for Cornet* and *50 Jazz Choruses* in *Chicago Defender* August 27, 1927, p. 8.

³⁴Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagie*, 14-27.

³⁵Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagie*, 50. See also Brian Rust, *Jazz on Record*, 1-2, 4-5.

promoted black blues singers and white jazz bands, but black jazz bands remained unrecorded. This trend began to change after Gennett recorded the New Orleans Rhythm Kings in 1922 and entered the growing jazz market in Chicago. The New Orleans Rhythm Kings produced an accomplished style of jazz much different from the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. The Original Dixieland Jazz Band tended towards an erratic, noisy style of playing and emphasized the more humorous aspects of their playing. “Livery Stable Blues,” for example, featured the band mimicking barnyard animal bleats and moans through their horns. In contrast, the New Orleans Rhythm Kings “played in a pleasant, legato style,” and their success proved to record companies the financial possibilities of recording Chicago jazz bands.³⁶ The Creole Jazz Band and Jelly Roll Morton sessions represented the first recordings of black jazz, and along with the blues recordings of Mamie Smith helped spawn a race records craze. Record companies designated most releases by black entertainers and for a predominately black audience as “race records.” The companies lumped into this category a wide range of styles including blues, jazz, and gospel.³⁷

In the 1920s, Brunswick (Vocalion), Paramount, and Okeh each recorded jazz music in Chicago, but somewhat perversely, one of the more important recording studio for Chicago jazz was Gennett Records—a small outfit located several hundred miles away in Richmond, Indiana. Though not the most prolific or most widely distributed record label, Gennett (along with its rival Okeh) represented the small, regionally based company that helped make jazz available on a larger scale. In the 1910s, as the

³⁶Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoogie*, 55.

³⁷Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 17.

phonograph began to be popular, the owners of Star Piano Company created a rather inauspicious division called Gennett Records to tap the growing interest in sound recording. By the early 1920s, record sales for Gennett exceeded three million; not entirely in league with Victor or Columbia, but the Richmond company represented respectable competition.³⁸ After the major patent victory in 1921, Gennett expanded its sales catalog to include “classical, sacred, popular, and military band music, as well as specialty foreign-language and instructional discs.”³⁹ These recordings took place in the back of the piano factory, in a building fifty yards away from the Chesapeake and Ohio railroad line. The studio’s proximity to this noise and commotion, clamor and reverberation interrupted not a few sessions and gave Gennett Records a certain mystique, both to contemporary musicians as well as later collectors and historians. External interruptions notwithstanding, studio engineers also had to contend with the acoustics of the room itself. Only marginal sound adjustments could be made, and usually these changes consisted solely of moving louder musicians a few steps away from the megaphone.

Apart from musical considerations, recording at Gennett forced black musicians to experience rural, Midwestern race relations. Although Chicago maintained at least satisfactory race relations throughout the 1920s, black musicians discovered less accepting areas when they traveled outside of the city. Indiana, for instance, boasted the nation’s largest number of Ku Klux Klan members during this period, and although

³⁸“Victor’s sales of phonograph players and records by the end of 1921 had reached an astounding \$50 million.” Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagie*, 26.

³⁹Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagie*, 27.

nominally more anti-Catholic than anti-black, the Ku Klux Klan still represented prejudice and bigotry. On recording trips to Gennett Studios, black musicians could not stay overnight in Richmond, but had to arrange for safer accommodations outside of town. The racial temper of the city, for example, forced the New Orleans Rhythm Kings to assert somewhat facetiously that Jelly Roll Morton was Latin American rather than black.⁴⁰ In reality, Morton was neither, but his rather complex Creole ancestry would be a hard sell in an area rife with Klan activity. This Richmond-area Klan population, however, also purchased phonograph records, and the savvy business owners of Gennett Records took advantage of this new record-buying market by producing a number of Klan-themed recordings such as “Onward Christian Klansman” and “The Bright Fiery Cross.” Thus, the studio responsible for the first integrated jazz recording sessions and some of the most influential black music of the twentieth century stood in a town with many services inaccessible to African Americans and devoted much of its catalog to Ku Klux Klan recordings.⁴¹

Placing business before art certainly fails to distinguish Gennett from other record companies, large or small, and in fact, Gennett recorded jazz with little regard for posterity. The responsibility of selecting master recordings fell to the nearest employee at the time; thus, secretaries and day laborers determined which Bix performance transcended all others. However, the company’s proximity to Chicago, and its emphatic willingness to produce records by local artists for a regional audience placed Gennett in

⁴⁰Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagie*, 74.

⁴¹Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagie*, 36-9. Kennedy notes that “though Klan literature was circulated in the factory, the Gennetts did not publicly support the organization.” *Ibid.*, 38.

an extraordinary position to preserve and transmit early jazz music. For most of the 1920s Gennett—“the only record label based in the rural Midwest”—produced records independent from the larger corporate entanglements of New York City. As such, Gennett signifies the necessary link between jazz as an African American folk music prominent in New Orleans, and jazz as a national commodity that resonated with black and white audiences. Aside from business concerns, this evolution depended on the diverse social structure and jazz scene present in Chicago, and commerce and community blurred unambiguously as record companies discovered the available market in Bronzeville.⁴²

Chicago represented the center of jazz recording in the 1920s, and Chicago bands released many of the seminal jazz records of the period. The city’s active and diverse black community allowed for a dependable market for the music, and the coalition of record company and audience rewarded both parties. An example of this interaction occurred on June 12, 1926, when Okeh Records—in conjunction with the Consolidated Talking Machine Company and Local 208, the black musicians union—hosted the “Okeh Cabaret and Style Show.”⁴³ Held at the Chicago Coliseum, the gala evening boasted a dance contest, festival booths, a style show, and a wide range of musical acts.⁴⁴

⁴²Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagie*, 90.

⁴³Chicago actually hosted two major events in 1926. Earlier that February, the South Side Elks Lodge sponsored a smaller gala event. The highlight, at least according to the *Defender*, was a demonstration by Armstrong’s Hot Five of how phonograph records were made. The band recorded a song on stage and then played back the recorded results for the audience. See Kenney, *Chicago Jazz*, 124.

⁴⁴Mildred Ann Henson, “Coliseum Will Resemble a Scene From ‘Arabian Nights,’” *Chicago Defender*, June 12, 1926, p. 1; Bob Hawley, “Thousands to be Given as Prize Awards,” *Chicago Defender*, June 12, 1926, p. 1. For more on the gala see also

Promoters expected between 20,000-25,000 people, and to support the bands the promoters installed “a specially built amplifying system consisting of a control board weighing three tons and requiring two operators’ attention.”⁴⁵ For \$1.10 participants could dance to fifteen bands including Joe Oliver and his Plantation Serenaders, Sara Martin, Lonnie Johnson, and Louis Armstrong and his Hot Five. For the bands that played at the gala, “their success at the Okeh ball,” Hennessey writes, “would be an indication of the eventual victory of Chicago recordings over the actual live sounds of the period.”⁴⁶ Although the musicians remained the big draw, the gala also demonstrated the strength of Chicago’s black community. The *Chicago Defender* enthusiastically supported the event and published a special music section the day of the gala to promote the various bands. Furthermore, one of the purposes of the event was to raise money for a new building for the black musicians union, Local 208, associated with the American Federation of Labor. Verona Biggs, president of 208, maintained a strong presence in the black community, and his support of black musicians garnered him some amount of influence. A considerable amount of money went into the program, and one of the main financial backers of the gala, the self-styled philanthropist E. A. Fearn of the Consolidated Talking Machine Company, noted that he had an “interest in ambitious and talented Race musicians.”⁴⁷ Okeh Records and the other sponsors spared little expense

Robert S. Abbott, “Music Hath Charms,” *Chicago Defender*, June 12, 1926, p. 1, 4; *Chicago Defender*, June 12, 1926, p. 1; *Chicago Defender*, June 12, 1926, p. 2.

⁴⁵Henson, “Coliseum Will Resemble a Scene From ‘Arabian Nights.’”

⁴⁶Thomas J. Hennessey, *From Jazz to Swing: African-American Jazz Musicians and Their Music, 1890-1935* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 67.

⁴⁷Henson, “Coliseum Will Resemble a Scene From ‘Arabian Nights.’”

to demonstrate their pride in black Chicago. Although no clear record exists documenting the demographics of the audience, the size of the crowd indicates that a reasonable cross-section of black Chicago turn up at the event. Black socialites, however, received much of the attention of the *Defender* which noted “at the Coliseum’s box reservation office the box lists show that every man and woman on Chicago’s South side who is important socially, politically or otherwise will be there.”⁴⁸ Overall, Peyton pronounced the gala as “the greatest affair the Windy City has ever witnessed.”⁴⁹

As much as the 1926 gala presented the strength and diversity of Chicago’s black community, it also attested to the popularity of Louis Armstrong. More than any other single musician, Armstrong personified the jazz scene in Chicago. Armstrong spent most of the decade in the city and played in both types of bands—large and small—as well as produced the most influential recorded jazz of the period. For the first two years, Armstrong played almost exclusively with King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band, and almost single-handedly transplanted a New Orleans feel into a new Chicago context. Oliver and other Louisianians had introduced Chicago listeners to a New Orleans style, but Armstrong combined New Orleans rhythm with Chicago elegance and invented a new approach to jazz. “He was in the process of developing the vocabulary of modern jazz,” one biographer has written, “taking it out of sleepy New Orleans and sticking it right in the fast-beating heart of Chicago.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸Chicago *Defender*, June 12, 1926, special music section, p. 4. See also Chicago *Defender*, May 22, 1926, p. 6.

⁴⁹Chicago *Defender*, June 19, 1926, p. 6.

⁵⁰Bergreen, *Louis Armstrong*, 200.

In 1924, Armstrong moved to New York City to play with Fletcher Henderson's orchestra at the Roseland Ballroom. In the year that he lived in New York, Armstrong made three changes in his playing that would have a profound affect on Chicago jazz once he returned. For one, Armstrong's tenure with Henderson's band introduced him to the power of a large band playing written arrangements. Although he continued to play and record with small units over the next few years, Armstrong began seeking out a more arranged style of playing during the later part of the decade. Secondly, he began singing regularly at gigs. His gravelly voice thrilled audiences, but it also helped to preserve his lip. Finally, Armstrong switched from the harsh blare of the cornet to the more refined tone of the trumpet. Armstrong put these changes to use once he returned to Chicago in 1925 and began playing with a variety of bands. No longer connected to Oliver, Armstrong performed with Lil Hardin's band at the Dreamland, Erskine Tate's Vendome Orchestra, and Carroll Dickerson's large band at the Sunset.⁵¹

These bands brought Armstrong some money and celebrity—his name began appearing on promotional material during this time—but the trumpet player's real contributions to jazz occurred in the recording studio. In 1925, Okeh Records put together a five-piece recording unit. The Hot Five, as it came to be known, existed only in the studio and included Armstrong on trumpet, his wife, Lil Hardin, on piano, Johnny Dodds on clarinet, Kid Ory on trombone, and Johnny St. Cyr on banjo.⁵² They made

⁵¹For Armstrong's 1924 trip to New York, see Bergreen, *Louis Armstrong*, 236-59; Ilsa Storb, *Louis Armstrong: The Definitive Biography* (New York: Peter Long, 1999), 25-6; and Mike Pinfold, *Louis Armstrong: His Life and Times* (New York: Universe Books, 1987), 40-7. For his return to Chicago, see Bergreen, *Louis Armstrong*, 260-310.

⁵²Bergreen, *Louis Armstrong*, 262-5.

several recordings between November and February, and on February 26, 1926, the Hot Five cut “Heebie Jeebies,” a fairly unremarkable novelty tune connected with a popular dance. Armstrong, however, delighted in the playful lyrics, and punctuated the song with scat singing—voicing nonsense syllables rather than words. Armstrong did not invent scat, but “Heebie Jeebies” brought the singing style to the record-buying public. Funny, exhilarating, and utterly different from what had come before, Armstrong’s “Heebie Jeebies” sold tens of thousands of copies, served as the trumpet player’s first hit record, and introduced Chicago-style jazz to the nation.⁵³ The song also generated considerable response in Chicago, and part-time clarinetist/full-time marijuana dealer Milton “Mezz” Mezzrow wrote of the record’s influence on white jazz musicians, especially Bix Beiderbecke. Armstrong’s scat vocals served as key identifiers for the white jazz subculture, and Mezzrow notes that “for months after that you would hear cats greeting each other with Louis’ riffs when they met around town—I got the heebies, one would yell out, and the other would answer *I got the jeebies*, and the next minute they were scating in each other’s face.”⁵⁴

Armstrong was at his peak during the years that Peyton wrote for the *Defender*, and the columnist regularly mentioned Armstrong’s activities. “Louis is in demand in the Windy City,” Peyton wrote in 1927, “and there is a reason—he toots a wicked

⁵³Louis Armstrong, “Heebie Jeebies,” (OKeh Records, 1925) on *Louis Armstrong: The Complete Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings* (Columbia, 2000). Storb, *Louis Armstrong*, 32-3; Pinfold, *Louis Armstrong*, 52-3; and Alyn Shipton, *A New History of Jazz* (London: Continuum, 2001), 142.

⁵⁴Milton Mezzrow and Bernard Wolfe, *Really the Blues* (New York: Citadel Press, 1990), 119-20.

trumpet.”⁵⁵ Despite his praise, Peyton also gently chastised Armstrong when the trumpet player veered from the columnist’s canonical laws. In particular, Peyton criticized an Armstrong-led band that performed predominately improvised hot jazz. “Louis will learn in time to come,” Peyton wrote in 1927, “that noise isn’t music.”⁵⁶ Still, Peyton greatly respected Armstrong’s talent, work ethic, and professionalism, and the trumpet player represented much of what Peyton called for in a musician. Armstrong, Peyton wrote, “is a fine example of ambition and thrift.”⁵⁷ Considering Peyton’s views on musicianship, Armstrong could receive no higher a compliment. Armstrong, tired of the constraints of the New Orleans style, wanted to pursue a big band direction, and following the 1928 sessions Armstrong increasingly utilized larger band configurations and performed more popular tunes.⁵⁸

In the summer of 1928, Louis Armstrong gathered an amended version of the Hot Five, and scheduled a recording session at an Okeh studio in Chicago. Armstrong’s tenure with Fletcher Henderson and Carroll Dickerson had piqued an interest in more arranged pieces, and Armstrong began relying on more complicated charts and

⁵⁵Chicago *Defender*, April 17, 1926, p. 6.

⁵⁶Chicago *Defender*, March 19, 1927, p. 8.

⁵⁷Chicago *Defender*, June 18, 1927, p. 8. See also Chicago *Defender*, November 7, 1925, p. 8; November 21, 1925, p. 6; December 12, 1925, p. 7; March 20, 1926, p. 6; April 10, 1926, p. 6; September 25, 1926, p. 6; April 16 1927, p. 9; July 2, 1927, p. 8; July 16, 1927, p. 8; December 31, 1927, p. 6; April 28, 1928, p. 8; April 27, 1929, p. 8; and May 4, 1929, p. 9.

⁵⁸Bergreen, *Louis Armstrong*, 307. Armstrong’s career after 1928 remains controversial, and in fact, Bergreen is one of the few writers to place a positive spin on the issue by implying that Armstrong had a clear musical direction. Gunther Schuller, on the other hand, argues that Armstrong basically forsook his jazz roots (and talent) and

arrangements. Armstrong therefore replaced his longtime trombonist Kid Ory, banjo player Johnny St. Cyr, and clarinetist Johnny Dodds with musicians who had more capable music reading skills. For these recordings Armstrong also enlisted Arthur “Zutty” Singleton on drums and Earl Hines on piano.⁵⁹ These two musicians, along with clearer, more deliberate arrangements, tightened the band’s sound. Lil Hardin’s steadfast, if unimaginative piano work paled in comparison to Earl Hines who “unleashed broken chords and delicate improvisations with elegance.”⁶⁰ To enhance the creative mood, Armstrong—a longtime advocate of marijuana— “insisted everyone smoke some of that good shuzzit before they began recording.”⁶¹ Supplementing Armstrong’s creativity, tight band, and prodigious intake of marijuana, Okeh recorded the Hot Five electrically, rather than the earlier acoustic sessions in 1923. Instead of a megaphone, microphones would pick up the sound waves greatly increasing the power and vitality of the recordings. The larger studios had transferred over to electric as early as 1925, and Armstrong himself had recorded electrically in 1927, but the 1928 sessions marked the first time in which a modern approach to the music complemented modern recording methods.⁶² Whereas “Snake Rag” represented a culmination of many of the preceding

settled for the more financially lucrative path of recording popular, commercial music. Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 131.

⁵⁹The complete lineup featured Louis Armstrong (trumpet), Earl Hines (piano), Fred Robinson (trombone), Jimmy Strong (clarinet/tenor saxophone), Don Redman (clarinet/alto saxophone), Mancy Carr (banjo), and Arthur “Zutty” Singleton (drums).

⁶⁰Bergreen, *Louis Armstrong*, 304.

⁶¹Bergreen, *Louis Armstrong*, 304.

⁶²Bergreen, *Louis Armstrong*, 291.

musical trends, the recordings produced by Armstrong in 1928 signified a break, a turn towards a new era of jazz music.

On June 28, 1928, Armstrong and the Hot Five recorded “West End Blues,” a song by Joe Oliver.⁶³ Armstrong’s version of the piece combines several elements of traditional New Orleans-style jazz, but overall, the tune receives a completely new context. Armstrong’s opening trumpet cadenza—the most famous aspect of the song—relates back to the brass bands of his youth, and the song follows an established blues form. Armstrong reinvented and reconceived these elements, however, distilling them into a piece of music that “might be used to mark the modern period in American expression.”⁶⁴ Following the explosive trumpet cadenza, the band falls into a reliable, medium blues tempo, and although only Hines comes near Armstrong’s virtuosity, the Hot Five more than ably supports the soloists. Near the middle of the tune, Armstrong puts his trumpet down and begins to scat melodies along with the clarinet. In “Heebie Jeebies,” Armstrong’s scat-singing imparted the song with a comical edge. In “West End Blues,” however, Armstrong’s voice served as a creative extension of his horn, and his scabrous syllables introduced the world to modern jazz.⁶⁵ The piece climaxes with another strong Armstrong solo in which he hits a piercing and prolonged high note before

⁶³Louis Armstrong, “West End Blues,” (OKeh Records, 1928) on *Louis Armstrong: The Complete Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings* (Columbia, 2000).

⁶⁴Robert G. O’Meally, “An Appreciation of Armstrong’s Hot Five and Seven Recordings,” *Louis Armstrong: The Complete Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings* (New York: Columbia Records, 2000), 67 (liner notes to compact discs).

⁶⁵The “introductory free-tempo cadenza,” Gunther Schuller has written, “was for a time one of the most widely imitated of all jazz solos. It made Armstrong a household name, and to many Europeans it epitomized jazz.” Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 115. See also Storb, *Louis Armstrong*, 39-40; and Shipton, *New History of Jazz*, 142-3.

Zutty Singleton ends the song with a cymbal crash. Modern and mysterious, “West End Blues” stood apart from all preceding jazz, and with this song Armstrong bridged the gap between the shadowy prehistory of Buddy Bolden’s jazz and the bold arrangements of Duke Ellington’s swing. “No one had ever made music like these recordings,” one Armstrong biographer wrote, “and no one, not even Louis, would ever manage to again.”⁶⁶

Armstrong’s recordings in 1928 attest to the changes that occurred in jazz in the 1920s, and Chicago served as the backdrop for much of this evolution, both in terms of musical innovation and recording. The city, however, would not maintain its position as a major center for jazz in the next decade. By the late 1920s, a number of national and local developments altered greatly Chicago’s jazz scene forcing many musicians to leave the city for brighter prospects elsewhere. In 1927, the advent of talking pictures forced occupational changes for musicians as sound systems replaced live bands, and a number of the largest area theaters disbanded their pit orchestras.⁶⁷ During this same period, local moral reformers succeeded in closing down a number of clubs on liquor violations, a move that further impacted employment opportunities for the city’s musicians. In 1929, in a reflection of Chicago’s changing musical temper, the *Defender* removed Dave Peyton from his “Musical Bunch” column. Most importantly, a large number of musicians—many of whom had helped define Chicago-style jazz—left for the East Coast. Both Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton, for example, moved to New York in the late 1920s. Other musicians, however, peaked creatively during this period and

⁶⁶Bergreen, *Louis Armstrong*, 306.

⁶⁷Kenney, *Chicago Jazz*, 155-6.

barely survived the 1920s at all. For all of his promise, Bix Beiderbecke ended the decade in an alcoholic haze and would be dead by the age of twenty-eight. Furthermore, economic despair helped erode the once-thriving recording industry in and around Chicago narrowing the opportunities for musicians to record. At its peak in 1927 the national recording industry averaged sales of over 104 million records. Five years later, during the Great Depression, sales averaged barely six million records. The economic depression and resultant drop-off in record sales helped accelerate an emerging pattern of industrial consolidation as the major record companies bought out smaller rivals. By the early 1930s, Paramount Records, the premier label for blues artists, had disappeared, and having bought out a number of their smaller rivals such as Victor and OKeh, Columbia Records and the Radio Corporation of America effectively reclaimed control the recording industry. Less than a decade after producing many of the most influential jazz records of the 1920s, Gennett Records could afford only to market budget-priced recordings of novelty sound effects.⁶⁸

By the late 1920s the American public clamored for jazz music, and the emergent power of radio helped make jazz a national art form. White musicians—some talented, some not so talented—discovered the most success, and by the early 1930s most Americans associated jazz with men like Paul Whiteman and Rudy Vallee rather than Joe Oliver and Louis Armstrong. Furthermore, New York supplanted Chicago as the foremost center of jazz transmission, and though white Chicago musicians, most notably Benny Goodman, would continue to impact American culture and achieve success through the popularity of swing music, their hometown failed to survive the 1920s as a

⁶⁸Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagy*, 192.

focal point for jazz music. Radio, not the phonograph, served most consumers of music during the Great Depression, and the broadcasting towers of New York City soon eclipsed the recording studios of Chicago as the primary purveyors of American popular culture in the 1930s.

CHAPTER 4

NEW YORK CITY AND THE BROADCASTING OF JAZZ IN THE 1920S

Despite the innovative sounds produced by a large number of musicians in the Midwest, New York City—not Chicago—served as the center of the jazz world during the 1920s, and East Coast jazz would come to characterize the nation’s popular music for the next two decades. The recordings made in and around Chicago helped to define a certain sound, but overall, these records reached an audience greatly limited by region and race. Connected to Chicago in spirit, New York jazz differed considerably from its Midwestern counterpoint in style. In contrast to the Chicago scene, New York City featured large bands playing arranged jazz for an increasingly white audience. Many of the best musicians from Chicago—most notably Bix Beiderbecke and Louis Armstrong—played with various New York bands throughout this period, but New York maintained a distinctive form of jazz that would eventually reach a mass audience. During the 1920s, New York jazz evolved from the polished dance music of Fletcher Henderson into the art music of Duke Ellington that saturated many levels of American society. The Harlem Renaissance helped justify jazz music as an African American cultural art form equal to poetry and literature, and black bands began performing in large ballrooms for white audiences. The increased attention to jazz from white listeners and dancers coincided with the emergence of radio broadcasting. Unlike the more regionally based companies operating out of Chicago, New York City represented the national focal

point of the music publishing and recording industries as well as the home for the most powerful radio corporations. By the Great Depression, jazz had developed into the predominant popular music of the United States, and much of this evolution centered on the jazz scene in New York City during the 1920s.

On May 29, 1925, Fletcher Henderson's Orchestra entered a New York studio to record "Sugarfoot Stomp."¹ At the time, Henderson's group represented the epitome of big band dance music, and although the band had made earlier recordings, the recent addition of Louis Armstrong provided the 1925 sessions with an even stronger sense of swing. Aside from his talent, Armstrong also brought Henderson a new repertoire of material. "Sugarfoot Stomp," for example, was a rearranged version of King Oliver's "Dippermouth Blues." Don Redman, Henderson's arranger, reworked the piece into a song only tangentially related to Chicago jazz. Recorded two years after Oliver's "Snake Rag," "Sugarfoot Stomp" sounds nothing like the music of the South Side, presaging instead future stylistic developments in jazz. "Alternately subtle and driving," the song establishes the pattern for big band swing music of the 1930s with a band divided into sections, a driving riff-based structure, and a swinging rhythm section.² This model would define popular music for the next two decades. By dividing the band into different sections—brass, reeds, and rhythm—the arranger could have each section perform short, melodic lines (known as riffs) to produce a dense, warm sound. This arrangement allowed for a more complex harmonic structure (a larger band generates more

¹Fletcher Henderson, "Sugarfoot Stomp," (Columbia Records, 1925) on *A Study in Frustration* (Columbia Records, 1994).

²Frank Driggs, "Liner Notes," Fletcher Henderson, *A Study in Frustration* (Columbia Records, 1994), 24.

instrumental voices) as well as provided a thick undercurrent for the various soloists. Redman's arrangements "cut through the tired formulas of New Orleans and Chicago jazz, which had relied almost exclusively on contrasting monophonic voices."³ A key component to this intricate style concerned the written chart. Chicago bands removed some of the New Orleans spontaneity and cacophony from their music, but most of the smaller bands, such as King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band, still employed unwritten (or "head") arrangements. Henderson's band, in contrast, used charts for all of their songs, and only the soloists would be able to improvise material, and then only occasionally. Larger dance bands did exist in Chicago, most notably Erskin Tate's Vendome Orchestra, but the fundamental unit in New York City tended towards the ten to twenty-piece dance orchestra playing an arranged style of jazz music. This larger arrangement signified the general connection of the New York jazz scene to traditional band structures, and if King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band or Louis Armstrong's Hot Five typified the Chicago scene, then Fletcher Henderson's Orchestra or Duke Ellington's Cotton Club Band characterized the jazz produced in New York.

Don Redman's arrangement of "Sugarfoot Stomp" underscores the similarities and differences between Chicago and New York jazz. The basic melody, of course, relates back to King Oliver's band, but the instrumentation of the group and the rhythmic pulse of the band connect the piece to the music of New York. Beginning with a short, standard trumpet introduction the piece then leads into the melodic theme played

³Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 111. Collier sums up the arrangement pattern simply as "one section played the melodic lead, or dominating riff, which the other sections either answered during the pauses in the line or punctuated with brief rhythmic figures." James Lincoln Collier, *The Making of Jazz: A Comprehensive History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1978), 182.

reasonably straight. The tuba, banjo, and drums follow a careful dance band pulse, with the accents falling on the first and third beats. A brief clarinet and saxophone section precedes a quick trombone solo by Charlie Green. The first half of the tune thus follows a somewhat standard dance band arrangement. The second half of “Sugarfoot Stomp,” however, diverges into a more interesting combination of Chicago and New York styles. After Green’s solo, Louis Armstrong enters with a blaring, swinging trumpet solo that invigorates the entire song. Redman counterbalances Armstrong’s solo with a subtle underpinning of saxophones, trumpets, and trombones, and Kaiser Marshall, Henderson’s drummer, ably supports Armstrong with “the terrific spirit and swing of Louis’s solo.”⁴ After the two solos, Redman alternates sweet sections of the band playing a rather drawn-out melody with the banjo maintaining the tempo with more raucous, Chicago-style jazz. Although not fully improvised, the boisterous sections at the end of the piece clearly prefigure swing music with the organized cacophony of different sections playing contrasting melodies supported by a driving tuba part emphasizing all four beats. This subtle bass shift from an emphasis on the first and third beats to playing on all four beats directly foreshadows the basic rhythmic element crucial to swing music.⁵ Between Armstrong’s solo and the proto-swing of the rhythm section, “Sugarfoot Stomp” marks a clear transition from Chicago jazz to the uniformity of New York dance music.

⁴Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 263.

⁵Schuller argues that the tune had several obvious flaws and proclaims it “a record of very mixed quality.” However, the music scholar also notes the forward-thinking elements of the arrangement (most notably the drumming), and states that “in 1925, the band was not ready to make such quasi-intellectual ideas succeed.” Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 262-3.

Born within two years of each other in the late 1890s, Fletcher Henderson (from Georgia) and Don Redman (from West Virginia) came to represent a new type of jazz musician. If Louis Armstrong's childhood in New Orleans indicated one aspect of black life, then the relatively comfortable middle-class upbringings of Fletcher Henderson and Don Redman reflected the degrees of variance experienced by African Americans during this period. The son of a school principal and a music instructor, Henderson developed a dual passion for tinkering with chemistry and playing the piano. Classical music, not jazz, filled the Henderson home, a musical cadence interrupted by the jazz scene Henderson encountered after he moved to New York City. A child prodigy from a similar background, by the time Redman graduated high school he could play the cornet, piano, trombone, and violin. Both Henderson and Redman attended college, and both men had eventually made their way to New York by the early 1920s; Henderson intent on a career in chemistry, and Redman focused on playing the alto saxophone for a travelling band. Differing considerably from many of the players in New Orleans and Chicago in terms of economic background, educational opportunities, and musical interests, Henderson and Redman spearheaded a new, if related, style of jazz. The music of Henderson and Redman—who began playing together in 1923—emerged from a different array of social and musical influences than did earlier jazz. Instead of building upon a dynamic folk tradition as had musicians from New Orleans, the direct antecedents of Henderson's jazz proved to be ragtime, vaudeville, and popular dance music. In essence, Henderson and Redman (as well as their friend, saxophonist Coleman Hawkins) produced the archetype of the educated musician that actively sought out new sounds,

and though anomalous to the 1920s jazz scene, this attitude would come to define the quintessential bebop musician of the 1940s.⁶

Jazz music came of age in New York City during the 1920s. The city served as the center of the music industry, and the decade's most prominent record companies, publishing houses, and radio stations bore Manhattan addresses. Though important similarities connect the three cities, in general, the developmental pattern of New York jazz deviated from what had occurred in New Orleans and Chicago. In New Orleans and Chicago, jazz emerged as a form of African American folk music. The performers and audience came from essentially the same racial, social, cultural, and economic backgrounds. New York City jazz, however, emerged from a different socio-musical context, one intimately connected to the music business. In general, the black neighborhoods of New Orleans and Chicago first produced jazz and this music slowly found a mainstream (white) audience over the course of the 1910s and 1920s. In contrast, much of the jazz played in New York emerged from musical trends already popular with a white audience. Many black musicians still stood at the forefront of the evolution of jazz, but larger bands exhibiting a strong ragtime and vaudeville influence defined much of the jazz scene present in Manhattan during the 1920s. Thus, despite certain developmental similarities with New Orleans and Chicago, the jazz performed in New York maintained a diluted folk influence and a more pervasive spirit of commercial appeal than any other jazz city.

⁶Richard Hadlock, *Jazz Masters of the 20s* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1972), 194-5, 198-9; Samuel B. Charters and Leonard Kunstadt, *Jazz: A History of the New York Scene* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962), 166; Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 191. Gioia notes that Henderson “drew primary inspiration *not* from New Orleans and

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the music scene of New York City incorporated several genres that would eventually give rise to a rather unique form of jazz. Notwithstanding certain stylistic differences, two general types of jazz music came to dominate the city. One musical trend centered on the bands that provided music for dances, Vaudeville performances, and Broadway shows. Unlike the brass band tradition of New Orleans, these New York bands used primarily written arrangements, maintained larger configurations, and played songs predominately made popular through the sheet music industry. More than any other individual, James Reese Europe personified this style of band performance. Europe, who became a hero of sorts for many African Americans, achieved much of his fame through his work with Irene and Vernon Castle as well as with his military band, the 369th Infantry Hell Fighters. Europe directed the Society Orchestra to accompany the Castles, a noted dance team that helped popularize the foxtrot in the 1910s. The band (originally a rather large string-based ensemble) maintained a working core of about seven members and played lightly syncopated dance music infused with a ragtime spirit. In 1913, Europe recorded several numbers with the Society Orchestra and although stiff compared to later bands, the rhythmic drive of Europe's group struck a chord with dancers.⁷ Europe's work with the Castles ended with the eruption of World War I and the bandleader's induction into the military. Stationed in France, he directed the 369th Infantry Hell Fighters, an all-black

Chicago, but from [the] currents of popular music and dance that were sweeping New York." Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 107.

⁷James Lincoln Collier, *Jazz: The American Theme Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 21-2.

ensemble that introduced ragtime rhythms overseas. Wildly popular, Europe successfully grafted ragtime syncopation onto the military brass band tradition. At least one scholar has posited the Hell Fighters as an absolute precursor to big band jazz, and though connections exist, Europe represented only a whispered foretelling of something more complex.⁸ Europe, however, would not survive the 1910s as the slash of a musician's knife ended the life of "the most important transitional figure in the pre-history of jazz on the East Coast."⁹

Whereas ragtime coursed through the brass band music of James Europe, the other trend popular in New York during this period centered on a type of ragtime-influenced piano playing. Although classic ragtime developed out of the Midwest, ragtime song emerged from Tin Pan Alley, and the casual syncopation of popular ragtime emanated from the East Coast. Furthermore, the ragtime craze of the 1910s occurred in large measure because of the sheet music industry centered in Manhattan. Also cementing the ragtime influence in the East, Scott Joplin moved to New York and near the end of his life staged *Treemonisha*, his failed rag opera, in the city. The ragtime craze lasted only a few years, but its syncopated spirit enkindled a dynamic culture of solo piano playing. These piano players performed a mix of ragtime, blues, and Tin Pan Alley music that reverberated throughout New York City. Whereas New York bands played in

⁸Schuller pronounces the Hell Fighters as "in a real sense...the first big band." Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 249. In contrast, Gioia pointedly notes that Europe's music "stood out as a late flowering of the ragtime style, rather than as a harbinger of the Jazz Age." Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 106.

⁹Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 249. See also, David A. Jasen and Gene Jones, *Black Bottom Stomp: Eight Masters of Ragtime and Early Jazz* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 41-3.

black cabarets, white dancehalls, or in theaters, solo piano players performed in more informal venues. Predominately black, these pianists mainly played for neighborhood events such as parlor socials and “rent parties.” A trend of lower-income areas of the city, rent parties were usually hosted by a group of neighbors to raise enough money to placate the monthly calling of the landlord. The hosts would often hire a piano player and charge admission to acquire that month’s rent. These frequent parties made the better piano players quite popular throughout much of the city. Between the late 1910s and the 1930s three piano players, James P. Johnson, Willie “The Lion” Smith, and Fats Waller, came to prominence in New York City, and each player represented a key link between ragtime, the blues, Tin Pan Alley, and improvised jazz music.

Born in New Jersey in the early 1890s, James P. Johnson helped conceive a new style of piano playing known as stride in the 1910s. With its complex syncopation and ragtime origins, stride piano emanated from innumerable cafes, bars, and house parties throughout New York City. “The most sophisticated of all popular piano playing,” stride invigorated the somewhat stilted and controlled ragtime style with a looser and more relaxed feel.¹⁰ “Stride,” two writers have pithily noted, “had one basic tempo (fast) and one basic mood (hilarity).”¹¹ Unlike most piano ragtime, which maintained only a syncopated melody, stride piano added a strong syncopated rhythm to the song. In other words, stride pianists performed syncopated figures with both hands. “The left hand,” scholars have noted, “is often relieved of its duty as metronome, set free to join with the right, to provide syncopated countermelodies, and to provide unexpected accents and

¹⁰Jasen and Jones, *Black Bottom Stomp*, 68.

¹¹Jasen and Jones, *Black Bottom Stomp*, 102.

contrasts with those in the upper octave.”¹² One of Johnson’s rivals, Willie “The Lion” Smith, added a more pronounced blues harmonic structure to stride piano. Possessing an “unparalleled sense of harmony,” Smith combined a syncopated ragtime/stride style with a blues feel and a strong sense of vaudeville showmanship.¹³ In a sense, the stride piano of Johnson and Smith combined elements of the most popular music styles in the 1910s and serves as a bridge between ragtime and jazz. Jelly Roll Morton produced a similar type of music, but the stride piano players of New York maintained stronger connections to popular music allowing for a more marketable style of playing, and both Johnson and Smith found degrees of commercial success—Johnson through the production of piano rolls and records, and Smith through his tenure with various bands including Mamie Smith’s Jazz Hounds. More than any other piano player of this period, however, Fats Waller exemplified the combination of musical innovation, exuberant showmanship, and commercial appeal.

Born in 1904 in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Manhattan, Thomas “Fats” Waller perfected a syncopated blend of ragtime, the blues, popular song and vaudeville on the piano, and eventually surpassed his mentor, James P. Johnson, to become “the most popular black entertainer of the 1930s.”¹⁴ His father, an active deacon, and mother, a church pianist, instilled in Waller an appreciation for hymns as well as for the pipe organ, a rather uncharacteristic jazz instrument. More so than Johnson and Smith (and certainly their ragtime forefather Joplin), Waller blurred the discontinuity

¹²Jasen and Jones, *Black Bottom Stomp*, 72.

¹³Jasen and Jones, *Black Bottom Stomp*, 84.

¹⁴Jasen and Jones, *Black Bottom Stomp*, 102.

between high and low culture, and related the rent party to Carnegie Hall. Waller perfected the rolling stride style of Johnson and Smith and combined piano prowess with vaudeville clowning. “His wide-ranging left hand,” one writer has observed, “had become, by 1927, a model of metrical accuracy and buoyant swing combined with harmonic daring and tremendous rhythmic power.”¹⁵ The musician, however, balanced successful entertaining with unsuccessful business planning, and “to pay for his eating, drinking, and reveling, he sometimes sold himself too cheaply, and he often worked himself too hard.”¹⁶ Despite his business failures—financial problems plagued the pianist throughout his life—Waller wrote some of the most vibrant jazz of the late 1920s. In the mid-1920s, Waller began playing engagements at various theaters, and in 1929, Waller composed his most famous piece, “Ain’t Misbehavin’,” for the popular musical revue *Hot Chocolates*. Somewhat idiosyncratic, few musicians rivaled his clowning and fewer still attempted jazz on a pipe organ, Waller still represented New York piano culture at its peak, and his popularity throughout the early 1930s “did more than any of these players to bring the Harlem style to the attention of the broader American public.”¹⁷

Though stride piano players discovered some success outside of New York City during this period, other jazz performers found a national audience. In particular, a five-piece band of transplanted white New Orleanians garnered acclaim with their flurry of (slightly stilted) syncopation and noise. Originally based in New Orleans, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band (ODJB) soon relocated to New York, and by 1917 the unit—still

¹⁵Hadlock, *Jazz Masters of the 20s*, 155.

¹⁶Jasen and Jones, *Black Bottom Stomp*, 103.

¹⁷Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 99.

comprised of Larry Shields on clarinet, Eddie Edwards on trombone, Tony Sbarbaro on drums, Nick LaRocca on cornet, and Henry Ragas on piano—had established a long-term engagement at the Reisenweber Restaurant. In early 1917, the band performed to an underwhelming response at several clubs in Manhattan. On January 27, however, the owners of the Reisenweber asked the ODJB to provide music for the formal opening of their new club, the “400” Room. Met with instant acclaim, the ODJB capitalized on this one performance by signing a contract with Columbia Records within one week. Columbia, however, balked at the recorded sound of the group and decided to shelve the project. At the end of February, the band recorded several songs for Victor Records, Columbia’s rival, and finally saw the release of their “Livery Stable Blues” and “Dixieland One-Step.” The record proved immensely popular, validated the Reisenweber performance, and persuaded Columbia to release two of the songs originally cut in January.¹⁸

The immediate response by consumers for the ODJB blurred the actual substance of their records. Though based in improvisation, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band relied less on spontaneity than on structured “improvised” breaks. Their stylized improvisations mirrored the clamorous vibe of New Orleans, but vaudeville entertainment, not musical innovation, served the band’s purpose. Imitative barnyard whines served as the most prominent feature of “Livery Stable Blues,” and “Dixieland One-Step” relates more to the dance music of the Castles than to the streets of New Orleans. Race has also obscured the band’s role in jazz history. Since their introduction

¹⁸The best full-length study of the band remains Harry O. Brunn, *The Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960).

in 1917, the whiteness of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band has generated controversy and overstatements from both admirers and detractors. Supporters posit the Original Dixieland Jazz Band as true originators of jazz music, and critics have dismissed the band as a novelty act producing only a vague representation of “authentic” jazz.¹⁹ The importance of the band, though, exists less in the grooves of a shellac disc than in their influence on white Americans. The Original Dixieland Jazz Band introduced jazz music to a wide audience, and although their music related little to King Oliver or Jelly Roll Morton, their early success familiarized a generation of young, white listeners with a music rooted in the experience of black Americans, however implicitly. LaRocca and company portended the careers of Paul Whiteman and Rudy Vallee, and the eventual national obsession with jazz in the 1930s fulfilled through happenstance the shadow promises of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band.

Whereas the socio-cultural impact of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band eclipsed their music, another small white jazz band realized the union of innovative music and popular acceptance by a white audience. Conforming to the era’s fetish for adjectivally hyperbolic, regionally specific, and numerically appropriate names, the Original Memphis Five exemplified the small band style of New York jazz.²⁰ Taking their moniker from W. C. Handy’s “The Memphis Blues,” the Original Memphis Five initially

¹⁹“In an ironic and incongruous twist of fate,” one scholar notes, “the Original Dixieland Jazz Band . . . was the first to make commercial recordings of this distinctly African American music.” Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 37.

²⁰Besides the Original Memphis Five, a few of the more popular bands during this period included the Original Georgia Five, the Original Indiana Five, and the Rialto Versatile Five. Most of these bands featured white musicians with only tangential (if any) connection to the named city or state and played a rather standard form of slightly

included five white musicians from the Northeast: Phil Napoleon (cornet), Miff Mole (trombone), Jimmy Lytell (clarinet), Frank Signorelli (piano), and Jack Roth (drums). Formed in 1917 right as the Original Dixieland Jazz Band began to gain popularity, the Memphis Five began its career by accompanying dancers at a club on Coney Island. The Original Memphis Five shared certain similarities with the ODJB, namely a rather inflexible style of improvisation as well as a stiff, mundane rhythmic feel. The Original Memphis Five, however, overcame a jerky ragtime beat through the talents of its two main soloists—Miff Mole and Phil Napoleon—who combined technical ability with a graceful jazz energy entirely absent from the ODJB recordings. On these early records the Original Memphis Five “seems a refined version of the ODJB, with the jagged edges planed off.”²¹ Whereas the Original Dixieland Jazz Band looked to the past with its stilted form of New Orleans folk music, the Original Memphis Five suggested instead the eventual emergence of jazz as a commodity. Borrowing their name from the blues, utilizing a ragtime beat, prolific in the recording studio, and popular on the road, the Original Memphis Five touched upon the defining elements of jazz in the early 1920s. Moreover, the success of the band relates in part to its adherence to one of the hallmark historical trends of this period. In 1922, the Original Memphis Five officially became the Original Memphis Five, Incorporated. Unusual for a jazz band—though large brass bands followed a similar business route—this registration created a corporate

improvisational jazz. These bands did, however, usually include five members. See Charters and Kunstadt, *Jazz*, 124.

²¹Richard M. Sudhalter, *Lost Chords: White Musicians and Their Contribution to Jazz, 1915-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 108. See also Sudhalter, *Lost Chords*, 101-29; and Barry Kernfeld, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 943.

arrangement of stockholders, rules of accountability, and a system of fines to enforce these rules. A band savvy in business that also incorporated popular songs in their set, the Original Memphis Five presented formidable competition in New York and their achievement helped bring jazz music into the homes of white America.²²

Although issues of race delineated elements of the New York jazz scene—the stride pianists were black, the small bands tended to be white, and the large bands were of both races (though segregated)—racism denoted less of a determinant musically as it did occupationally. In other words, despite certain stylistic differences between black and white musicians, race constricted the venues available to and the resultant audiences for these bands. White bands performed for a predominately white audience in clubs that barred the admission of African Americans. Black bands, in contrast, performed for segregated audiences of both races and for moderately mixed audiences in black clubs that tolerated white patrons. Geography provided defining limitations as the jazz scene cleaved New York City into two distinct areas: downtown (mid-Manhattan), and uptown (Harlem). White bands played primarily in such downtown clubs as the Casanova, Trocadero, and the Hollywood, clubs that featured floorshows. Larger bands found gigs at Le Perroquet, the Midnight Frolic, and the Little Club. “Black bands,” as one writer has noted, “did not often play at the downtown spots.”²³ The better ones did, however, and both Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington played at various clubs downtown, including the Arcadia and Roseland, the two most popular ballrooms in the city, located

²²Sudhalter, *Lost Chords*, 106.

²³Leroy Ostransky, *Jazz City: The Impact of Our Cities on the Development of Jazz* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 178.

on Broadway. In general, black bands performed in Harlem in venues such as the Cotton Club, Small's Paradise, and Connie's Inn.²⁴ Several of these clubs catered to white patrons, though this arrangement primarily existed due to the cost-prohibitive nature of these venues rather than outright restriction. In 1929, one writer has observed, "the cost per person for an evening at Connie's averaged twelve to fifteen dollars; by contrast, at Small's Paradise, the average was about four dollars."²⁵ White Manhattan knew of these clubs, but a host of other Harlem nightspots maintained a predominately black clientele. The most famous of these clubs was the Savoy Ballroom, the black equivalent of the Roseland. A large, block-long structure on Lenox Avenue, the Savoy could accommodate 1,500 dancers. White customers "were tolerated," but the majority of the Savoy's crowd came from the surrounding black neighborhoods.²⁶ Boasting strong dance bands and a low admission (less than one dollar), the Savoy Ballroom provided black entertainment for a black audience. Throughout this period, a white New Yorker (with money) had the opportunity to see any white jazz band and most black jazz bands they desired. A black jazz fan, however, faced certain racial and financial obstacles limiting the available music. By the late 1920s, the popularity of radio helped erase some of these racial constraints on the city's jazz scene and though not completely colorblind, the broadcasting medium provided new opportunities (and a certain degree of anonymity) for black jazz bands. As audiences increased and diversified, jazz music challenged and changed American culture, and New York City stood at the center of this transformation.

²⁴Ostransky, *Jazz City*, 178, 201.

²⁵Ostransky, *Jazz City*, 201.

²⁶Ostransky, *Jazz City*, 205.

During the mid- to late-1920s, two major developments greatly impacted the transmission, reception, and style of jazz music. The writers of the Harlem Renaissance created a broad cultural context for jazz as an example of African American creative expression, and radio broadcasting allowed for wider dissemination of jazz, especially as the Great Depression eroded record sales in the 1930s. The radio industry and the Harlem Renaissance shared few similarities, but together this combination of art and technology removed jazz from its folk music moorings and helped transform jazz into the preeminent musical art form of modern America. In addition these two issues deepened the connection between jazz and modernism. As many Americans drifted away from nineteenth century Victorianism, a new spirit of moral, cultural discontent framed intellectual debate. Writers directed much of this discourse, but jazz illustrated their prose assertions with its combination of folk tradition, African primitivism, and a musical potency detached from the previous century. As radio produced a larger, national audience for a new music, and the writers of the Harlem Renaissance allowed for a new language of modernity, jazz came to define a decade, a generation, and a nation. New York City served as the backdrop for most of this change as African American artists and writers inundated uptown and the largest radio corporations established offices downtown.

The history of jazz often overemphasizes the importance of the Harlem Renaissance, but the movement underscores two themes that would dramatically impact jazz, namely the importance of a powerful and creative black population, and the creation of a culture that valued jazz as art. Optimistic and progressive, as a culture, the Harlem Renaissance “was primarily a literary and intellectual movement” and failed to embrace

readily jazz music.²⁷ Poets such as Langston Hughes experimented with jazz rhythms in their work, but the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance focused much more on the “respectable” arts of literature, art, and classical music. Age explains part of this indifference, as the intellectual leaders—W. E. B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson—tended to be older than many of the writers. Still, few of the leading adherents to this spirit of rebirth embraced jazz music. Like Dave Peyton and the Chicago *Defender*, the leaders of Harlem maintained certain middle-class affectations precluding an immediate embracing of this music. Jazz, though perhaps enjoyable, was certainly not scholarly. “And while many Harlem intellectuals enjoyed the music of the cabarets,” a leading Harlem scholar notes, “none were prepared to give someone like Jelly Roll Morton the serious attention he deserved.”²⁸ Immediate acceptance of jazz by black intellectuals failed to materialize, but a newfound respect for black art and a growing attachment to modernism provided a base for the future legitimization of jazz music as an art form.

Although black leaders in the 1920s promoted Harlem as a spirit, a mood, and an intellectualism, Harlem was also a place. Occupying the northern end of the island of Manhattan, Harlem and its cultural manifestation, like Chicago’s South Side, was created by the Great Migration. In the 1890s, predominately white Harlem exploded into a series of real estate deals and developments. This housing boom soon became a bust, and the ensuing depressed housing market created a tenuous situation for a large number of

²⁷Cary D. Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1988),1.

²⁸Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 64.

Harlem residents.²⁹ Black Harlem continued to grow throughout the early 20th century, and by 1930 over 100,000 people lived in the area bordered by 126th Street on the South, 159th Street on the North, the Harlem River to the East, and Eighth Avenue to the West. Of this population, over 95% were African American.³⁰ Not the largest black community in terms of numbers—Washington, DC held that distinction—Harlem served as the spiritual center of black life in the 1920s. Although many of the writers and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance maintained “middle-class” ideals, Harlem never obtained a strong middle-class social structure. This lack of a business class prevented continual regeneration, a condition that when combined with the effects of the economic crisis of the 1930s resulted in the gradual ghettoization of Harlem. During the 1920s, however, Harlem served as the center for creative black thought in the nation.³¹

Despite the flowering of African American cultural talent in New York, black musicians still faced many obstacles in terms of obtaining jobs outside of Harlem, especially in clubs catering to an all-white clientele. Exceptions existed, however, and in 1924, Fletcher Henderson, fresh from his tour with Ethel Waters, acquired a job directing an orchestra at Club Alabam. The club furnished Henderson with somewhat steady income, but more importantly, a New York radio station, WHN, established regular broadcasts of the bands featured at the Alabam. These remote broadcasts brought live

²⁹Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, 17.

³⁰See Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, 20; and Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 73.

³¹On Harlem’s lack of a middle-class see Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, 26.

dance music to its listening audience, and WHN (through the impulsiveness of a station director who “was also an early champion of black bands”) made Henderson a star.³² Stemming directly from the exposure gained from these broadcasts, Henderson’s band received an invitation to play at the Roseland, one of the most prestigious white ballrooms in the city. Station WHN continued to broadcast Henderson’s music, and during this period his band included some of the finest players in jazz, including Louis Armstrong, who moved to New York specifically to work with Henderson. His career at Club Alabam and the Roseland attests to the power and influence of radio, but the reserved Henderson would reap few other rewards from this new medium. Henderson, in fact, barely survived the decade at all. Other musicians would follow the vague template established by Henderson and would discover much greater successes, but Henderson’s early broadcasts proved that black culture could find a voice in the burgeoning radio industry.

In the late 1920s and 1930s, the radio industry served to connect Americans through national broadcasts that crossed regional, economic, and to some degree, racial lines. A young medium, radio came to symbolize much of the progress emanating from the corporate mentality coordinating business in the United States in the first part of the twentieth century. Between the early 1890s and the late 1910s, a number of individuals struggled to create a viable broadcast medium capable of sending code, then voice and music, across long distances. Guglielmo Marconi, a young Italian, succeeded in sending Morse code along radio waves by way of an antenna. Soon after, Alexander Popov, a

³²Philip K. Eberly, *Music in the Air: America’s Changing Tastes in Popular Music, 1920-1980* (New York: Hastings House, 1982), 43.

Russian who had visited the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, developed a theory of electromagnetism. Both Marconi and Popov obtained various patents for their discoveries as well as received naval sponsorships (Marconi with Britain and Italy; Popov with France and Russia), and early radio technology became closely entwined with maritime exploits. Lee DeForest, an isolated and idiosyncratic Iowan, and Reginald Fessenden, an enterprising Canadian, built upon both Marconi's and Popov's work by independently experimenting with transmitting music and voice (not simply Morse code) across radio waves. By the 1910s, the technology behind simple radio receivers became accessible enough to allow for a growing number of radio hobbyists in the United States. These amateurs, predominately young men, read various technology journals, built elementary receivers and transmitters, and marveled at the great distances covered by their creations. A 1912 law made clear that these amateurs could be shut down in times of national crisis—a threat acted upon five years later with the declaration of war on Germany—but in general, amateurs directed much of this early stage of radio development as “experimenters in bedrooms, attics, shacks, and rooftop laboratories” created the foundation for the radio broadcasting industry.³³

Between the early 1890s and the mid-1910s, amateurs and hobbyists stood at the center of the radio industry. By the 1920s, however, large corporations called the shots, and radio broadcasting quickly became embroiled in a sea of patent lawsuits, copyright confusion, corporate entanglements, and questions of governmental control. Chaotic as it seemed, the radio industry continued to grow, and in 1924 sales of radio equipment

³³The standard history on radio development in the United States is still Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, Volume 1* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966). Quote on page 41.

topped \$358 million. The potential wealth promised by radio lured even more licensed/unlicensed stations into the field, and corporate consolidation allowed for a small number of people to exert their authority over the industry. By 1921, General Electric (GE), the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), American Telephone and Telegraph (ATT), and Westinghouse controlled over 2,000 patents and effectively directed the broadcasting industry. For most of this period the industry operated under the rather vague guidelines of the 1912 law, but by the mid-1920s the rampant confusion forced the federal government to reevaluate the situation. In 1927, Congress passed a new radio law creating an independent commission with licensing authority to oversee the industry. The Radio Act of 1927—based on the premise of myriad independent stations—failed to account for advertising or broadcast networks, two issues that had already begun to influence the industry. In 1926, RCA created the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) allowing for one station to “speak at once to east and west, city and country, rich and poor.”³⁴ Within months, NBC established two national networks, designated red and blue, setting the pattern for regional affiliate stations broadcasting programs emanating from a central studio. These radio programs generated revenue through corporate sponsorship and connected people throughout the country. The Radio Act of 1927, however, neglected both the idea of networks and advertising, an inherent flaw that weakened its legislative power and the act thus failed to regulate the industry as it entered its peak of popularity.³⁵

³⁴Barnouw, *Tower in Babel*, 189.

³⁵For the Radio Act of 1927, see Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of United States Broadcasting, 1928-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 12-8.

As with the music industry, New York City dominated radio broadcasting. The largest companies established Manhattan offices, and the city quickly exerted control over the burgeoning network system. The power of New York was made clear early on with the controversy surrounding “silent nights.” Due to the large number of stations competing for a limited amount of broadcast frequencies, many cities established proscribed periods of inactivity. These self-imposed “silent nights” allowed for listeners to tune in to stations at a great distance. New York stations, however, frequently balked at this somewhat casual arrangement. “One cannot help but suspect that,” one radio commentator noted, “when there is so strong a demand from listeners to hear programs from other localities, there are serious lacks in the local programs. There has never been, in the New York area, for example, any similar widespread desire for a silent night.”³⁶ Stations began to phase out silent nights in 1927, but the impact of New York City remained strong. In general, New York City broadcast stations represented some of “the most technologically advanced in the nation,” and the owners resented their freedom impinged by some semi-rural transmission.³⁷ During the pre-network period, local studio owners (much like local record producers) would put just about anything on the air that would attract an audience. The larger stations usually maintained a regular performance schedule of “potted palm music,” a genre that included light classical selections and parlor pieces. “It was the music played at tea time,” one scholar writes, “it was recital

³⁶Kingsley Welles, “The Listeners’ Point of View,” *Radio Broadcast* 7:6 (October 1925): 754.

³⁷Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 29.

music.”³⁸ Jazz rarely made it to the airwaves. Chicago’s WBBM signified the first station to specialize in jazz, Henderson had success locally on WHN, and certain stations picked up conductors such as Paul Whiteman or Vincent Lopez, but jazz remained rather elusive on the national level until the mid 1920s.³⁹

As a new medium derived from the work of Americans and Europeans, instantly popular with young people (especially the greatly increasing college-age crowd), and maintaining a certain aura of the exotic, the emergence of radio mirrored the cultural evolution of jazz. The radio industry, rather unsurprisingly, thus served as the primary instrument in the creation of jazz as a national music, and the growing popularity of national broadcasts in 1926 coincided with the appearance of more jazz music on the air. By 1927, jazz had finally discovered a truly national audience, and radio surpassed earlier media as the primary transmitter of jazz music. The sudden popularity of radio drastically impacted the music business as attested by the rapid drop-off of sales of sheet music and phonograph records. In 1921, for example, record sales peaked at over 105 million units. Four years later, sales had dropped to fewer than 60 million records per year. Radio had a similar effect on piano sales, an industry already sluggish because of the emergence of phonograph records.⁴⁰ Radio, however, also produced jobs, and a number of musicians found employment in radio-sponsored bands once broadcast

³⁸Barnouw, *Tower in Babel*, 126. “*Potted Palm*,” William Barlow notes, “was an industry term for classical and semi-classical concert music played by amateur musicians, who volunteered their services to the stations free of charge.” William Barlow, “Black music on Radio During the Jazz Age,” *African American Review* 29:2 (Summer 1995): 326.

³⁹Barnouw, *Tower in Babel*, 129-31.

⁴⁰Eberly, *Music in the Air*, 24-5.

networks began to flourish. The NBC orchestra, in particular, provided tenure for many of the most popular white swing musicians of the 1930s, including the Dorsey Brothers, Red Nichols, and Benny Goodman.⁴¹ Radio and its reverberations reconfigured the music business, and helped complete the transformation of jazz to a popular commercial music. Sheet music failed to denote the improvisational qualities of jazz, phonograph records could not connect groups of people simultaneously over long distances, but radio succeeded in combining the immediacy of live performance with a broadcast range of thousands of miles. As network broadcasting blossomed in the late 1920s, one of the premier artists to take advantage of its possibilities was a stylish 28-year-old bandleader from Washington, DC.

On December 4, 1927, Edward “Duke” Ellington’s ten-piece orchestra began its tenure at the Cotton Club, the most famous nightclub in Harlem. Built in 1923, located on 142nd Street, and featuring a rather eccentric blending of African “jungle” images and a fake log cabin exterior, the Cotton Club earned the designation, “the aristocrat of Harlem.”⁴² Accommodating nearly 700 dancers and carousers, the club featured black entertainers in highly choreographed and risqué floorshows performing for a white audience. The Cotton Club also serves as an example of the uneasy racial context of jazz in the 1920s as wealthy, white New Yorkers traveled north to Harlem to enter a club decorated as a southern plantation with jungle accoutrements masked as a sham log cabin. This jumbled set of visual metaphors complemented the service arrangement of

⁴¹Eberly, *Music in the Air*, 31.

⁴²John Edward Hasse, *Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 101.

black staff (many dressed as plantation butlers) and entertainers serving illegal booze to white customers.⁴³ Yet, by the late 1920s, Ellington's orchestra itself became the prominent draw for the club, a band that featured black, Creole, and in the case of trombonist Juan Tizol, Puerto Rican musicians. Along with its mob-based management and radio antenna connection, the Cotton Club illustrates the peculiar synergy that defined Jazz Age America. At the center of this barrage of explicit and implicit tropes stood Duke Ellington, the heir apparent to Fletcher Henderson.⁴⁴

On the surface, Ellington's band related directly back to Fletcher Henderson's music of a few years prior. Both bandleaders utilized similar dance band formations and arrangements, and both Henderson and Ellington took advantage of the recording studio and radio broadcasts. Henderson, however, lacked a number of "interpersonal skills" that hampered his performance as a bandleader.⁴⁵ Despite his roster of incredibly talented musicians and the original arrangements of Don Redman, Henderson never transcended his early success, a career indisposition that only worsened after an automobile accident in 1928 severely affected his demeanor and disposition. In contrast, Ellington's personality—a combination of affability and resolution—fostered a creative work environment, and his active pursuit of critical appointments such as the Cotton Club coincided propitiously with the broadcast boom of the late 1920s. "Ellington's

⁴³A number of local clubs used similar "southern" images, but the Cotton Club's size and popularity distinguished it from the others. Other clubs included Club Kentucky, Club Alabam, and the Plantation Café. See Mark Tucker, *Ellington: The Early Years* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 110.

⁴⁴Hasse, *Beyond Category*, 101-3.

⁴⁵Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 107-8.

subsequent five-year engagement at the Cotton Club, with its network wire,” one scholar argues, “not only launched the career of one of America’s leading musical originals, it also made possible the first important national propagation of popular music by a black group.”⁴⁶

Born in Washington, DC, in 1899, Edward Kennedy Ellington experienced a comfortable, middle-class childhood in a city that boasted the nation’s largest African American community. In 1900, for example, the nation’s capital maintained a black population of 87,000 people, or roughly 37% of its total population. In many ways, Ellington’s early life paralleled the lives of men such as Fletcher Henderson and Don Redman. The three musicians emerged from similar socio-economic backgrounds, and ragtime provided the soundtrack for much of their formative years musically. An attentive student, Ellington began playing the piano, and as a teenager he started frequenting a neighborhood pool hall. Frank Holliday’s poolroom served as the noted place of respite for local musicians (particularly piano players) and Ellington received his informal training in this bar.⁴⁷ Because of its central location and large African American population, Washington attracted many of the most talented ragtime, blues, and early jazz performers, and Ellington had the chance to hear James P. Johnson and Mamie Smith (apparently on tour with Fletcher Henderson) among others. By 1923, Ellington had outgrown the Washington scene and “was attracted by the luster of New York and its

⁴⁶Eberly, *Music in the Air*, 47.

⁴⁷Edward “Duke” Ellington, *Music is My Mistress* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), 23-30.

musical life.’⁴⁸ His chance arrived on the vaudeville circuit in 1922 when Wilbur Sweatman performed in Washington, DC. Ellington may or may not have seen him play, but Sonny Greer, Ellington’s drummer, was in the audience, and in 1923, Sweatman invited Greer to play for his band in New York. Greer agreed with the concession that Ellington and saxophonist Otto Hardwick could come along as well. Sweatman acquiesced, and Duke Ellington moved to New York City that spring.⁴⁹

After a brief stint with Sweatman, Ellington began making contacts of his own, especially with the Harlem piano players. Both Willie “The Lion” Smith and J. P. Johnson opened doors for Ellington, and throughout 1923, his band, the Washingtonians, played in and around Harlem’s circuit of small clubs and cabarets. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Ellington also endeavored to break into the white-dominated areas south of Harlem.⁵⁰ A few months after moving to the city, Ellington made several songwriting contacts with publishers in Tin Pan Alley and found some initial success on Broadway at “a cramped cellar” called the Hollywood.⁵¹ Ellington’s early career encapsulated the history of jazz as well as set the stage for the future development of jazz in the 1930s and 1940s. A heady combination of ragtime and rent party piano, vaudeville and Broadway show pieces, Tin Pan Alley popular song, and Chicago jazz growl, Ellington explicitly blurred African, European, and American motifs into an engaging and complex form of

⁴⁸Tucker, *Ellington*, 75.

⁴⁹Tucker, *Ellington*, 74-80. See also Mark Tucker, “The Renaissance Education of Duke Ellington,” in *Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990).

⁵⁰Tucker, *Ellington*, 81, 83-4, 92-5.

⁵¹Tucker, *Ellington*, 99.

music that appealed to audiences of both races. This musical alchemy effectively reconceptualized the New Orleans/Chicago jazz style as something altogether modern, and although antecedents existed in Don Redman's work with Fletcher Henderson, this transformation of early jazz is seen most clearly in Ellington's prodigious output during the late 1920s.

In the decade between 1925 and 1935, several musical changes greatly impacted the sound of big band jazz. In the early 1920s, Don Redman's arrangements helped to divide the band into sections allowing for a more complex, warmer sound. The appearance of the saxophone gave a new sound to the band as well. A relatively new instrument, the saxophone was used mainly as a novelty in Chicago jazz. By the 1920s, however, the saxophone found a new home in large jazz orchestras and would eventually eclipse the clarinet as the predominant jazz reed. The sax altered the tone palette available to composers, but developments in the rhythm section would change the overall feel of jazz music. In the mid 1920s, the guitar began to replace the banjo as the driving rhythmic instrument. This shift caused both a change in timbre as well as a further distancing from the minstrel trappings of a black banjo picker allowing jazz to develop an even stronger urban identity. Also, guitarists usually played chords using all down-strokes, instead of the banjo style of alternating up and down-strokes. This altered strum pattern allowed for a more propulsive rhythmic feel. Perhaps more audibly explicit, the string bass replaced the tuba as primary bass voice in the rhythm section, and this shift allowed for greater definition as the plucked string bass had more presence and attack. Furthermore, bass players began playing on all four beats, rather than only two as in New Orleans and Chicago jazz. This four-beat style of "walking" bass—playing a different

note of a particular chord on each beat—created a sense of forward movement with the rhythm, as seen in Henderson’s “Sugarfoot Stomp.” Finally, drummers began emphasizing beats one and three with a slight kick, a subtle anticipation of the beat that helped to give big band jazz a momentum and drive that earlier jazz had achieved only intermittently.

These various changes in the rhythm section transformed the role of the big band soloist. As the rhythm developed from accenting two beats to all four, the soloist had less space to define their melodies; although the number of beats per measure had not changed, the rhythmic feel had been altered. In New Orleans jazz, many songs transcribed in 4/4 time (four beats per measure) would actually maintain the feel of music in 2/4 time (two beats per measure). The New Orleans soloist “was playing his line over a pulse that went, effectively, at half the speed of the one the swing soloist was working against.”⁵² Swing players “were working within the compass of a single beat for their effects, and more and more they searched out ways to accent within the beat itself—to shade the note one way or another as it came by.”⁵³ Swing had to impart more subtlety in less space than earlier jazz, a musical situation nearly impossible to transcribe. The written charts may have stayed the same, but the resultant sound represented something completely new. These changes would not be widespread until the mid 1930s with the appearance of the Count Basie and Benny Goodman bands, but in New York City in the late 1920s, Duke Ellington incorporated many of these elements and produced some of the most nuanced and creative jazz of the twentieth century.

⁵²Collier, *Making of Jazz*, 191.

⁵³Collier, *Making of Jazz*, 191.

Although Ellington's recording career began in 1924, most of his recordings prior to late 1926 lack the overtures of creative distinctiveness. "The recordings," one music scholar has noted, "made by the Washingtonians between November 1924 and October 1926 had reflected Ellington's status as a relative newcomer to New York's competitive musical scene."⁵⁴ During that period Ellington gained compositional proficiency, discovered a successful working arrangement with his band, and perhaps equally important, acquired a manager. Irving Mills came to manage Ellington in late 1926, and Ellington remained under his controversial leadership (the musician's contract stipulated that 55% of his earnings would go to Mills and his lawyer, both white men) until the late 1930s. One of the first recording sessions during the Mills era produced a subtly transitional piece composed by Ellington entitled, "The Creeper."⁵⁵ Recorded for Vocalion on December 29, 1926, "The Creeper" borrowed from King Oliver and Fletcher Henderson, but Ellington's arrangement, and the solos by his band, formulated a newer sound. A fairly straightforward, up-tempo, dance number, "The Creeper" combined melodic "short, fragmented phrases" with a number of hot solos (especially the muted trombone solo by Joe Nanton) and a "close, three-part voicing resembles Don Redman's writing for Fletcher Henderson."⁵⁶ More explicitly, Ellington's arrangement quotes directly a break from Oliver's "Snake Rag" in the final chorus. Connected in spirit to

⁵⁴Tucker, *Ellington*, 211.

⁵⁵Duke Ellington, "The Creeper," (Vocalion Records, 1926) on *The Okeh Ellington* (Columbia Records, 1991).

⁵⁶Tucker, *Ellington*, 222-3.

Chicago and New Orleans, the “freewheeling solos” of Ellington’s band declared a conceit equaled only by Louis Armstrong’s Hot Five.⁵⁷

Four years after “The Creeper,” Ellington recorded one of his most important and popular songs of this period. Boasting a deceptively simple arrangement, “Mood Indigo” subtly undercut traditional jazz with a sense of modernism.⁵⁸ In particular, Ellington employed an inverted form of the New Orleans front-line. Instead of a strong trumpet framed by a high-voiced clarinet and low-voiced trombone—the mainstay of New Orleans jazz—Ellington arranged the melody for a muted trumpet, a trombone played an octave higher than usual, and a clarinet played an octave lower.⁵⁹ The resultant warm sound, with all three instruments playing within a similar range, gave “Mood Indigo” a distinctive harmonic structure that quietly upended the jazz tradition. Originally entitled “Dreamy Blues,” the piece fits into a category of Ellington’s compositions known as the “moods.” Throughout his career Ellington revived this style as seen in “Misty Mornin’,” “Awful Sad,” “Melancholia,” “Solitude,” and “Prelude to a Kiss.” Each of these songs emphasized emotion and mood over distinct melodies, and in this way, Ellington’s mood pieces relate directly to the emotionality of the blues. Also, Art Whetsol’s thick, warm tone proved exceedingly apt for these mood pieces, and along with the close harmonies,

⁵⁷A. H. Lawrence, *Duke Ellington and His World: A Biography* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 84.

⁵⁸Duke Ellington, “Mood Indigo,” (Columbia Records, 1930) on *Ellington Indigos* (Columbia Records, 1989).

⁵⁹“It is very simple,” Ellington later recalled, “it is just one of those very simple little things that you throw together. Of course, the arrangement makes it. But it really isn’t anything; the melody isn’t. It’s funny, I threw that together, and it has caught on.” “Isn’t it queer,” he continued, “not to have anything for a great deal of work, and something for no work at all?” Lawrence, *Duke Ellington and His World*, 165.

the “melancholic, sentimental” strain affected by Whetsol gives “Mood Indigo” its feel.⁶⁰ With its tight harmonic construction, lilting but not cloying melody, and attention to tone, “Mood Indigo,” like Armstrong’s “West End Blues” two years prior, borrowed from the past while pushing jazz forward. Between 1928 and 1931, Ellington recorded over 160 songs, a set of compositions staggering in their “wide-ranging experimentation and intuitive probing.”⁶¹ With “Mood Indigo” and “West End Blues,” Ellington and Armstrong had effectively created a new jazz language of minimal cool. Stripping New Orleans jazz down to its essential syncopated and harmonic forms these two artists succeeded in reconfiguring nineteenth century black folk music into something peculiar to the modern age of the United States. No longer simply music for dancing, jazz, through the experimentation and creativity of Duke Ellington, had become art music.

“Mood Indigo,” however, transcended even “West End Blues” through its modern reception by a radio audience. Ellington first introduced “Mood Indigo” on the air at the Cotton Club without having first made a recording of the song. A truncated six-piece version of the band performed the song, with Whetsol, Joe “Tricky Sam” Nanton (trombone), and Barney Bigard (clarinet) out front. Ellington later conceded that the piece represented “the first tune I ever wrote specially for microphone transmission.” The audience response was immediate. “The next day,” Ellington writes, “wads of mail came in raving about the new tune, so Irving Mills put a lyric on it.”⁶² This comment

⁶⁰Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 340-3 (quotes on 341). Hasse notes the original title of the piece. Hasse, *Beyond Category*, 142.

⁶¹Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 340.

⁶²Ellington, *Music is My Mistress*, 79.

speaks both to the newfound power of radio as well as to the input of Ellington's manager. Unlike Armstrong in Chicago, New York City offered Ellington new technologies and an immediate response. Phonograph records allowed consumers to obtain a wax imprint of a performance, but little connection existed between artist and audience (aside from an occasional royalty check). Radio shortened the gap between performer and audience—a song aired, mail followed—as well as widened the pool of listeners. Large, corporate radio networks carried Ellington's Cotton Club broadcasts throughout the United States allowing for a national audience tapped into a single source. The New York-based radio industry connected the performer to their audience, and the city to the farm, effectively creating a national music. Ellington, however, rooted the more modern elements of his music in the traditional context of African American folk music. The emotional tenor of the blues, in other words, undercut even the most modern of Ellington's compositions, and this combination of rural and urban musical forms helped generate Ellington's unique jazz sound.

As he created a new jazz vocabulary, Ellington also used his success at the Cotton Club to create new opportunities for black musicians, and in 1929 Duke Ellington and his Cotton Club Orchestra starred in a short film produced by RKO at Gramercy Studios in New York. Written and directed by Dudley Murphy—an American filmmaker living in Paris—*Black and Tan* features Ellington playing himself as the bandleader of the Cotton Club orchestra.⁶³ The rather melodramatic story centers on Ferdi Washington, a featured dancer at the Cotton Club (and Ellington's girlfriend), and her decision to disregard medical advice and continue dancing even after learning of a potentially serious heart

⁶³Dudley Murphy, *Black and Tan* (Paramount, 1929).

condition. The first part of the short involves two stereotypically ignorant movers attempting to repossess Ellington's piano. The movers interrupt Ellington as he is rehearsing a new tune with Whetsol. "Brother, remove your anatomy from that mahogany," one of the movers says to Ellington, who appears reasonably unaffected by the events. Washington enters the room and proceeds to bribe the movers with a bottle of gin to leave the piano for another day. The second half of the film is set in a mockup of the Cotton Club's interior and Ellington's band performs two numbers in support of the Five Hot Shots, a black dance troupe. Washington watches from the wings, but she begins to feel faint. Nevertheless, she enters the stage and launches into a wild dance performance before collapsing to the stage. The film ends with Ellington's band, augmented by the Hall Johnson choir, surrounding Washington's death bed as she drifts off to sleep.

The melodramatic story notwithstanding, *Black and Tan* remains a remarkable film for 1929. Featuring an all black cast, the film uses racial stereotypes sparingly—especially in contrast to other jazz-themed movies from this period. The two piano movers (played by Alec Lovejoy and Edgar Common) represent the only real clowning. Even though their job regularly involves addresses and the clock, neither man apparently can distinguish numbers, nor can one mover tell time. The men also fall too easily for the siren call of booze, as Fredi Washington quickly bribes them with a bottle of gin. Still, these images lack the racism behind the satirical blackface comedy of *Amos and Andy*, and in general, these characters represent the only overt racist imagery in the short. Murphey and Van Vechten (who had a major, if uncredited, role in the development of the film) endeavored to produce a positive picture of black life, and this subtle connection

to the values of the Harlem Renaissance helps to elevate this early jazz film. Other elements do appear—a vague jungle setting at the club, Ellington is in hock—yet, the overall image of the film presents Ellington in a flattering light. In fact, Ellington’s first movie role would be his most substantial, and although he would continue to appear in films over the next three decades, he rarely had the speaking roles that he had in *Black and Tan*.⁶⁴

Film added a new dimension to the transmission of jazz and although radio maintained its dominance throughout the next decade, Hollywood and its culture of celebrity greatly affected jazz music. Jazz musicians became movie stars, but racial prejudice corrupted the accolades thrust upon these highly visible entertainers. Motion pictures removed the theoretical colorblindness of radio broadcasts forcing many black artists to accept demeaning stereotypical roles in order to pursue a career in film. Many more African Americans were barred from the film industry altogether. New York City continued to serve as the epicenter for the music industry, but Los Angeles projected a new visual identity for jazz, one that would inherently alter the way Americans experienced jazz. The jazz that flickered and crackled in movie houses across the nation, however, differed greatly from the music of Armstrong, Henderson, and Ellington as Hollywood cast jazz with a predominately white face.

⁶⁴Lawrence, *Duke Ellington and His World*, 149-51.

CHAPTER 5

LOS ANGELES, THE MOTION PICTURE INDUSTRY, AND THE DIFFUSION OF EARLY JAZZ

In the summer of 1930, Duke Ellington and his orchestra left New York City and traveled to Southern California to appear in their first feature film, *Check and Double Check*.¹ Directed by Melville Brown, *Check and Double Check* signified the film debut of Amos and Andy, one of the most popular comedy duos on radio, and Irving Mills hoped the inclusion of Ellington would help extend the band's audience. Unlike the eighteen-minute short *Black and Tan*, *Check and Double Check* was a full-length film that featured the band only in an early scene performing for a society dance. The band's appearance represented the first instance of a black band appearing in a predominately white film, but this distinction fell under the burnt cork umbrage of the stars of the film, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll who performed in black face as Amos and Andy. Gosden and Correll, both white actors, had developed their comedy team a decade earlier on the vaudeville circuit, but discovered a wide audience with their radio program in the late 1920s. By 1928, Gosden and Correll had one of the most popular radio shows in the nation and their show attracted a large, racially-mixed audience. Most of their skits involved situations set in the urban ghetto, and despite the heavy, racially skewed dialect of the two actors, their antics entertained both white and black listeners in part because the radio hid Gosden and Correll's

¹Melville Brown, *Check and Double Check* (RKO, 1930).

obvious whiteness.² Combining the immense radio popularity of Amos and Andy and Duke Ellington, *Check and Double Check* signified the newly realized status of the adolescent motion picture industry as musicians discovered the power of widely disseminated mass media. Los Angeles stood at the center of much of this media revolution, and more than either Chicago or New York, this city signified the growing national audience attracted to jazz music.

Filmed in the RKO Studio lot in Los Angeles, *Check and Double Check* centers on Amos and Andy—who operate the “Fresh Air Taxicab Company of America Incorporated”—and their attempts to bring a young couple together in marriage, a union complicated by a haunted house. Ellington and his band only appear in an early scene set in “Blair Mansion” as they perform for an extravagant dance. Neither Ellington nor any of his band members had speaking roles, but the orchestra performed approximately sixteen-minutes of music with two complete songs and sections of three others. Despite their brief onscreen appearance, the band’s rendition of “Old Man Blues” represents some of the finest jazz of the period preserved on film. An original Ellington composition, “Old Man Blues” showcases the solo talents of Harry Carney and Johnny Hodges—on baritone and alto sax respectively—as well as the band’s powerful trumpet lineup of Freddie Jenkins, Cootie Williams, and Art Whetsol. An exciting up-tempo performance, this piece captures the band at an early highpoint. Anticipating the swing era, the song combines improvised solos and organized riffs all propelled by Wellman Braud’s driving, four-beat, bass line and Sonny Greer’s cymbal-centered drumming. The band also emphasizes its theatrics with the flashy muted work by Jenkins, Williams, and Whetsol, and “Old Man Blues” climaxes with a blaring clarinet rising above the muted trumpet and trombone riffs. In just over three minutes,

²The most complete study of *Check and Double Check* is in Klaus Stratemann, *Duke Ellington Day by Day and Film by Film* (Copenhagen: JazzMedia, 1992), 29-44.

Ellington and his band brought the excitement and artistry of their live shows to a wide, movie-going audience.

The musical triumph of “Old Man Blues” notwithstanding, a complicated combination of on- and off-screen racially-themed behavior overshadowed the other elements of the film, an arrangement that underscores the peculiar presentation of race in early film. Unlike radio, motion pictures showcased the overt whiteness (and subsequent blackface) of Amos and Andy in ways that highlighted the racial buffoonery of Gosden and Correll. Disembodied voices on the radio gave way to painted faces on the screen, and these blackface performances overshadowed the comedic elements of the duo. A significant change of scenery also affected black audiences as “most of the action had been moved from the radio program’s black urban ghetto into white suburbia.”³ Elements of the film’s racism also affected the band’s appearance as the filmmaker directed New Orleans Creole Barney Bigard and Puerto Rican Juan Tizol to wear burnt cork makeup in order to reinforce the image of a segregated band.⁴ Still, the inclusion of a black band in an otherwise all-white movie signified a considerable achievement even with the conspicuous stereotypes. The film, however, also included a less obvious element of racial confusion connected to the other full-length number performed by the band, “Three Little Words.” This piece ostensibly features the singing of Ellington’s trumpet section—shown somewhat fuzzily in

³Stratemann, *Duke Ellington*, 35. “Seeing the film today,” Stratemann writes, “it is not difficult to determine the reasons for the disappointment of black audiences.” Stratemann, *Duke Ellington*, 35. The film also failed to make much of an impression on white audiences forcing the studio to cancel a planned sequel, and after this disappointment, Gosden and Correll appeared as Amos and Andy only in small roles until eventually replaced by black actors for the television series produced in the early 1950s.

⁴Stratemann, *Duke Ellington*, 35; Krin Gabbard, *Jammin’ at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 167-8. The black press also noted this burnt cork decision. See Baltimore *Afro-American* August 3, 1930, p. 8.

the background singing into megaphones. The trumpeters, however, only pretended to sing as the soundtrack actually featured the voices of the Rhythm Boys.⁵ An all-white trio that included a young Bing Crosby, the Rhythm Boys discovered early success as the vocalists for Paul Whiteman's orchestra. Thus, apparently unknown to the audience, three black men received the singing credit for three white men, an example of the racial confusion generated by the uneasy amalgam of technological advancement and social prejudices.

This combination of subtle musical innovation and ambiguous racial imagery signifies in large measure the role Los Angeles played in the diffusion of jazz in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Los Angeles produced a new representation of jazz music and then broadcast these images to the nation through the medium of film. Although not as widespread as phonograph records or as immediate as radio broadcasts, motion pictures redefined the commercial power of jazz, and Los Angeles facilitated greatly the transformation of jazz from regional folk music to a dominant form of American popular music. Unlike New Orleans, Chicago, or New York City, the jazz scene of Los Angeles during this period provided commercial viability and national distribution rather than overt musical innovation. This difference in emphasis reflects the way the city's black community differentiated Los Angeles from other jazz cities. Compared to Chicago or New Orleans, which maintained black populations of at least 20% throughout the 1920s, Los Angeles sustained an African American community of just over 15,500 people, or

⁵Some confusion surrounds Ellington's involvement with this number and Stratemann argues that the "rather saccharine" arrangement fails to connect to Ellington's work during this period. See Stratemann, *Duke Ellington*, 36-7. In the movie, the song begins with a seemingly tacked-on growling trumpet introduction before commencing with a fairly standard popular song arrangement. This incongruence coupled with the appearance of the Rhythm Boys lends credibility to Stratemann's claim.

just under 3%.⁶ This disparity in the size of the Los Angeles black community underscores one of the major differences between that city's jazz scene and the jazz culture seen in other areas. Technologically-driven diffusion—not musical innovation—delineated the city's contribution to early jazz history, and though a rather anomalous jazz city, Los Angeles succeeded in bringing jazz music to the nation.

The history of jazz in Los Angeles corresponds generally with the growth and development of the city's black community. Although black people had lived in Los Angeles since the city's inception in the late eighteenth century, migration to the city occurred at such a slow rate that by 1850 only twelve black people lived in the area. Between 1885 and 1905, however, the black population of the city witnessed three distinct periods of increase. In 1887, a local land boom brought large numbers of African Americans out to Los Angeles from neighboring Pacific-area states as well as from the South Atlantic area. In one year, the city's black population had increased to over 1,200 residents.⁷ Five years later, a second group of black people—comprised mainly of rural transplants—moved to the city to escape some of the ravages of the 1893 economic depression. Ten years later, railroad companies offered incentives for black laborers to migrate west in order to substitute for striking Asian and Hispanic workers. “Between 1900 and 1920,” one writer notes, “the volume of Negro migration to the city increased sharply, causing the Negro population to multiply more than sevenfold.”⁸ Despite

⁶Lawrence B. DeGraaf, “The City of Black Angels: Emergence of the Los Angeles Ghetto, 1890-1930,” *Pacific Historical Review* 39 (1970): 330.

⁷“The modern black community,” one scholar argues, “began not with the founding party, but with the land boom of 1887-1888 which increased the Negro population in the city to 1,258, or 2.5% of the total in 1890.” DeGraaf, “City of Black Angels,” 327.

⁸DeGraaf, “City of Black Angels,” 330.

these frequent increases, African Americans still represented less than three-percent of the total population of Los Angeles throughout the 1920s.

Overall, Los Angeles maintained relatively peaceful race relations, at least between white and black residents, a situation due mainly to the black population's small size and its dispersion throughout the city. Asians and Hispanics bore the brunt of racial/ethnic animosity, and throughout the 1920s black Angelenos experienced few racial-motivated attacks. The class distinctions of early black Los Angeles also affected race relations, and the city, one scholar notes, "remained a rather exclusive enclave for African Americans of high economic and social standing, with an inordinately low percentage of unskilled urban workers, farmers, and others representing lower economic brackets."⁹ As most of the city's black residents adhered to middle-class values, the relatively shared culture of white and black Angelenos helped stave off some overt animosity. African Americans encountered segregation, especially in terms of employment and transportation opportunities, but the city's black community fared much better than other minority groups living in Los Angeles.¹⁰ This tempered Jim Crow society began to crumble once the city's aggregate population increased during the 1920s and placed greater strain on the local housing market. The resultant widespread housing shortage instigated the white community to institute residential restrictions to maintain all-white neighborhoods. By 1930, the comparatively harmonic race relations of Los Angeles had devolved into a more

⁹Michael B. Bakan, "Way Out West on Central: Jazz in the African-American Community of Los Angeles Before 1930," in Jacqueline C. DjeDje and Eddie S. Meadows, eds., *California Soul: Music of African Americans in the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 32. Bakan's essay remains the most complete and valuable study of early Los Angeles jazz.

¹⁰In 1920, only 28 black residents were employed as salesman out of a total of 11,341 workers, a statistic that reflects the imbalance of African Americans in the nonprofessional, white-collar job sector. DeGraaf, "City of Black Angels," 342.

familiar system of racial bias as “widespread residential exclusion, employment discrimination, social segregation, and growing congestion and structural deterioration of housing were reflections of a pervasive racial animosity towards blacks.”¹¹ Still, over 30% of black Angelenos owned their own home, an extraordinary figure in comparison to Chicago (with 10% ownership) and New York City (with 5.6% ownership). Thus, despite an increase of racial tensions, many local black residents escaped a dependence on white landlords, a situation almost unattainable for most other African Americans across the nation.¹²

Although small, Los Angeles’s black community represented an attractive proposition for southern blacks with the means to make the trip out west. The city’s well-defined connection to show business also made it an appealing vaudeville and minstrel show stop. Throughout the 1910s, a number of jazz musicians from New Orleans and elsewhere made the trip out to Los Angeles, usually through touring shows, and the ones that stayed helped create the jazz scene of the 1920s. As early as 1908, New Orleans bassist Bill Johnson traveled to Los Angeles with the Creole Band, a group that included cornetist Ernest Coycault, who apparently remained in California.¹³ Johnson returned to Los Angeles in 1912, this time with an amended Creole Band

¹¹DeGraaf, “City of Black Angels,” 350. Percussionist Lionel Hampton presents a different perspective on local racism in his autobiography, noting that “Hollywood was a pretty town, but I didn’t think much of the attitude towards blacks there. It was my first real experience with discrimination.” Comparing the city to Chicago, Hampton argued that “in Chicago, the black population was so big that you could live and go to school and work and never even have to talk to a white person.” Lionel Hampton with James Haskins, *Hamp: An Autobiography* (New York: Warner Books, 1989), 28-9.

¹²DeGraaf, “City of Black Angels,” 351. See also Lonnie G. Bunch, “A Past Not Necessarily Prologue: The Afro-American in Los Angeles,” in Norman M. Klein and Martin J Schiesl, eds., *Twentieth Century Los Angeles: Power, Promotion, and Social Conflict* (Claremont, CA: Regina Books, 1990), 103.

¹³Dates for this early period remain somewhat elusive, but both Bakan and Gushee tend to place the Creole Band in Los Angeles in 1908. Certainly by 1911, members of the band began

including famed New Orleans musicians George Baquet on clarinet and Freddie Keppard on cornet. Between 1913 and 1916, another band in the area, the Wood Wilson Band served as the premiere ragtime dance band in the city, and throughout this period this group provided an early ragtime apprenticeship for most of the important bandleaders and musicians of the 1920s. The Black and Tan Orchestra represented the other major Los Angeles-based jazz band of the 1910s, and the transformation of this group mirrored that of other groups throughout the nation as syncopated music became popular. A ten-piece ragtime band from Texas, the Black and Tan Orchestra began to play more and more syncopated dance tunes featuring at least some improvisation, especially after the addition of Coycault and trombonist Harry Southard.¹⁴ By 1918, in fact, the group amended its name to reflect these changes, and the Black and Tan Jazz Orchestra “became one of the busiest groups in Los Angeles through the first half of the twenties, posing the most serious competition to bands led by newly arriving New Orleans musicians.”¹⁵

Two of the most prominent individual musicians to travel west from New Orleans were Jelly Roll Morton and trombonist Edward “Kid” Ory. These two musicians embedded themselves in the Los Angeles scene, made crucial connections to important local players, and

appearing in the city directory. More important than individual dates, however, is the fact that jazz scholars routinely ignore Los Angeles in the early history of jazz viewing it more of a footnote than a connected scene. Despite various contradictions and incongruities, Los Angeles maintained a rather thriving ragtime and early jazz scene throughout the 1910s and 1920s. See Bakan, “Way Out West on Central,” 31; and Lawrence Gushee, “New Orleans-Area Musicians on the West Coast, 1908-25,” *Black Music Research Journal* 9:1 (1989): 9.

¹⁴Southard had been a member of the Wood Wilson Band, and the Black and Tan Jazz Orchestra eventually included a number of the musicians from that band as well as other prominent Los Angeles groups. Bakan, “Way Out West on Central,” 34.

¹⁵Bakan, “Way Out West on Central,” 34, 44-47 (quote on p. 34).

helped attract other skilled New Orleans musicians to the area. Morton, during his period of musical wandering, had made the trip out to southern California in the early 1910s, and by 1917 Morton considered Los Angeles home.¹⁶ Between 1917 and 1922, Morton played in a variety of clubs throughout the Los Angeles area, and the piano player began writing for musician acquaintances from New Orleans to fill out his band. In 1919, Kid Ory left for Los Angeles, and in 1921, his band made several recordings with a local entrepreneur and had “the distinction of being the first records ever made by an African-American instrumental jazz band.”¹⁷ Ory performed in the same circles as Morton, and like the piano player, Ory brought out other New Orleans musicians, bassist Pops Foster in particular.¹⁸ Both Morton and Ory had strong music reading abilities, but many of their recently transplanted sidemen from New Orleans only improvised. This musical distinction mattered little in New Orleans where reading and non-reading musicians could often find ample employment. In contrast, a certain conservatism marked the music scene (and black community in general) of Los Angeles, and jobs rewarded readers far more than improvisers.¹⁹ This dichotomy continued to mark the city’s jazz scene for the next two decades, especially as the motion picture industry began using jazz music as

¹⁶Again, dates remain quite unclear and Morton conceivably could have been in the area earlier than 1912, the earliest date usually given for his arrival. See Bakan, “Way Out West on Central,” 35.

¹⁷Bakan, “Way Out West on Central,” 41.

¹⁸Although their careers developed separately, Morton and Ory’s travel patterns mirrored one another during this period. In 1922, for example, Morton left California for Chicago, a move paralleled by Ory two years later. For these musicians, Los Angeles served as a tangential way station for the eventual relocation to Chicago. See Bakan, “Way Out West on Central,” 40-1.

¹⁹“Because of the European art music background of most local players and the conservative aesthetic sensibilities of Los Angeles’s black establishment,” one scholar notes, “well-schooled local musicians with limited skills in improvisation tended to enjoy greater

soundtrack material. By the late 1920s—only a few years removed from the random journeys of Morton and Ory—Hollywood emerged as the dominant mechanism for jazz commodification, an evolution wholly unique to Los Angeles.

The sketchy prehistory of itinerant musicians floating in and out of the area during the 1910s gave way to a rather stable jazz scene in the 1920s. This western scene, however, represented a hodgepodge of talent with New Orleanians merging with other musicians from the Mid-Atlantic and Southwest. “Jazz thrived in Los Angeles,” one scholar summarized, “where an interesting mix of local players, New Orleans expatriates, and itinerant and resident musicians from all over the country contributed to an active and exciting musical culture.”²⁰ In general, the bands of this period combined the larger band arrangements of Fletcher Henderson with occasional New Orleans and Chicago-style instrumental breaks. These bands produced relatively few records during the 1920s, but the extent recordings point towards a controlled, arranged sound suitable for dancing (and later instrumental film scores). Overall, no unified style came to dominate Los Angeles, and with only a few exceptions, instrumental virtuosity remained limited to short breaks.²¹ The music and careers of three musicians active in the city during the 1920s underscore many of the inherent qualities of Los Angeles jazz, and together Reb Spikes, Sonny Clay, and Paul Howard each created music that connected to the jazz produced in other cities as well as represented something different.

professional success than hot-blowing improvisers from New Orleans, Chicago, and elsewhere.” Bakan, “Way Out West on Central,” 39.

²⁰Bakan, “Way Out West on Central,” 29.

²¹The lack of phonographic evidence also makes defining the jazz scene in Los Angeles difficult. Unlike in Chicago and New York, where a wide range of bands found themselves in the recording studio, relatively few Los Angeles bands preserved their sound on wax.

Perhaps the most important figure in the early jazz scene of Los Angeles, Benjamin “Reb” Spikes served as a music teacher, an arranger, a bandleader, a music publisher, a booking agent, a record label owner, a music store proprietor, and for a short time a restaurateur. Many of these ventures included Spikes’s brother, Johnny, and together these two musicians defined in large measure the early jazz scene of Los Angeles. Born in the late 1880s in Dallas, Texas, Reb Spikes moved with his family to Los Angeles in 1897. The journey west—apparently due to a “racist-inspired campaign of arson”—coincided with Spikes’s introduction to music through the purchase of a set of drums.²² In 1907, Reb and Johnny Spikes (who played piano) developed a musical act and began touring the Southwest with various minstrel shows. “These early experiences,” one writer notes, “provided the Spikes brothers with a solid foundation for their contributions to African-American vaudeville in the 1920s.”²³ During the mid-1910s, Reb Spikes moved to San Francisco and played saxophone in Sid LeProtti’s So Different Orchestra, a job that brought him back to Los Angeles on tours. During one of these visits to Los Angeles, Spikes supported Rudolph Valentino’s floorshow, and these performances regularly attracted silent film stars, a pattern that would continue throughout the next decade.²⁴ These early musical experiences provided Spikes with both the performance skills as well as a developing business sense as to how jazz could be marketed to a larger (or at least paying) audience.

²²Bakan, “Way Out West on Central,” 57. See also Tom Stoddard, *Jazz on the Barbary Coast* (Essex: Storyville Publications, 1982), 55-7.

²³Bakan, “Way Out West on Central,” 57. During this period, the Spikes’s toured with Hattie McDaniel, the comedienne who went on to appear in *Gone With the Wind*. Floyd Levin, “The Spikes Brothers: A Los Angeles Saga,” *Jazz Journal* 4:12 (December 1951), 12.

²⁴Bakan, “Way Out West on Central,” 57; Albert J. McCarthy, *Big Band Jazz* (New York: Putnam, 1974), 168; Levin, “The Spikes Brothers,” 12.

In 1919, Reb Spikes heeded these lessons and opened a music store on Central Avenue, an area that featured black-owned businesses and integrated jazz clubs, and served as the de facto heart of the black community. This store stocked everything from musical instruments and sheet music to radios and phonograph records. Spikes's store, more importantly, served as "a focal point for local musicians," and gradually "developed into a booking agency with as many as seven or eight bands under their control."²⁵ This foray developed into a race record business and Spikes soon scheduled recording sessions for local and traveling musicians.²⁶ Between producing and selling records, Spikes maintained intimate connections with most of the city's jazz scene and served as the unofficial organizer of jazz talent in Los Angeles. Spikes eventually entered the recording studio himself, and in October 1927 he recorded "My Mammy's Blues" released under the billing of Reb Spikes' Majors and Minors.²⁷ The song combines a straightforward ragtime arrangement and a standard dance tempo with several hot jazz elements. The violin and trumpet solos, in particular, provide a unique sound for this period, and both musicians fashioned improvised solos that achieved a pleasant swinging rhythm. A nice recording—if only a footnote even in his own career—Spikes's "My Mammy's Blues"

²⁵McCarthy, *Big Band Jazz*, 168.

²⁶"The stomps, blues, rags African-American jazz bands played on the latest race records and in the integrated clubs along Central Avenue, in the chic, segregated nightspots of Hollywood, and in other parts of town represented the cutting edge of West Coast music for black and white audiences alike." Bakan, "Way Out West on Central," 56.

²⁷Reb Spikes' Majors and Minors, "My Mammy's Blues," (1927) on *Jazz in California, 1923-1930* (Timeless Records, 1997). Brian Rust gives the lineup as including George Morgan (trumpet), W. B. Woodman (trombone), "Slocum" (clarinet), Roland Bruce (violin), Fritz Weston and "Gordon" (piano), George Craig (drums), and unknown musicians on second trumpet, second trombone, alto sax, tenor sax, tuba, and banjo. See Brian Rust, "Liner Notes," *Jazz in California, 1923-1930* (Timeless Historical Records, 1997), n.p. Levin gives Slocum's name as Adam Mitchell. Levin, "The Spike Brothers," 13.

underscored the blurred lines between popular dance music and jazz, an ambiguity that tended to define Los Angeles jazz during this period.

The near ubiquity of Reb Spikes in the jazz scene of 1920s Los Angeles created a situation where most black jazz musicians of the period performed in one of Spikes's bands.²⁸ The incestuousness of most Los Angeles bands during the 1920s provided a small group of players a considerable amount of experience as well as provided a certain uniformity to the city's jazz. Despite the lack of a singular style infiltrating the city, this regularity allowed for some degree of consistency, at least with the larger bands. Few distinctive or innovative soloists emerged from this group, but a number of these players performed for long periods of time with popular ensembles in the area. As these players matured several of them formed their own bands and continued the pattern of mentor-apprentice relationships somewhat unique (at least in scope) to this area. Constancy and consistency, not innovation or inventiveness, thus provided the defining element of Los Angeles jazz, and the conservative nature of the city's culture only served to heighten these factors.²⁹ Not unlike Jack Laine in New Orleans or Dave Peyton in Chicago, Reb Spikes affected greatly the Los Angeles jazz culture even if he himself remained almost anonymous outside of the California area.

²⁸“It is virtually impossible,” Bakan argues, “to discuss any aspect of early jazz in Los Angeles without some reference to [the Spikes brothers].” Bakan, “Way Out West on Central,” 54. In a similar vein, McCarthy writes that “there was no corner of jazz activity in Los Angeles in which one or other of the brothers was not deeply involved.” McCarthy, *Big Band Jazz*, 168. Not all references to the brothers, however, remained positive as McCarthy also reports that “in 1925 the orchestra received unwelcome publicity and the 16th September issue of *Variety* reported that three of its members had been arrested for contributing to the delinquency of three under-age white girls.” McCarthy, *Big Band Jazz*, 168.

²⁹“In the 1920s,” one writer argues, “there was no ‘West Coast jazz,’ if by that one means a distinctive regional style.” Ted Gioia, *West Coast Jazz: Modern Jazz in California, 1945-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 8. See also Bakan, “Way Out West on Central,” 39.

Hailing originally from Chapel Hill, Texas, William “Sonny” Clay moved to Phoenix with his family in 1908. In Arizona, Clay began playing the drums and piano (among other instruments), and spent most of the late 1910s playing ragtime and dance music throughout the Southwest. At some point during this time, Clay met up with Jelly Roll Morton in Tijuana, but eventually made his way to Los Angeles by the early 1920s. In 1921, Clay played with Reb Spikes and his Famous Syncopated Orchestra, and the next year performed with Kid Ory. After these sideman forays, Clay formed his own band, the Eccentric Harmony Six, and continued to perform a mixture of ragtime, jazz, and syncopated dance music. In 1925, under the name Plantation Orchestra, Clay recorded “Jambled Blues,” an original piece representative of his jazz style.³⁰ The first half of the song features Clay on the piano unaccompanied except for short breaks. Clay plays in a lightly syncopated, ragtime style not far removed from the music of Scott Joplin. Though not quite the stride piano of the Harlemites, Clay maintains a strong bass figure, partly to make up for the lack of tuba or string bass on the record. Three solos follow Clay’s opening, with New Orleanian Coycault’s trumpet work constituting the only real example of instrumental virtuosity. After the solos, the band launches into a final section of collective improvisation and maintains an easy-tempoed Dixieland feel. Although not incredibly original, “Jambled Blues” remains a pleasant and controlled dance number, with at least some elements of New Orleans spontaneity near the end. Not altogether different from the music of Jelly Roll Morton, Sonny Clay’s recordings emphasize the orderly and arranged style prevalent in Los Angeles during the 1920s.³¹

³⁰Sonny Clay’s Plantation Orchestra, “Jambled Blues,” (1925) on *Jazz in California, 1923-1930* (Timeless Records, 1997).

³¹McCarthy, *Big Band Jazz*, 172-3. See also Rust, “Liner Notes,” n.p. Seven months after “Jambled Blues,” the band recorded a version of Jelly Roll Morton’s “Chicago

If Reb Spikes exemplified a certain vaudevillian diversity and Sonny Clay symbolized an efficient (if pleasant) holding pattern, then Paul Howard served as the architect of a new big band style of jazz. Simultaneous to Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington's tinkering with large band arrangements, Howard began infusing the early California jazz model with a stylistic verve not seen consistently in the work of Spikes or Clay. "Of all the California bands recording during the late 'twenties and early 'thirties," one writer argues, "Paul Howard's was the one most obviously in the mainstream of contemporary big band development."³² A reedman formally of Clay's band, Paul Howard moved to Los Angeles from Ohio in 1911 as a teenager.³³ Between 1918 and 1923, Howard played with the Black and Tan Orchestra and other smaller bands throughout the area. After this period of apprenticeship, Howard gathered together a strong lineup of musicians under the Quality Serenader moniker. During 1927 and 1928, the Quality Serenaders had residency at the New Cotton Club, a venue inspired by Ellington's headquarters in New York City. The club attracted wealthy Hollywood celebrities with its floor shows and jazz music, and Howard's band became one of the most popular jazz ensembles in the city. The next two years represented the peak period for the Quality Serenaders, and their recordings during this time illustrate a tight band with strong soloists and ensemble players fully comfortable with unique arrangements.

Breakdown." Again, the band performs a very composed form of improvised jazz, with instrumental breaks.

³²McCarthy, *Big Band Jazz*, 169.

³³Barry Kernfeld, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 542.

In 1930, Howard's band recorded several numbers in Culver City including "Cuttin' Up," a number arranged by Charlie Lawrence, Howard's clarinet and alto saxophone player.³⁴ Along with trombonist Lawrence Brown, Lawrence wrote a large number of Howard's arrangements, and his unique instrumentation and riff-based arrangements presaged clearly the big band jazz of the Swing Era.³⁵ By 1930, Howard's band had evolved into a strong unit featuring harmonized riffs and strong, swinging solos, a pattern clearly in place by the "Cuttin' Up" session. After a rather unique saxophone and trumpet introduction, "Cuttin' Up" launches into a spirited and swinging section of muted trumpet and trombone underpinned by a contrasting reeds section performing long, warm tones.³⁶ This opening section sets the pattern for the song as sections of unison riffs alternate with solos. After a rousing trombone solo near the middle of the piece, the band commences a section of short, two-measure solo breaks from each of the lead instruments. In the second half of the song, Howard's drummer, Lionel Hampton, sings a short scat melody

³⁴Paul Howard's Quality Serenaders, "Cuttin' Up," (1930) on *Jazz in California, 1923-1930* (Timeless Records, 1997).

³⁵"The arrangements," Albert McCarthy notes, "are functional and efficient, while the ensemble passages are played with technical expertise." Though certainly accurate, this description tends to downplay the obvious differences between the work of the Quality Serenaders and, for example, one of Sonny Clay's bands. McCarthy, *Big Band Jazz*, 172. See also, Bakan, "Way out West on Central," 61-4.

³⁶Most of Lawrence and Brown's arrangements included almost iconoclastic introductions. Eschewing formulaic and rote figures, Howard's arrangers usually began each of their songs with either a call and response type of riffing, or as in "California Swing," a rhythmically complex section of contrasting instruments. The lineup for these 1930 sessions included: George Orendorff and Earl Thompson (trumpets), Lawrence Brown (trombone), Charlie Lawrence and Lloyd Reese (clarinet and alto sax), Paul Howard (tenor sax), Reginald Forsythe (piano), Thomas Valentine (banjo), James Jackson (tuba), and Lionel Hampton (drums, vocals). See Brian Rust, "Liner Notes," n.p.

before the sax section performs an arranged segment of harmonized riffs.³⁷ Following a piano solo that relates more to the sophistication of Earl Hines than the ragtime of Scott Joplin, the song concludes with a strong trumpet solo by George Orendorff, the band's true virtuoso.³⁸ An overlooked band, Paul Howard's Quality Serenaders help bridge the gap between the ragtime-influenced music of the early Los Angeles jazz scene and the swing music of the 1930s.

Regardless of the widespread appeal (if any) of these records outside of Los Angeles, the Quality Serenaders remained a popular live band, and in 1930, the group claimed residency at the Montmartre, an exclusive Hollywood club that catered to the film industry.³⁹ Like New York City, Los Angeles fostered this relationship between wealthy white patrons and black jazz bands, but unlike Harlem, this moneyed interest of Hollywood generated film opportunities for jazz music. Howard's connection to the Hollywood elite represented an advantageous occupational situation, but this association between wealthy film stars and jazz musicians also spoke to the emergent synergy of the two burgeoning forms of mass culture. Both jazz and motion pictures developed around the same time, and both cultural forms elicited as much derision as excitement. Jazz music, however, also directly accompanied the film industry as various stride pianists and small jazz ensembles found employment performing the live soundtracks to silent movies. With

³⁷A slight facsimile of Louis Armstrong, Lionel Hampton plays the scat lines more as a humorous aside than as an instrumental solo. Hampton also scatted on several other Howard songs including "Moonlight Blues," "Stuff," and "California Swing." Hampton, of course, would rise to fame later with the Benny Goodman band.

³⁸Born in Atlanta in 1906, George Orendorff played with Howard from 1925 to 1930 before leaving to play with Les Hite throughout the next decade. The trumpet player shines on most of Howard's recordings, and as Brian Rust notes, "open or muted, he drives the band along with an attack that never becomes frenzied." See Brian Rust, "Liner Notes," n.p. For biographical information see Kernfeld, *New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, 939.

³⁹McCarthy described the club as "an exclusive and inordinately expensive room much favored by the leading film stars of the time." McCarthy, *Big Band Jazz*, 170.

the advent of sound, filmmakers had the ability to include jazz music seamlessly into their movies, and many directors used local talent (in conjunction with nationally recognized celebrities such as Duke Ellington) to fill out the soundtrack. The unconventional jazz scene in Los Angeles, however, predicated the inclusion of a type of jazz somewhat different from the music heard on the records coming out of Chicago or the radio stations centered in New York. Throughout the late 1920s, the American public encountered jazz on the big screen and in many instances the music related only tangentially to the music developed over the previous decade in New Orleans, Chicago, and New York City.

Like the progression of phonographs and radios, the film industry represented a combination of technological innovation, quickly contracted patents, complicated lawsuits, burgeoning consumerism, and trailing along behind, an occasional sense of artistry and aesthetics. Although not in widespread use until the late 1920s, talking pictures constituted part of the plan for a number of inventors working since the 1880s. As early as 1877, for example, Thomas Edison saw motion pictures as a component of his phonograph system.⁴⁰ Fifty years would pass, however, before technology allowed for the completion of this fantasy. Once Edison began focusing fulltime on motion picture technology in the 1880s, he tended to view it as a particular type of working class entertainment, not unlike vaudeville shows.⁴¹ In fact, the vast majority of early subjects for this invention, termed the kinetoscope, came from the vaudeville and minstrel show stage as the cameras focused on contortionists, magicians, and

⁴⁰Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 10.

⁴¹Edison based his work primarily on the experiments of two men, Eadward Muybridge and Etienne Jules Marey, who had separately developed unique aspects of early film production. See Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 5-10.

pantomimes.⁴² An immediate middle class fascination notwithstanding, the machines were marketed as a novelty for mostly working class vaudeville and saloon patrons. This class distinction marked the motion picture industry for the next two decades.⁴³ None of these early movie attempts involved integrated sound though some filmmakers experimented with phonograph records crudely synchronized by the theater projectionist. Despite drawing from a similar pool of talent (and catering to a similar audience) as jazz music, the lack of sound obviously delayed the inclusion of musical acts into early motion pictures.

Two developments—one corporate, one spatial—redefined the film industry during the 1910s, and the move towards middle class approval coupled with the move out to Hollywood had a massive impact on the eventual inclusion of (and reception to) jazz music. Like the radio and to some extent the record industry, the evolution of projected film involved a set of corporate demands unique to the business model of early twentieth century America. Through the creation (and sometimes misappropriation) of various technical patents, Edison eventually merged with or put out of business most of his competitors.⁴⁴ This monopoly of film resources—known as “The Trust”—defined the motion picture industry in the early 1910s but came under withering attack

⁴²Edison first publicly unveiled the kinetoscope at the Columbian Exposition in 1893, a machine that involved “a peep-show viewer capable of showing unenlarged 35mm. black-and-white pictures with a maximum running time of about ninety seconds.” Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 13.

⁴³On the impact of the kinetoscope on vaudeville, see Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 13-4. For the turning away of the middle class audience, see Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 18-9. For an examination of the Victorian ideals at odds with early film and the resultant reform movement, see Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 43-59.

⁴⁴The Biograph Company proved an exception as it maintained a patent for a different type of camera. This exception lasted only until 1908 when the constant lawsuits by Edison and threats of bankruptcy forced Biograph into the Edison fold. One concise history of the early business pattern of the film industry is in Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 33-47.

from a host of independent companies that capitalized on an informal network of unlicensed theaters. This tension between the Edison establishment and these primarily immigrant independents allowed for a change in subject matter, and somewhat ironically the independents (drawn from the original working class audience for film) spearheaded the move towards middle class acceptance.⁴⁵ The director David Wark Griffith epitomized this shift in tone, and almost single-handedly Griffith brought motion pictures to a new audience. To attract this new audience, Griffith and his fellow independents endeavored “to produce longer and more expensive films modeled after familiar middle-class forms of entertainment.”⁴⁶ Historical epics and stage plays thus served as the new model for film subject matter, a model exemplified by Griffith’s 1915 Reconstruction film, *The Birth of a Nation*.⁴⁷ The film, despite its explicit and implicit racism, appealed to a large new audience, a group attracted to the spectacle of the film if not its political and social message.

In addition to the shift in audience following the success of *The Birth of a Nation*, the film also foreshadowed a larger development in the evolution of the motion picture industry as Griffith filmed the outdoor scenes in southern California.⁴⁸ The Los Angeles area appealed to filmmakers for a number of reasons including temperate weather, a diverse selection of scenery, and an assemblage of low-wage workers. The West Coast also (and almost as importantly) offered an alternative to the Trust-driven business practices of New York City. The conservative

⁴⁵Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 41-7.

⁴⁶Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 42.

⁴⁷May, *Screening Out the Past*, 60-95; Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 57-61.

⁴⁸For the early history of Hollywood, see May, *Screening Out the Past*, 167-99; and Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 67-85.

population of Los Angeles received Hollywood with suspicion, if not outright antipathy, and many Angelenos saw Hollywood as culturally unconnected from their city.⁴⁹ The reform-mindedness of local officials, however, played into the plans of young Hollywood as various anti-trust laws were enacted that provided the industry with a constant labor supply.⁵⁰ Also, despite the concerns of local residents, Hollywood helped to redefine the subject matter and audience of the motion picture industry. “Hollywood,” one writer argues, “showed how middle-class ideals could be regenerated to fit the modern age.”⁵¹ This mixture of social conservatism and political progressivism set Los Angeles apart from New York City (and Europe), and as Hollywood signaled a new type of entertainment, Los Angeles “offered the vision of a new West.” Within a few years of its creation, Hollywood had developed into the national center of abundance, consumption, and a progressive vision of individualism. By the 1920s, the motion picture industry had redefined and reopened the western frontier of opportunity and promise, and Los Angeles threatened to eclipse New York’s hold on mass culture.⁵²

On October 6, 1927, *The Jazz Singer*, the first full-length talking picture, debuted in New York City, ushering in the age of sound film fifty years after Edison’s original proposal.⁵³ Based

⁴⁹Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 69.

⁵⁰“Along with cheap land,” May writes of the studio heads, “they found a civic administration that helped break strikes in the studios and protected their interests as well.” May, *Screening Out the Past*, 182.

⁵¹May, *Screening Out the Past*, 198.

⁵²Lary May elaborates greatly on the idea of Hollywood’s creation of a new frontier, see May, *Screening Out the Past*, 198-9.

⁵³Alan Crosland, *The Jazz Singer* (Warner Brothers, 1927). Filming took place over the summer of 1927 with everything filmed in California except for external location shots of New York City. For the background to the film as well as the movie’s working script, see Robert L. Carringer, ed., *The Jazz Singer* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1979). The two best pieces

on a series of short stories and a stage play, *The Jazz Singer* relates the story of a Jewish singer conflicted by his faith (and his father's demands) and his desire to sing jazz music. The film starred Al Jolson, the actual inspiration for the short story, and the singer connected immediately to his role as Jakie Rabinowitz/Jack Robin. At its heart, *The Jazz Singer* serves as a study in immigrant assimilation, a tension expressed through Jolson's vacillation between his Jewish heritage and popular American music. The plot centers on the disapproval of Jack Robin's father (the cantor at the synagogue) of his son's career choice of a jazz singer. His father had urged his son to train as a cantor to carry on the family tradition, but Robin refuses to leave show business. The film climaxes as the father (on his deathbed) forgives his son's rebelliousness, and Robin serves as cantor at the Yom Kippur service by delaying his Broadway opening. The film's finale, however, allows Robin to satisfy both tensions by performing "Mammy" in blackface at the Winter Garden for an ecstatic audience.⁵⁴ The film quickly became a massive success as audiences flocked to the film if only drawn by the novelty of a talking picture.⁵⁵ By the end of 1927 the film had opened in New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, and by February of the next

of criticism of the film are Michael Rogin, "Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Spring 1992): 417-453; and Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margin*, 14-9, 35-44.

⁵⁴This finale appears only in the film as Raphaelson ends his story with Robin serving as cantor. "The triumphant but slightly incoherent 'Mammy' finale," Gabbard notes, "was added to the film by Warners if only for the sake of a more upbeat ending." Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins*, 41. See also Carringer, *The Jazz Singer*, 26.

⁵⁵The sound technology—known as Vitaphone—was cost-prohibitive for a number of smaller theaters impelling Warner Brothers to distribute a silent version of the film as well. Carringer, *The Jazz Singer*, 140.

year the film attracted over one million viewers a week.⁵⁶ Not everyone, however, warmly received the movie. Warner Brothers, for example, invited to the movie's premiere the author of the original short story, Samson Raphaelson. Unimpressed completely by the movie, Raphaelson later categorized *The Jazz Singer* as "a dreadful picture."⁵⁷

Film historians routinely shared Raphaelson's feelings and dismiss *The Jazz Singer* as a lackluster film that fails even to deserve its standing as the first talking picture.⁵⁸ "It is absolutely no secret," one writer argues, "that *The Jazz Singer* is, to all intents and purposes, a lousy movie. Many knew it in 1927, and anyone who sees it today expecting a masterpiece will be rudely awakened."⁵⁹ Although the film focused on Jewish assimilation and the lure of show business (as well as Robin's rather odd fixation with his mother), the more implicit elements of race and jazz as seen in Jolson's blackface performances illustrate the importance of the film in terms of jazz diffusion. Despite Jolson's overreaching and emotive performance, the main criticism of the film tends to focus on its title and the fact that no jazz actually appears in the movie. "The blackface jazz singer," one writer notes, "is neither a jazz singer nor black."⁶⁰ Despite the prejudices of many of the critics of the film, the lightly syncopated music of the film

⁵⁶A number of theaters that usually switched out movies every week showed *The Jazz Singer* for two months straight. Richard Barrios, *A Song in the Dark: The Birth of the Musical Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 39.

⁵⁷Carringer, *The Jazz Singer*, 20. See also Barrios, *A Song in the Dark*, 39.

⁵⁸In 1921, D. W. Griffith included a musical number and a "short talking prologue" to his film, *Dream Street*. This film, Richard Barrios argues "is left to history as the first major—if brief—use of recorded sound in a feature film." Barrios, *A Song in the Dark*, 15. Technically, the majority of *The Jazz Singer* was also silent as music and speaking appeared in only one-quarter of the film.

⁵⁹Barrios, *A Song in the Dark*, 34.

⁶⁰Rogin, "Blackface, White Noise," 420.

fits clearly into the broad definition of jazz in the 1920s.⁶¹ In some cursory ways, the music featured in the film relates to the style of jazz popular in Los Angeles with an emphasis on lightly syncopated dance music. Still, Jolson's performances connect more to vaudeville than jazz, and in this sense, "the film condensed into a single feature film the entire history of American popular entertainment, from minstrelsy through vaudeville to silent films to talking pictures."⁶² Besides the title, jazz appears throughout the movie, and various characters (particularly Jakie's father and Moishe Yudelson) refer unequivocally to the music.⁶³ More importantly, this film underscored the growing acceptance of jazz as the movie industry began to see the marketing power of this type of music, and as one writer notes, "the singing of one song in blackface indicated Hollywood's interest in jazz."⁶⁴

The divergent use of blackface in early film signifies the complicated manner in which filmmakers represented racial identity. In *The Jazz Singer*, Jolson's application of greasepaint serves more as a minstrel signifier of his show business roots rather than a denunciation of African Americans. The issue of race appears only briefly in the film, and the director keeps the

⁶¹The generally astute Rogin, for example, maintains that "the most obvious fact about *The Jazz Singer*, unmentioned in all the critical commentary, is that it contains no jazz." Rogin, "Blackface, White Noise," 14. Gabbard, who agrees with most of Rogin's larger points, counters Rogin rather forcefully noting that "although *The Jazz Singer* ought not win praise for eliminating blacks from its presentation of 'jazz,' the film should not be held responsible for using the term in the same way that most whites would have understood it in the 1920s." Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins*, 17.

⁶²Rogin, "Blackface, White Noise," 430.

⁶³In one scene, Jakie's father demands of his son, "What you mean, coming in my house and playing on my piano your music from the streets—your jazz?" Carringer, *The Jazz Singer*, 96. Also, in the foreword to the play, Raphaelson argues that "jazz is prayer." Quoted in Carringer, *The Jazz Singer*, 23.

⁶⁴Bruce M. Tyler, *From Harlem to Hollywood: The Struggle for Racial and Cultural Democracy, 1920-1943* (New York: Garland, 1992), 88.

main focus on the tensions involved with his Jewish identity.⁶⁵ Instead of simply highlighting his whiteness, the blackface makeup connects Jolson to the stage, and those scenes lack comedic intent.⁶⁶ In these scenes, Jolson uses blackface to express his emotions. Unable to articulate his desires to his family, Robin only connects with his inner yearnings and aspirations through makeup as he also does through song.⁶⁷ A comparison of Robin's conversations with his father (without makeup) and his actions (with makeup) underscores the inherent transformation allowed by the application of blackface. Only through the visual assimilation of race in terms of face paint and the aural assimilation of black music in terms of jazz can Robin alleviate his familial and occupational tensions. In addition, in blackface and through jazz, Robin connects to the emotional elements of African American music, particularly the blues. This positive use of blackface lies in stark contrast to Gosden and Correll's use of makeup in *Check and Double Check* primarily to emphasize the racial differences between white and black people. Unlike Jolson—who actually sang jazz-based songs—Gosden and Correll affect crude dialects and caricatured actions to parody black Americans. No longer merely a prop, in *Check and Double*

⁶⁵The shooting script of the film contains more racially-pointed language than in the final version. In two scenes (both involving Moisha Yudelson, the Jewish “man of influence”), the phrase “nigger songs” and “he looks like a nigger” appear in the script but are altered in the film. Interestingly, the script includes a description of another scene (involving Robin in blackface talking with his girlfriend in his dressing room) with a note explaining that “playing a romantic scene in blackface may be something of an experiment and very likely unsuccessful one. As an alternative . . . there could be a scene . . . in Jack's dressing room, showing him enter in blackface and start taking off the makeup.” Carrington, *The Jazz Singer*, 63, 83, 120.

⁶⁶Race certainly plays a role in any blackface performance, but the point made here centers on the primary intent of this particular use of blackface which was not meant to denigrate or humiliate African Americans. Rogin elaborates quite well on the subject of blackface throughout his article, “Blackface, White Noise.”

⁶⁷“Blackface,” Rogin maintains, “is the instrument that transfers identities from immigrant Jew to American.” Rogin, “Blackface, White Noise,” 434.

Check blackface serves as a key method of denigration and humiliation. That film also included the compulsory use of blackface by two members of Ellington's band in order to impose an unambiguous visual sense of racial segregation. This use of blackface, however, differs considerably from the other two as the makeup disguises (rather than emphasizing) racial identity. Seemingly unbeknownst to most of the audience, the filmmakers employed blackface surreptitiously to prevent race from becoming an issue.⁶⁸ This racial ambiguity and complexity only deepens once African Americans begin accepting larger and more prominent roles in mainstream films.

Within this multifaceted presentation of race in early film, Hollywood offered African Americans new roles in entertainment, especially as Hollywood began to realize the commercial possibilities of jazz music. The bands active in the Los Angeles area discovered a number of opportunities connected to Hollywood, and many of the more popular bands eventually found employment in the elite clubs north of the city that catered to film celebrities. The Les Hite band, in particular, took advantage of the Hollywood connections and successfully combined studio work with regular live performances to create a stable career. By the early 1930s as the Depression increasingly affected the entertainment industry, Hite's band remained somewhat stable through the extra income gained from performing on film soundtracks. This movie-based windfall allowed Hite to continue operating throughout this period and helped produce one of the most stable band rosters of the era.⁶⁹ Other musicians also pieced together Hollywood-based livelihoods, and Sonny Clay began selling his arrangements to other performers, adapting

⁶⁸Again, black newspapers related the blackface story, but most members of the white audience would have been unaware of the use of makeup. See Baltimore *Afro-American* August 3, 1930, p. 8.

⁶⁹McCarthy, *Big Band Jazz*, 177.

Fletcher Henderson's business model to the film industry. Overall, both black and white musicians found new opportunities in Hollywood during this period, and although old stereotypes persisted, this new platform of exposure allowed for a new audience for jazz music.

In the five years after *The Jazz Singer*, Hollywood inundated American moviegoers with a number of shorts and feature films that attempted to capitalize on the emergent jazz craze of the late 1920s.⁷⁰ Many of these films maintained only tangential connections to jazz music, but as promotional tools, these short movies underscore the growing marketability of jazz music. These films shared an array of positive and negative factors, and implicit black stereotypes abutted dazzling examples of jazz music. White musicians also discovered some success with this film format, and by the early 1930s, a number of white singers and instrumentalists appeared in short films to promote their records. Few of these films contained noteworthy acting, but the better ones transcended their advertising potential and combined a brief story arc with two or three musical numbers. Usually preceding the main attraction, these short films helped introduce jazz to a larger audience and signified the growing acceptance of the music. Four films in particular highlight the various ways the motion picture industry represented jazz in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In 1932, Paramount Studios produced a short film based around Louis Armstrong's recording, "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal You." In 1931, the Boswell Sisters appeared in a short, non-acting clip to showcase their version of Armstrong's "Heebie Jeebies." In 1933, Cab Calloway played himself in *Hi-De-Ho*, and finally, popular white crooner, Rudy Vallee, starred in *The Musical Doctor* (1932), a short film featuring Vallee as a physician who prescribes various musical selections to heal patients.

⁷⁰In his catalog of jazz films, David Meeker lists over forty films produced between 1917 and 1930 that maintained some connection (however tenuous) to jazz music. See David Meeker, *Jazz in the Movies* (London: Talisman, 1981).

In the early 1930s, having lived in New York City for a few years, Louis Armstrong headed out west to perform with Les Hite's band in Los Angeles. While living in southern California, Armstrong made several movie appearances including *A Rhapsody in Black and Blue*, a ten-minute short based around his recording of "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal You."⁷¹ The film—its title an obvious play on the music of George Gershwin—begins with a black man (played by Sidney Easton) drumming along with an Armstrong record as his wife incessantly demands him to clean the apartment. The man agrees only if he can listen to his new Armstrong record of "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal You." His wife (played by Victoria Spivey) knocks him unconscious, and he awakens to Armstrong singing the song dressed in animal skins (as is his band) on a stage covered in bubbles. The husband, now known as the king of "Jazzmania," decrees Armstrong to perform "Shine." Enjoying the song, the man is jolted awake as his wife smashes the record over his head. Overall, a much different image of African Americans than the one seen in *Black and Tan*, and the black couple at the center of the action represent a lower class lifestyle with the husband apparently unemployed. The beleaguered and underprivileged husband fantasizes of a life defined by power and opulence, but once given authority can only ask for an Armstrong performance. Armstrong complicates matters further by playing both a legitimate jazz star as well as an entertaining (and harmless) clown. The jazz music in this film receives more of the focus due to Armstrong's eminence, but tellingly, the trumpet player's early film roles reflect the change in musical direction he had

⁷¹Aubrey Scotto, *A Rhapsody in Black and Blue* (Paramount, 1932). Immediately prior to this film, Armstrong appeared (in partial cartoon form) in a Betty Boop animated film in which he also performs "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal You." Thomas Robert Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 229.

experienced since his time with the Hot Fives.⁷² Both of the featured songs focus more on Armstrong's gravelly voice than his trumpet (though flashes of his virtuosity remain in the brief solo sections), and he clearly enjoys playing the commercial popular culture imagery and sexual innuendo of the lyrics, such as "you bought my wife a bottle of Coca-Cola so that you can play on her Victrola."

Despite the presence of "authentic" jazz, Armstrong's performance in animal skins offers a much more visible connection to blackface posturing. Both Armstrong and the husband genially mug for the camera, grinning and making faces throughout the film. Played for comedic effect, these actions also serve to present black Americans either as powerless husbands; severe, sexless women; or court-appointed jesters. Not simply a racist gesture, these stereotypes illustrate the constraints placed on black entertainers. In order to benefit from this new mass communication, social conventions forced many black actors and musicians into stereotypical roles. Some African Americans ably escaped most of these trappings—Ellington in *Black and Tan*, for instance—but most black entertainers performed certain stereotypical roles in exchange for a larger public forum. "The shenanigans," one writer argues, "might even be tolerated as a sop to the less sophisticated members of the audience, an interlude between the moments of

⁷²Armstrong's acceptance of popular music over the music he performed in Chicago represents the most controversial part of his career. Most critics tend to dismiss Armstrong after 1930 as merely a "popular entertainer," no longer capable of brilliant jazz. One reason for the shift concerned Armstrong's damaged lip that made his horn playing difficult. Still, his singing always represented a crowd pleasing element of his shows, and part of Armstrong's decision certainly dealt with the possibility of a larger audience. Critics, however, were angrier about his choice of music, which most of them saw as watered down vaudeville-style pop music. Although not completely unfounded, Armstrong steadfastly argued that he placed no boundaries on music, unlike the critical pedants angry with him. For a brief survey of the critical response, see Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins*, 206-9.

improvisatory art.”⁷³ Instead of a savage or dangerous persona, Armstrong wears the skins simply to denote a cartoonish image of Africa, and parallels visually the husband’s ostentatious marching band regalia. Armstrong even plays the rather obvious sexual innuendo of the lyrics broadly and humorously disallowing the record’s sexual energy. Furthermore, the film presents the gender role reversal of a powerful wife and out-of-work husband—a situation generated by the economic crisis of the early 1930s—as a farce. “The matriarchy,” one writer notes, “that rose as a function of male unemployment and the blues sounds of the ‘race records’ were made to seem mutual enemies.”⁷⁴

Singer and bandleader Cab Calloway presented a completely different take on black life in *Cab Calloway’s Hi-De-Ho*, a short film produced in 1932.⁷⁵ Like Armstrong, Calloway (who replaced Ellington at the Cotton Club) had a flamboyant performance style, but unlike the trumpeter, Calloway avoided most of the jungle trappings that surrounded Armstrong. Unlike the unemployed and impoverished couple in *Rhapsody in Black and Blue*, *Hi-De-Ho* centers on a black couple that maintains a more comfortable (if not upper class) lifestyle. In this film, the husband—who works as a train porter—purchases a radio for his wife to entertain her while he is away at work. Calloway, playing himself as a flamboyant bandleader, charms the wife through his performances on the radio. Her husband’s gift, in other words, offers the wife the opportunity (through film magic) to have an affair with Calloway—and his whole band, apparently, as at the end of the film, the entire group marches out of the bedroom playing a song. Calloway still clowns, but the portrait of black life in *Hi-De-Ho* eschews most of the obvious

⁷³Gabbard, *Jammin’ at the Margins*, 6.

⁷⁴Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 233.

⁷⁵Fred Waller, *Cab Calloway’s Hi-De-Ho* (Paramount, 1932).

caricatures and stereotypes present in the *A Rhapsody in Black and Blue*. Sexually independent, the wife relates little to the sexless wife in Armstrong's film and lacks both the frumpy dress and oppressive demeanor apparent in the earlier film. In addition, the husband in *Hi-De-Ho*, with his regular employment as a train porter, presents a more positive image of black masculinity than the fantasy king of "Jazzmania." Although ultimately made a cuckold, the husband avoids the coarse generalizations and stereotypes of black men made in *A Rhapsody in Black and Blue*.

During this same period, the Boswell Sisters, a popular vocal trio comprised of three white sisters, appeared in a brief clip promoting their version of Armstrong's "Heebie Jeebies."⁷⁶ The sisters—Connee, Martha, and Helvetia—grew up in New Orleans and they "had an unusually broad education in music."⁷⁷ Connee, the oldest and most talented sister, played saxophone, trombone, and piano among other instruments; Martha played the piano; and Helvetia could play a number of stringed instruments including guitar, banjo, and violin. Raised in a middle class environment in New Orleans, the sisters developed a tight singing style showcasing their close-harmony singing. Familiar with jazz and blues records—if not local firsthand experience—the sisters maintained a strong rhythmic pulse in their vocalizing and light syncopation colored most of their work. One hallmark of their singing style relates to the precise harmonic arrangement of much of their material. "Instead of the on-the-beat barbershop style of close harmony that was then current," one writer has noted, "the Boswells established a

⁷⁶"Heebie Jeebies," *At the Jazz Band Ball: Early Hot Jazz, Song and Dance* (Yazoo Video, 2000).

⁷⁷Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 129. Dahl and Kernfeld refer to New Orleans as their native city, but one other scholar has shown that the family most likely moved to New Orleans in 1914, when the young girls were between five and seven years old. See Kernfeld, *New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, 140; and Colin Larkin, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Popular Music* (London: Muse, 1998), 677.

swinging, jazz-influenced vocal sound.”⁷⁸ This sound, in conjunction with their creative use of microphones, made the group exceptionally compatible with radio audiences, and the sisters discovered a wide audience while singing with the Dorsey Brothers in the 1930s.⁷⁹

The film for “Heebie Jeebies” features a close-cropped, stationary shot of the sisters arranged behind a piano. As Martha plays the piano, Connee sings the song in a methodical tempo with a slight bluesy feel. This first section—especially with Connee’s rather dramatic mannerisms—tends towards an affected approximation of the blues played almost as a vaudeville-styled joke. The second half of the song, however, erupts in a boisterous scat section performed in three-part harmony by the sisters. Far removed from the Armstrong version recorded a few years earlier, this rendition by the Boswell Sisters speaks to a different audience. Not simply a reduction of “real” jazz, the carefully arranged harmonies and rhythmic structure of the song remove it from mere approximation and articulate the growing acceptance of jazz music. By the end of the piece, the Boswell Sisters ably transcended most of the arrangement’s novelty trappings, and this clip underscores the growing white acceptance of jazz in the early 1930s.

The filmic arc of the white acceptance of jazz begun by Al Jolson culminated in 1932 when Paramount Studios produced *The Musical Doctor*; the elaborate eleven-minute film starred Rudy Vallee, the popular radio crooner, and Mae Questal, the voice for Betty Boop.⁸⁰ The rather

⁷⁸Dahl, *Stormy Weather*, 129-30.

⁷⁹See Larkin, *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 677-8. Connee in particular, influenced a generation of singers (both black and white) with her bluesy, syncopated style, and Ella Fitzgerald, for one, frequently cited Boswell as a strong influence on her own singing style. Larkin, *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 678.

⁸⁰*The Musical Doctor* (Paramount, 1932).

stiff and seemingly uncomfortable Vallee presides over a musical hospital where he prescribes different styles of music to cure various ailments. Vallee, who speaks in odd rhyming phrases, presents his philosophy to fellow doctors in “Keep a Little Song Handy,” a song that offers music as a cure for most complaints. This song sets up the next scene in which a patient needs immediate attention. The other doctors debate the man’s condition—possibly indigestion, the gout, or hammertoes—before Vallee enters and gives the diagnosis of “musical starvation.” He then offers the patient a strict musical diet (which includes a “salad made from a very light ballad,” “a sandwich of two standard blues,” and “a little hot song for dessert”), the other doctors then perform the prescribed music at the patient’s bedside. The doctor in charge of the blues (on a muted trumpet) plays the music for laughs, but the inclusion of blues and jazz along with classical and popular music illustrates the emerging tolerance for jazz music. This tolerance, however, fails to affect the included black actor as he performs in a broad style reminiscent of the husband in *A Rhapsody in Black and Blue*. With bugged-out eyes and singing a stereotypically southern song, “Missin’ All the Kissin’,” the black actor is forced into another clown role. Despite the mugging and stereotyping, the subtle inclusion of a black patient in an otherwise all-white hospital also speaks to a certain inclusionary spirit in the film. Vallee deepens this complex combination of inclusion and caricature through his treatment of the black patient. Asking for his favorite instrument, a megaphone, Vallee proceeds to croon a version of “Mammy” to the patient.⁸¹ This piece relates directly to Jolson’s blackface performance in *The*

⁸¹The megaphone served as Vallee’s trademark, and the instrument allowed for both a smooth timbre as well as a method of projection for radio transmission. His appeal, one writer argues, “lay in his supremely radiophonic voice, a perfect match for the mikes, amps, and loudspeakers of the period.” Michael Pitts, et al, *The Rise of the Crooners* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 33.

Jazz Singer, and serves to connect Vallee to the popularity of the previous film along with the underlying racial stereotypes of the song.

Born Hubert Prior Vallee in Vermont, Rudy (the singer adopted his stage name from a saxophone player) constructed a successful radio career of singing in the 1930s. His northeastern ancestry coupled with an Ivy League education separated Vallee from most other singers of the period, but his smooth voice allowed for a career in vaudeville, and eventually Vallee challenged Bing Crosby's reign on the radio. The singer's elite pretensions—and average looks—prevented Vallee from obtaining lasting fame, but during the 1930s he strung together a number of popular hit songs.⁸² Paramount, however, spared little expense in promoting Vallee, and *The Musical Doctor* signified one of the more elaborate short films produced during this period. The film, for example, includes two brief scenes of animation as well as an exterior shot of an ambulance barreling down a crowded city street.⁸³ These touches underscore Vallee's marketability, and overall, *The Musical Doctor* serves as a summation of the major themes underlying the eventual acceptance of jazz music through the medium of film. The film presents jazz as merely one element in a normal diet, and by placing it alongside classical music, the film offers a subtly divergent approach to the history of the connections of jazz to more accepted genres of music. The short also combines a popular radio singer with a popular film actress (or at least her famous voice), and illustrates the synergy involved in cross promoting two forms of mass media. The filmmakers counter these attributes, however, with the casual, if brief,

⁸²“Indeed,” one writer notes, “there was nothing very sexy in his face, hair, or body. He was the epitome of the clean-cut college boy.” Pitts, *The Rise of the Crooners*, 33. Rather oddly, Vallee “claimed his sex appeal was due to a phallic quality deep in his throat.” Pitts, *The Rise of the Crooners*, 21.

⁸³Later in the film, Vallee employs a “Televisor,” a device allowing the doctor to check on (and sing to) all of his patients while standing in his office.

stereotyping of black American life, a move that relates the movie to most other filmic images of African Americans during this early period of motion pictures.

Together, the posturing of Armstrong in animal skins, the appropriation of his music by three middle class white women, and the inherent inclusion of jazz in a balanced musical diet underscores the peculiar ways in which the motion picture industry recast jazz music during the early 1930s. The studios viewed these shorts as disposable and transitory, but the low cost and inherent marketing possibilities of these films made them attractive products. For these reasons, black entertainers discovered more opportunities in these shorts than in full-length motion pictures. “Because they required little investment,” one writer argues, “and because the risk of failure and its impact on their careers was borne almost exclusively by the black performers, the studios could grind them out regularly.”⁸⁴ Though essentially ephemeral, and their popularity remains almost impossible to judge, these films underscore the growing acceptability of jazz music as well as the continued stereotyping of black life.

From the blackface antics of Amos and Andy to Louis Armstrong in animal skins, the filmic representations of jazz were connected intimately to the role of race and racism. As Hollywood projected jazz to the nation, the majority of mainstream film appearances included white actors and musicians. Widespread acceptance of racial discrimination allowed for the neglect of black performers, but the preponderance of white musicians (as well as a simplified form of jazz music) helped create a larger audience for jazz music during this period. Within a decade, the depictions of jazz on film facilitated the removal of many of the regional differences inherent to jazz music in the 1920s. In the 1930s, a host of white bandleaders and musicians brought jazz to a national audience, and the musical innovations of Benny Goodman in

⁸⁴Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 219.

particular, helped eclipse the stilted pseudo-jazz of singers like Vallee. In many ways, Goodman—the white, Jewish, working class clarinetist from Chicago—personified the *Jazz Singer* story, but the clarinetist also gathered together a prodigious group of musicians. No longer an approximation of jazz music, Goodman and other white musicians popular during the Swing Era redefined both the jazz audience as well as infused popular music with authentic jazz elements. Not everyone, however, welcomed warmly this new music only a decade removed from obscurity. During the 1920s, as jazz began to make inroads into mainstream culture, a number of critics disparaged this new music as detrimental to American society. The mainstream success of the music only heightened their concern, and throughout the decade jazz stood at the center of a national debate focused on the number of tensions that defined modern America.

CHAPTER 6

THE JAZZ CONTROVERSY

In 1926, several years before Rudy Vallee starred in *The Musical Doctor*, the *New York Times* published an article on the therapeutic effects of music on physically ill patients. Entitled “‘Organized Music’ Urged as a Cure,” the article served as a discussion on the health benefits of listening to classical music. “It is held,” the writer noted, “that ‘right music rightly produced’ may be of inestimable assistance in the curing of the sick.”¹ The author of the article never clearly defined what constituted “organized” music, but the medical professionals studying the curative use of music outright dismissed the use of jazz. Unlike Vallee, who prescribed a variety of musical genres, the National Association for Music in Hospitals proclaimed jazz as “absolutely taboo.” This “wrong music wrongly rendered” only served to upset patients, the association maintained, due mainly to the music’s “jerky and unrestful” nature. Serious in tone, the article emphasized the disruptive effects of jazz, and urged physicians not to upset their patients further through the playing of this tortuous noise. Newspapers had warned of the deleterious effects of jazz music for years. In 1922, for example, the *New York Times* published a story of a Cincinnati group’s attempt to block the construction of a movie theater adjacent to a maternity hospital. The Cincinnati chapter of the Salvation Army contended that the theater

¹“‘Organized Music’ Urged as a Cure,” *New York Times*, September 19, 1926, sec. 10, p. 8.

would “present the implanting of ‘jazz emotions’ in the babies.”² This reactionary fear concerning jazz music related directly to the rapid diffusion of the music throughout the nation, and in many ways, the technologically driven transmission of the music created as much tension as the music itself. The transformation of American culture in the 1920s forced people into a new set of relationships—socially, regionally, and politically—and the anxiety generated by much of this cultural change was focused on the growing popularity of jazz music.

As jazz began to creep into mainstream American culture, a jazz panic rushed through disparate groups of people. Divergent in demographics and reasoning, this jazz-fueled tension connected to a large number of themes rooted in the growing concern over the emergence of modern America. Fear and outright hostility framed much of this debate as many Americans reacted negatively to a new city-centered society, the prevalence of technological innovation, an emphasis on black culture, and the emergence of a new standard of morality and femininity. As the traditional values of Victorianism began to fray, in other words, many Americans expressed anxiety over the emergent modern order. The concept of modernism stood at the center of much of this debate, and jazz, one scholar writes, “represented a constellation of features associated specifically with modern civilization: materialism, mechanism, and urbanism.”³ In large measure, the shift from Victorianism to Modernism formed the context in which Americans reacted to jazz music. The frenetic improvisation that marked jazz performance connected the

²“Enjoin ‘Jazz’ Palace to Protest New Born; Salvation Army Fears Effect on Babies,” *New York Times*, October 30, 1922, p. 14.

³Macdonald Smith Moore, *Yankee Blues: Musical Culture and American Identity* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1985), 105. Daniel Singal presents a definition of modernism similar to Moore’s use of the word jazz. “Modernism,” Singal writes, “should properly be seen as a *culture*—a constellation of related ideas, beliefs, values, and modes of perception—that came into existence during the mid to late nineteenth century.” Daniel Joseph

music to Cubism, Dadaism, and a number of other modern art movements.⁴ The refashioning of traditional musical forms into something more modern—both rhythmically and harmonically—characterized the larger cultural role jazz performance played during this period. In general, Victorianism created a dichotomy separating absolutely human instincts from animal, and Modernism strove to reunite these two forces. Modernists, in other words, accepted the complex and ambivalent nature of modern American life, and artists, writers, and philosophers endeavored to create a fusion of the prominent elements in society. Jazz signified one method of merging the disparate elements kept asunder by Victorian culture, and the music, one writer argues, “symbolically fused many of the contradictions of modern society within itself.”⁵

Not everyone approved unreservedly of this change, however, and this cultural revolution alarmed many Americans. These critics of Modernism agreed with jazz advocates that jazz represented this new order, and throughout the 1920s community leaders labeled jazz dangerous, pastors posited jazz as immoral, high art cultural critics dismissed jazz as a vulgar approximation of classical music, and a sizable number of African Americans worried that the popularity of jazz would only debase further the black community. Overall, the array of anti-jazz rhetoric that

Singal, “Towards a Definition of American Modernism,” *American Quarterly* 39:1 (Spring 1987): 7.

⁴Singal, “Towards a Definition of American Modernism,” 12-4. See also Stanley Coben, “The Assault on Victorianism in the Twentieth Century,” *American Quarterly* 27:5 (December 1975): 616-8.

⁵Charles Nanry, “Jazz and Modernism,” *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* 1 (1982): 149. “Jazz,” he further argues, “embodied the dynamic tension at the very core of modern life, the tension between the individual ‘particularized’ creator (the soloist) and the group (the ensemble), with its simultaneous demands for improvisation on the one hand and discipline and coordination on the other.” *Ibid.*, 149. Daniel Singal also articulates this idea of cultural blending. Jazz, he argues, “blends the primitivism of its African origins with modern sophistication.” Singal, “Towards a Definition of American Modernism,” 14.

appeared in the 1920s reflected a larger pattern of action and reaction concerning the emergent modern nation, and much of the concern over jazz reflected a mood of apprehension as the pace of American life noticeably quickened.⁶ “We are living,” one musician argued, “in a state of unrest, of social evolution, of transition from a condition of established order to a new objective as yet but dimly visualized. This is reflected in the jazz fad.”⁷ Cultural historian Warren Susman argued that this “great fear” concerned “whether any great industrial and democratic mass society can maintain a significant level of civilization, and whether mass education and mass communication will allow any civilization to survive.”⁸ Jazz reflected much of this cultural transformation, and critics regularly attacked the music as symptomatic of the larger tensions erupting throughout American society.⁹ “Jazz served,” one writer contends, “as a scavenger symbol for the cultural traumas of the 1920s.”¹⁰ As a mechanical-sounding, mechanically mass produced music, originating from the black community, and serving as the soundtrack for a new

⁶For an amplification of this theme of increased activity as part of the new modern order, see John Higham, “The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890s,” in John Weiss, ed., *The Origins of Modern Consciousness* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965), 27-30. For the general antimodern sentiment, see T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

⁷Quoted in Robert Walser, ed., *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 44.

⁸Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 107.

⁹“Jazz challenged the Yankee musical mission,” one scholar argues, “because it achieved an instant popularity that illuminated white nervousness over the rapid ethnic transformation of Northern cities and because trained musicians and critics, both abroad and at home, paid serious attention to it.” Moore, *Yankee Blues*, 82.

¹⁰Moore, *Yankee Blues*, 82.

morality among women and young people, jazz existed at the center of the debate on modern America.

The new industrial order and World War I—the modern articulation of this new industrialism—helped define the parameters of much of the discussion surrounding the role of jazz music. The debate concerning jazz dealt with fears of a rapidly growing industrial network, and “some critics perceived jazz as the antimusic of robots and riveting machines, the technology of urban civilization.”¹¹ Other critics also connected jazz to the workplace, but rather than viewing the music as a symptom of a new modern order, these commentators feared jazz made workers lazy and inefficient. “In almost every big industry where music has been instituted,” Anne Shaw Faulkner argued, “it has been found necessary to discontinue jazz because of its demoralizing effects upon the workers.” “This was noticed,” she continued, “in an unsteadiness and lack of evenness in the workmanship of the product after a period when the workmen had indulged in jazz music.”¹² Some writers connected this fear of industrialization to the increasing role of network radio in society, and a standard line of reasoning concluded that simply because radios can pick up jazz, no reason exists as to “why it should be allowed to do so.”¹³ This writer also related the story of the planned deportation of forty American jazz bands from Germany. “That is bad news,” the writer argued, “for the effect may succeed, and then there will be forty more jazz bands in the United States than there are now, and already we are much more than

¹¹Moore, *Yankee Blues*, 108.

¹²Anne Shaw Faulkner, “Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation,” *The Ladies Home Journal*, August 1921, pp. 16, 34; reprinted in Walser, *Keeping Time*, 32-6. Quote on page 33. For an opposite approach to jazz in the workplace, see Munich Fuller Barnard, “Jazz is Linked to the Factory Wheel,” *New York Times*, December 30, 1928, Magazine Section, p. 4.

¹³“Jazz Bands Here and Abroad,” *New York Times*, December 12, 1924, p. 20.

adequately supplied with these baleful groups of conscienceless noisemakers.”¹⁴ World War I emerged as the definitive symbol of this “frenetic era,” and a number of writers posited jazz as a music emblematic of this cultural change.¹⁵ One commentator, for example, connected the war with a “revolt against conventions of all sorts—artistic, religious, moral, social, political.”¹⁶ In general, critics of jazz argued that the music “represented the manifold paradoxes of modern life: hedonism and urban mechanism, the components of consumption capitalism,” and this cultural apprehension affected most areas of American life.¹⁷

Writers fearful of the corrupting nature of jazz expressed this apprehension in a variety of different ways, and a number of commentators argued that a jazz infestation would only serve to demean and degrade all forms of the national culture. “For years past,” composer Robert M. Stults writes, “I have watched the gradual deterioration of the so-called popular music of the day.” “This jazz epidemic,” he continues, “has also had its degenerating effect on the popular

¹⁴“Jazz Bands Here and Abroad,” *New York Times*, December 12, 1924, p. 20. “Writing about jazz,” another writer maintained, “naturally brings to mind other regrettable sounds that only too often irritate the radio listener who wants to hear something else.” This writer also compared jazz to aggravating outbursts of static, but concluded that static at least exist “in the nature of things electrical.” “Far Harder to Bear Than Static,” *New York Times*, January 12, 1925, p. 14.

¹⁵Neil Leonard, *Jazz and the White Americans: The Acceptance of a New Art Form* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 30.

¹⁶Paul Fritz Laubenstein, “Jazz—Debit and Credit,” *Musical Quarterly* 15:3 (October 1929): 614.

¹⁷Moore, *Yankee Blues*, 119. “Whatever jazz may be in the future,” one writer argued, “at present to us it is a thing poor indeed.” “He Has No Scorn For Jazz,” *New York Times*, January 28, 1925, p. 16.

songs of the day.”¹⁸ The diffusion (and methods of diffusion) constituted as great a threat to mainstream culture, critics argued, as the music itself. “Nothing,” one *New York Times* article maintained, “is safe from [jazz’s] devastating touch.”¹⁹ Still, a number of commentators disparaged the potential social effects of jazz but maintained an optimism concerning the eventual expiration of the noise. “It will disappear,” music director Will Earhart contended, “like all things that are not sound and fundamental always have disappeared.”²⁰ “If America did not think jazz, feel jazz and dream jazz,” Rabbi Stephen Wise declared, “jazz would not have taken a dominant place in the music of America.” “When America regains its soul,” he maintained, “jazz will go.”²¹ Apprehension over the direction of American society thus fueled much of the anti-jazz debate, and this larger social fear reverberated throughout the musical community as a number of music professionals began to express concern over the potential effects of jazz on classical music.

Throughout the 1920s newspapers and magazines often invited nationally recognized composers to offer their thoughts on jazz music, and these music professionals shared their contempt for larger elements of social change. Most of these composers, however, focused more explicitly on the effects of jazz on more traditional (and accepted) forms of music. Frank Damrosch—one of the leading critics on this issue of the jazz effects on classical music—served

¹⁸Robert M. Stults, “The Jazz Problem,” *The Etude* (1924), reprinted in Walser, *Keeping Time*, 53.

¹⁹“Drawing a Line for Jazz,” *New York Times*, December 10, 1922, sec. 8, p. 4.

²⁰Will Earhart, “The Jazz Problem,” *The Etude* (1924), reprinted in Walser, *Keeping Time*, 49. “A man in an epileptic fit,” he continued, “certainly loosens a large amount of energy; but it is ludicrously foggy thinking to appraise such energy as strength.”

²¹Stephen Wise, “The Jazz Problem,” *The Etude* (1924), reprinted in Walser, *Keeping Time*, 51-2.

as the director of the institute that eventually became Julliard School of Music and consistently argued that jazz only debased respectable music. “Attempts have been made,” Damrosch wrote, “to ‘elevate’ jazz by stealing phrases from the classic composers and vulgarizing them by the rhythms and devices used in jazz.”²² Much of Damrosch’s displeasure stemmed from the syncopated rhythm of jazz. “Jazz is a monotony of rhythm,” he argued, “it is rhythm without music and without soul.” “Jazz,” he continued, “with its degrading influence takes the place of the sincerity and sweetness of the class.”²³ Other music directors echoed Damrosch’s arguments. “I don’t like ‘Jazz,’ and don’t approve of it,” Pittsburgh conductor Will Earhart asserted, “my reason for not liking it is that it does not come pleasingly to my ears.”²⁴ Again, the rhythmic pulse of jazz lay at the center of the debate as the director cataloged his displeasure. “I do not approve of ‘jazz,’” he contended, “because it represents, in its convulsive, twitching, hiccoughing rhythms, the abdication of control by the central nervous system—the brain.”²⁵

Rhythm signified only one of the issues confronting music professionals, and other critics within the music business feared the improvisational elements of jazz. “Is it possible,” one

²²Frank Damrosch, “The Jazz Problem,” *The Etude* (1924), reprinted in Walser, *Keeping Time*, 44.

²³“Damrosch Assails Jazz,” *New York Times*, April 17, 1928, p. 26. A similar argument took place in France during this period, and the *New York Times* published an account of a French audience mad at the jazzing of the “Marseillaise.” Although this deliberation took place in France, the commentary reflects the contemporary national scene to such a degree that the *Times* seemingly felt the need to publish the account. The uproar surrounding the incident, the newspaper reported, “indicated that however popular jazz may be with a large part of the public everywhere, it is felt to be a low form of music and that to put a national anthem in it is an insult to patriots.” “A Virtuous Revolt Against Jazz,” *New York Times*, February 2, 1926, p. 26.

²⁴Will Earhart, “The Jazz Problem,” *The Etude* (1924), reprinted in Walser, *Keeping Time*, 49.

²⁵Will Earhart, “The Jazz Problem,” *The Etude* (1924), reprinted in Walser, *Keeping Time*, 49.

writer asked, “to protect from jazzing by anything but moral suasion?” This particular article focused on the problems confronted by sheet music publishers as improvised jazz began to take precedence over written arrangements. “How can you legally prevent a man,” the writer asked, “from playing a piece the way his fancy or his interest dictates?” Only through moral persuasion, or “by being present at every performance,” the writer concluded, can critics contain improvisation.²⁶ In a similar vein, one group, the National Federation of Music Clubs, tended to be sympathetic towards jazz, but “they were fighting the ‘jazzing of the noble compositions of the great composers.’” Improvised modern music, they hasten to add, “has its own place,” but society must first preserve the sanctity of classical music.²⁷ The removal of a written musical score alarmed a number of professional musicians, and many orchestral members simply could not make the transition to the Jazz Age. One cellist, who had performed classical music for almost three decades, witnessed the jazz revolution in his field and chose suicide over a slow jazz-fueled death. His determination not to play jazz cost him much needed employment, and the cellist eventually took his life rather than “insult his cello.”²⁸ The debate over classical music never strayed far from the apparent attack on morality by jazz, and many of these music professionals returned to the larger issues of their concern. “Jazz is to real music,” Frank Damrosch argued, “what the caricature is to the portrait. The caricature may be clever, but it aims at distortion of line and feature in order to make its point; similarly, jazz may be clever but

²⁶“Drawing a Line for Jazz,” *New York Times*, December 10, 1922, sec. 8, p. 4..

²⁷“Music Clubs Against Jazzing of Classics,” *New York Times*, December 6, 1927, p. 29.

²⁸“Musician Is Driven to Suicide by Jazz; Wouldn’t Play It, Couldn’t Get Employment,” *New York Times*, April 7, 1922, p. 1.

its effects are made by exaggeration, distortion, and vulgarisms.”²⁹ Jazz signified an assault on respectable music and tastes, a number of composers and music directors argued, and this cultural attack indicated many of the social tensions coursing through American life in the 1920s.

This fear of vulgarity connected to the debate over the new definitions of femininity and sexuality, and anti-modern critics pointed to jazz music as the most prominent representation of the loosening of inhibitions. The cultural shift away from the traditional values of emotional repression and aggressively maintained morality defined much of this debate as women began to shed some of the more inhibiting features of Victorianism. The daft, uninhibited flapper replaced the dour, corseted Victorian, and these two generalizations served as the primary symbols of female life in the 1920s. Modern women gravitated towards new clothing and hair styles, and in many ways, these outward expressions of style reflected an inward shift in attitude.³⁰ As the “boyish and single” modern mode of expression replaced the “maternal and wifely” Victorian ideal, women’s fashion provided a further way for young women to distance themselves from traditional roles.³¹ The modern feminine ideal centered on activity and movement, and fashion designers produced lighter clothing “better suited for busy, athletic

²⁹Frank Damrosch, “The Jazz Problem,” *The Etude* (1924), reprinted in Walser, *Keeping Time*, 44.

³⁰“Where the ideal Victorian middle-class woman,” one writer notes, “was shrouded in colorless and sexless drapery, fit inside constructs of corsets, layered wrapping, hobbled high-button shoes, the Flapper projected an undomesticated look celebrating sexual abandon and androgyny.” “Where the Victorian’s body was unimaginable beneath the fortress of her garb,” he continued, “the Flapper’s thin and shape-hugging dress announced the body as an emblem of youth and sexuality on display and dancing to the accompaniment of ‘jazz.’” David Meltzer, ed., *Reading Jazz* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1993), 73. See also Kenneth A. Yellis, “Prosperity’s Child: Some Thoughts on the Flapper,” *American Quarterly* 21:1 (Spring 1969): 48-9.

³¹The flapper “bobbed her hair, concealed her forehead, flattened her chest, hid her waist, dieted her hips away and kept her legs in plain sight.” Yellis, “Prosperity’s Child,” 44.

women.”³² Hairdos, too, signified a more active lifestyle, and many young women began wearing their hair in a short bob, a style first popularized by the dancer Irene Castle.³³ As traditional gender roles began to collapse, the fear of uninhibited women dancing publicly to jazz music coursed through traditional-minded social patrons.³⁴ “Much of the outcry,” one historian writes, “had to do with sex,” and critics connected jazz music to unrestrained dancing, public lewdness, and eventual sexual relations.³⁵ Jazz, in other words, loosened the corset and led directly to unredeemed activity. “That jazz,” Anne Shaw Faulkner argued, “is an influence for evil is also felt by a number of the biggest country clubs, which have forbidden the corset check room, the leaving of the hall between dances, and the jazz orchestra—three evils which have also been eliminated from many municipal dance halls.”³⁶ Jazz music represented the loudest and most obvious element of this new culture, and many critics pointed to jazz as the root cause of this shift in morality. “It is somewhat of a rude awakening for many of these parents,” Faulkner wrote, “to find that America is facing a most serious situation regarding its popular music.”³⁷

³²Yellis, “Prosperity’s Child,” 47.

³³Yellis, “Prosperity’s Child,” 48.

³⁴See Paula S. Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 303-6.

³⁵Eric C. Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 9. The rhythmic qualities of jazz,” he continues, “the participatory elements of the performance, and the physical aspects of the dancing associated with it spoke of unrestrained sexual energies, which had long been projected onto black bodies by Europeans and white Americans.” Ibid.

³⁶Faulkner, reprinted in Walser, *Keeping Time*, 33.

³⁷Faulkner, reprinted in Walser, *Keeping Time*, 32.

The fear of uncorseted young women cavorting with shameful young men aroused perhaps the most explicit attacks on jazz music as a source of moral degradation, and newspapers throughout the 1920s published sermons composed by religious leaders decrying the rampant wantonness of America's youth. "Jazz music," one writer argued in 1926, "is just as much a revolt against the standards of modesty and decency as is the jazz tendency in dress."³⁸ Most of these sermonizers pointed to the role dancing played in the popularity of jazz, and the sensual closeness presented by jazz dancing served to hasten the demise of traditional values of decency. "Dancing in itself is a substitute for sex contact," one pastor noted, "but when it becomes an instrument for a gratification then the whole psychological process is turned about, and instead you have an injury."³⁹ An Episcopal minister made a similar argument and contended that jazz music and dancing "lead to jazz manners and jazz morals among the younger members of the Church."⁴⁰ Jazz music, his line of reasoning asserted, led to dances, which then led to young people escaping the dance to pursue other, even more immoral acts. "Couples retiring to automobiles and remaining there during dances were frowned on," the local church organization argued, "[and] a reasonable check must be made for the community good."⁴¹ Other ministers allowed less equivocating, insisting instead that jazz be confined "to a hotter place than this

³⁸New York *Times*, May 7, 1926, p. 10.

³⁹New York *Times*, October 30, 1922, p. 14.

⁴⁰"Both Jazz Music and Jazz Dancing Barred From All Louisville Episcopal Churches ," New York *Times*, September 19, 1921, p. 17

⁴¹"Both Jazz Music and Jazz Dancing Barred From All Louisville Episcopal Churches ," New York *Times*, September 19, 1921, p. 17

earth.” Sparing much sympathy, the pastor defined the jazz musician as “an outlaw and a musical bandit. Like the gunman he is running amuck and should be relentlessly put down.”⁴²

Other religious leaders saw a larger, global dimension to the spread of jazz, and at least one writer argued that jazz represented a worldwide conspiracy. “Jazz,” the reverend argued, “was borrowed from Central Africa by a gang of wealthy international Bolshevists from America, their aim being to strike at Christian civilization throughout the world.”⁴³ His convoluted plot—involving both Africans and communists—spoke to the degree in which religious leaders feared that jazz sounded the death knell for western civilization and Christianity. “Jazz,” another minister claimed, “is a picture of the world fiddling, or the leisure of the few, while the rest of the world burns up like Rome under Nero.” “The church,” he added, “is the best remedy for jazz.”⁴⁴ Throughout this period, religious commentators attempted to connect jazz music with hedonism and cultural savagery, and the association of jazz to Africa—either in terms of an international conspiracy or musical origins—helped underscore the destructive aspects of the music. “Jazz,” an Episcopal rector explained, “goes back to the African jungle and is one of the crying evils of today.” The link to Africa, in this critic’s sermon, signified the supposed devolution of American society. “Jazz is retrogression,” he continued, “it is going to the African jungle for our music.”⁴⁵ Although the issue of race remained slightly veiled within this commentary, this sermon from 1922 establishes an early pattern of presenting

⁴²New York *Times*, May 7, 1926, p. 10.

⁴³“Says Jazz Threatens Christian Civilization,” New York *Times*, December 16, 1934, p. E2.

⁴⁴New York *Times*, October 30, 1922, p. 14.

⁴⁵New York *Times*, October 30, 1922, p. 14.

jazz as foreign and therefore detrimental to American society. Other jazz critics, throughout this period, began to elaborate on the racial elements alluded to in this sermon, attacking both the inherent African elements in jazz as well as cultural and social impact generated by the mainstream acceptance of the “savage crash and bang” of jazz.⁴⁶

During the 1920s, a number of commentators began to emphasize the correlation between jazz music and African American culture, and many of these observers warned of the social implications associated with the increased diffusion of jazz. “Symbol of the surface of American life,” one scholar has written, “jazz was perceived primarily as carrier of dangerous romantic blackness, of undisciplined sensuousness.”⁴⁷ Most of the commentary tended to agree that jazz represented a valid (if deeply misunderstood) expression of black culture in the black community. Problems arose only as this African American folk music seeped into the white community. As a subculture of musical expression, in other words, jazz served as a unique cultural indicator. “If jazz originated in the dance rhythms of the negro,” composer Frank Damrosch argued, “it was at least interesting as the self-expression of a primitive race.” Problems arose only once “jazz was adopted by the ‘highly civilized’ white race,” he continued, and jazz then “tended to denigrate” white society “towards primitivity.” Once jazz began to seep out of the black community and entered mainstream culture, criticism of the music increased dramatically. Black people playing jazz for other black people failed to signify a great threat to white culture. White people performing and listening to jazz, however, represented a direct attack on traditional music and values. “When a savage distorts his features and paints his face

⁴⁶New York *Times*, October 30, 1922, p. 14.

⁴⁷Moore, *Yankee Blues*, 105.

so as to produce startling effects,” the writer concluded, “we smile at his childishness; but when a civilized man imitates him, not as a joke but in all seriousness, we turn away in disgust.”⁴⁸

This fear of the supposed effects of black music on white culture connected directly to the rapid growth of black communities in the urban North.⁴⁹ Anti-modern commentators connected this increased black population to a growing acceptance of jazz as well as an increased erosion of traditional values. The music critic for the New York *Herald Tribune*, for example, associated the alleged immorality of black Americans, increased black migration to the urban north, and the effect that these issues would have on white culture. Jazz, he feared, would “soon emanate from the Negro brothels of the South.”⁵⁰ Anti-jazz critics consistently pointed to interracial sex—at least implicitly—as the real threat of jazz acceptance, and in general, jazz music “was made to stand for the devolutionary forces of sensual blackness.”⁵¹ “Some whites feared jazz,” one historian writes, “because it was rooted in black culture, because it played a role in facilitating interracial contact, and because it symbolized, in racially coded terms, the intrusion of popular tastes into the national culture.”⁵² “At a moment,” he continues, “when many young people (and young women in particular) were throwing off the constraints of Victorian sexual mores, anxieties over white juvenile sexuality dovetailed with fears of black

⁴⁸Frank Damrosch, “The Jazz Problem,” *The Etude* (1924), reprinted in Walser, *Keeping Time*, 44.

⁴⁹For a jazz-centered discussion of the black migration patterns out of the South, see Leroy Ostransky, *Jazz City: The Impact of Our Cities on the Development of Jazz* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 82-99.

⁵⁰H. E. Krehbiel, *Literary Digest* LXV (January 12, 1920), 40. See also, Leonard, *Jazz and the White Americans*, 36; and Moore, *Yankee Blues*, 85.

⁵¹Moore, *Yankee Blues*, 108.

⁵²Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz?*, 9.

sexuality and, especially, of the impact black culture might have on the sexual behavior of young whites.”⁵³ Much of the white fear concerning black Americans stemmed from a rash of social science that appeared in the 1910s and 1920s that sought to prove the biological inferiority of African Americans. In 1916, for example, Madison Grant published his theories of racial determinism (all based in assumptions) in *The Passing of the Great Race*. Grant provided the supposed biological evidence to bolster segregation and racism, and his work connected with the larger pattern of Nativism that reemerged as a cultural phenomenon focused on the elimination of foreign elements from American society throughout the early twentieth century.⁵⁴ Critics also connected the African American elements of jazz to the industrialization of the nation. “When the original Negro rhythm of jazz,” one writer argued, “which included as an indispensable component of all real rhythm an element of relaxation, became domesticated throughout the country, it was caught up in the incessant movement of the machine, pounding not only in our ears but also continuously in our consciousness, particularly during the stress of war-time production.”⁵⁵ Thus, the race-based fear of the emergence of jazz blended explicitly with the issues of gender and Modernism.

One of the most explicit condemnations of jazz appeared in an article printed in the *New York Times* in 1927, and overall, this article recapitulated most of the main arguments concerning the racial elements of jazz as well as the larger issues involved with Modernism. The central theme of this article underscores the importance of cultural continuity, and throughout the

⁵³Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz?*, 9.

⁵⁴John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 155-7.

⁵⁵Laubenstein, “Jazz—Debit and Credit,” 617.

piece a musician posits jazz as a dangerous force to white culture. “Jazz must be banned by the white races,” the musician argued, “if they wish to maintain their prestige.”⁵⁶ The musician also alludes to the cultural shift towards Modernist values. “Jazz was largely responsible for lowering pre-war standards,” he contended, “and it must be taboo in every shape and form until its baneful influence is gone.” Although the musician fails to define clearly the social standards in danger of degradation, he outlines explicitly the musical flaws of jazz. “Jazz is a low type of primitive music,” he maintained, “founded on crude rhythms suggested by stamping feet and clapping hands.” “It puts emphasis,” he continues, “on the grotesque by the banging and clanging of pots and pans or any shimmering metallic substance reinforced with special drums.” The trombone, he argued, “is made to bray like an ass, guffaw like a village idiot and moan like a cow in distress.” The trumpet, “associated in poetry with seraphim, is made to screech and produce sounds like drawing a nail on slate, tearing calico or the wailing of a nocturnal tomcat.” Jazz, he noted, “cannot be made anything but the essence of vulgarity.” Together, the musician fears the social effects of the growing acceptance of jazz, the increasing dismissal of traditional values, and the cultural implications of white people accepting black forms of music. “The popularization of jazz,” the writer concluded, “and the attendant immodest dances are lowering the prestige of the white races.”⁵⁷

As many white Americans fretted over the changing course of mainstream culture, a sizeable number of black Americans feared that the increased exposure of jazz music would only degrade the African American community. Whereas most white critics tended to assail jazz as

⁵⁶Each of the following quotes comes from the article, “Warns White Races They Must Drop Jazz,” *New York Times*, September 20, 1927, p. 4.

⁵⁷“Warns White Races They Must Drop Jazz,” *New York Times*, September 20, 1927, p. 4.

detrimental to the moral fiber of the nation, black critics of jazz worried that a focus on the more salacious elements of jazz would only serve to illustrate certain weaknesses of African Americans as seen by white people. A strong current of ambivalence marked the jazz debate within the black community, and many black writers expressed concern over the connection of jazz to Africa and the resultant effects that association would have on African Americans. Many black leaders opposed jazz out of fear that the music only debased the entire black community. “The treatment of jazz by Negro writers,” one scholar argues, “reveals that it is not considered the kind of cultural achievement of the race that ought to be mentioned or recommended.”⁵⁸ Dave Peyton, the jazz columnist for the *Chicago Defender*, represented one aspect of black writing with his generally supportive views on jazz undercut by a wariness of the more sensational elements of the music. “I am not against jazz music,” he argued, “but I do think it belongs in its place.”⁵⁹ Other African American writers active during the 1920s expressed more ambivalence, and intellectuals such as Alain Locke, J. A. Rogers, and W. E. B. DuBois feared an eventual degradation of the black community as white people increasingly associated jazz with African Americans.⁶⁰

Throughout his music columns for the *Chicago Defender*, Dave Peyton maintained a rather specific (and at times dogmatic) characterization of jazz, and he combined an emphasis on the composed components of jazz with a cautionary caveat of the possible immorality associated

⁵⁸Berger, “Jazz: Resistance to the Diffusion of a Culture-Pattern,” 466.

⁵⁹*Chicago Defender*, March 12, 1927, p. 8. For Peyton’s definitions of “good jazz” see *Chicago Defender*, February 20, 1926, p. 6; February 27, 1926, p. 7; August 7, 1926, p. 7; and December 29, 1928, p. 10. See also Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz?*, 33-5.

⁶⁰See for example, Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz?*, 13-4.

with hot jazz. Good jazz helped uplift both the audience and the musician, Peyton argued, but the columnist also maintained that more unrestrained jazz represented a depraved form of entertainment. “The dangerous jazz,” Peyton wrote in 1927, “is the barbaric, filthy, discordant, wild and shrieky music, that should be eliminated from the public dance halls and should be disqualified by the decent element.”⁶¹ The clearest indication of Peyton’s view of jazz, however, concerned his frequent columns centered on the history of jazz. Over the course of twelve articles between 1925 and 1928, Peyton attempted to construct a jazz history that emphasized and accentuated the elements that he found most pleasing in the music, and throughout his columns Peyton subtly distanced jazz music from any supposed African origins. “The story about jazz having its beginning in Africa played by the natives,” Peyton argues, “is mere imagination.”⁶² As he removed the continent of Africa from his narrative, Peyton also removed many of the more overt black-based domestic antecedents of jazz, as ragtime eclipsed almost completely the blues as the primary precursor of syncopated jazz.

This ragtime-centered jazz schematic connected in large measure to the philosophies of the major writers of the Harlem Renaissance, and J. A. Rogers, in his chapter on jazz in Alain

⁶¹Chicago *Defender*, July 16, 1927, p. 8.

⁶²Chicago *Defender*, December 12, 1925, p. 7. Peyton’s writing, however, reveals a considerable degree of ambivalence, and despite his desire to separate Africa from his narrative Peyton still feared the cooption of jazz unequivocally by white musicians. “As usual,” he writes, “the white man has taken credit for the birth of jazz and its development.” *Chicago Defender*, February 5, 1927, p. 6. For his views on the history of jazz see *Chicago Defender*, October 24, 1925, p. 6; December 12, 1925, p. 7; February 27, 1926, p. 7; February 5, 1927, p. 6; August 6, 1927, p. 8; and June 16, 1928, p. 10. See also October 3, 1925, p. 6; August 14, 1926, p. 7; September 18, 1926, p. 7; October 9, 1926, p. 6; October 29, 1927, p. 10; April 14, 1928, p. 10; and May 12, 1928, p. 10.

Locke's *The New Negro*, declared ragtime as "the direct predecessor of jazz."⁶³ The salaciousness of the blues—in the earthy churn of the rhythms and the coarse suggestiveness of the lyrics—dismayed most black intellectuals during the 1920s, and with the important exceptions of Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, the blues represented only the lowbrow articulation of black musical expression.⁶⁴ "Conformity to New Negro standards," one scholar argues, "necessarily meant a unfavorable attitude toward the lifeblood of African-American music-making: blues, jazz, and other vernacular idioms."⁶⁵ Throughout his essay, "Jazz at Home," Rogers presents a history of jazz similar to Peyton.⁶⁶ Aside from their shared emphasis on ragtime, both writers praised the symphonic jazz of Paul Whiteman, and the white bandleader demonstrated, in Rogers's terms, "the finer possibilities of jazz music." Unlike Peyton, however, Rogers used jazz to examine larger elements of African American life in the 1920s. "For the Negro himself," Roger argued, "jazz is both more and less dangerous than for the white—less, in that he is nervously more in tune with it; more, in that at his average level of economic

⁶³J. A. Rogers, "Jazz at Home," in Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (1927; reprint, New York: Touchstone, 1992), 217. Musically, this essay remains a jumbled arrangement of arguments, and although Rogers's thesis dovetails generally with Peyton's emphasis on ragtime, Rogers also tends to conflate jazz with the blues. "The Negroes who invented it," Rogers writes of jazz, "called their songs the 'Blues.'" Ibid. Locke's *The New Negro*, one scholar explains, "advanced the ideals and goals that characterized [the Harlem Renaissance]—chief among them, economic, social, and cultural equity with white citizens—to be achieved through the creation and dissemination of great works of literary, musical, and visual art." Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., "Cosmopolitan or Provincial?: Ideology in Early Black Music Historiography, 1867-1940," *Black Music Research Journal* 16:1 (Spring 1996): 23.

⁶⁴Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 222-3.

⁶⁵Ramsey, "Cosmopolitan or Provincial?," 27-8.

⁶⁶Rogers, "Jazz at Home," 221.

development his amusement life is more open to the forces of social vice.”⁶⁷ For Rogers, for example, jazz signified a fundamental element in African American culture, especially in terms of an expression of revolt. “Jazz is rejuvenation,” Rogers contended, “a recharging of the batteries of civilization with primitive new vigor.”⁶⁸ Primitivism also played a large role in Rogers’s fascination (and ultimate misunderstanding) of jazz music, and throughout his article, Rogers rather simply connects jazz performance to an earlier period of civilization in marked contrast to the industrial, modern age. “The jazz spirit, being primitive demands more frankness and sincerity,” Rogers writes, “[and] just as it already has done in art and music so eventually in human relations and social manners, it will no doubt have the effect of putting more reality in life by taking some of the needless artificiality out.”⁶⁹ This emphasis on the Primitive elements of jazz music underscores the importance of Modernist thought behind the Harlem Renaissance, especially in terms of emphasizing the supposed superiority of the preindustrial past.⁷⁰ The jazz debate as articulated by many black Americans connected clearly to the same modernist tensions that concerned white critics, but the relationship between black culture and mainstream culture differentiated the arguments of the two groups. Modernism, in other words, generally fuelled the

⁶⁷Rogers, “Jazz at Home,” 223.

⁶⁸Rogers, “Jazz at Home,” 224. In large measure, Rogers’s take on jazz reflects the newfound energy that fueled much of the transformation to Modernity. See Higham, “The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890s,” 27-30.

⁶⁹Rogers, “Jazz at Home,” 223.

⁷⁰For a discussion of the Primitive elements in jazz, see Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 89-92. For the connections between Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, see Houston A. Baker, “Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance,” *American Quarterly* 39:1 (Spring 1987): 84-97; Gerald Early, “Three Notes Toward a Cultural Definition of the Harlem Renaissance,” *Callaloo* 14:1 (Winter 1991): 136-49; Gilbert Osofsky, “Symbol of the Jazz Age: The New Negro and Harlem Discovered,” *American Quarterly* 17:2 (Summer 1965): 229-38; and Nathan I. Huggins, *The Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 9-11, 89-92.

jazz controversy, but black Americans also worried about the impact jazz would have on their own community in addition to larger concerns of American society.⁷¹

In general, the writers of the Harlem Renaissance treated jazz with wary neglect, and the elitism of many black intellectuals prevented a complete discourse centered on jazz music.⁷² This reactionary elitism coursed through much of the writing of the Harlem Renaissance, and jazz simply failed to fit into the larger arguments made by Alain Locke and W. E. B. DuBois. Both Locke and DuBois, in other words, focused more intently on the cultural importance of black spirituals and gave only passing emphasis to jazz music.⁷³ “Harlem intellectuals promoted Negro art,” one Renaissance scholar maintains, “but one thing is very curious, except for Langston Hughes, none of them took jazz—the new music—seriously.”⁷⁴ In large measure, jazz represented one of the greatest achievements of black culture in the twentieth century, but most leaders of the Harlem Renaissance simply dismissed the music as lowbrow noise.⁷⁵ Put simply, jazz proved problematic for black intellectuals in the 1920s. The centrality and agency of African Americans in the creation of jazz represented a key asset to the music, but the increasing attention on the supposed immorality of jazz (by both the mainstream and black press) made the

⁷¹See Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz?*, 5.

⁷²“The socio-political views of many Renaissance writers,” one scholar writes, “together with their narrow notion of ‘great art,’ prevented them from unequivocally (or perhaps just publicly) embracing the music of the cabarets, theaters, and speakeasies.” Ramsey, “Cosmopolitan or Provincial?,” 23.

⁷³Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz?*, 11.

⁷⁴Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 9. For a brief discussion of Hughes’s “music inflected verse,” see Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, eds., *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Vintage Classics, 1994), 3-7.

⁷⁵Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 10-11.

absolute acceptance of jazz music somewhat challenging. For black intellectuals, African American poetry, spirituals, plays, and novels represented more comfortable areas of study than did jazz, and for most of this period, mainstream black writers and scholars relegated jazz music to the dustbin of lowbrowism.⁷⁶

The controversy and panic as played out in social, moral, musical, and racial terms—and that defined much of the debate on jazz by cultural critics during this period—failed to recede completely by the early 1930s, and an anti-jazz sentiment continued to percolate as swing music dominated the nation. Despite their prevalence in mainstream newspapers and magazines, jazz critics also failed to define all of the debate during the 1920s. Throughout the decade a number of commentators wholeheartedly approved of jazz music, and by the last half of the 1920s, newspaper articles that focused primarily on critics of jazz also began to include more obvious elements of ambivalence. In 1926, for example, the *New York Times* published an article that loudly proclaimed jazz as the “agency of the devil.” The first part of the article resembled any number of contemporary anti-jazz articles with an emphasis on ministerial complaints. At the end of the article, however, the writer noted that Marguerite d’Alvarez, a celebrated opera singer, enthusiastically endorsed jazz music. “Jazz is my reason for living in New York City,” d’Alvarez maintained, “I prefer to live in New York because here I can best find the inspiration of good jazz music.” “To me [jazz] is truly great music,” she continued, “and certainly it is the music that best expresses us moderns.”⁷⁷ The issue of modernity thus served as the defining factor of both critics and proponents of jazz music.

⁷⁶“Jazz,” Huggins writes, “was definitely not the ‘high art’ that James Weldon Johnson and Alain Locke were hoping for.” Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 198. “Jazz,” Huggins also notes, “was infectious entertainment and not an ingredient of high civilization.” *Ibid.*, 64.

⁷⁷*New York Times*, May 7, 1926, p. 10.

The larger forces that created modern America—urbanization, industrialization, accelerated black migration, increased ethnic diversity, technological expansion—also helped frame the jazz debate. Americans therefore responded to jazz in ways similar to their responses to the emergence of a modern state. Connected to this shift away from traditional values, the distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow cultural forms began to dissolve. At no point did the jazz controversy disappear completely, but the loudest, most virulent elements of criticism during the 1920s gave way to a begrudging acceptance. This growing approval materialized on two different levels: several eminent bandleaders actively sought to combine jazz and classical forms, and the music press (in conjunction with the mainstream press) began publishing unambiguously positive articles on jazz.⁷⁸ This combined set of circumstances—gradual acceptance reflected in the press and the concerted quest for respectability by certain jazz musicians—allowed for a growing tolerance for jazz music. By the mid-1930s, the cultural transformation of the nation produced a new, nationally recognized expression of modern America, and much of this musical development stemmed from the music of Paul Whiteman, the premiere articulation of respectable jazz during the 1920s.

⁷⁸Between 1922-1941, *The Etude*, *The Musician*, *Musical Quarterly* 1/3 of articles rejected all forms of jazz except the sweetest records by Paul Whiteman and 1/3 saw that it had a very limited place in American culture. Berger argues that an unapologetically positive article on jazz did not appear until 1935. Berger, “Jazz: Resistance to the Diffusion of a Culture-Pattern,” 471-2. In contrast, James Lincoln Collier controversially argues that most magazines and newspapers published articles favorable, or at least not virulently against, jazz music. See James Lincoln Collier, *The Reception of Jazz in America: A New View* (Brooklyn: Institute for the Study of American Music, 1988).

CHAPTER 7

AN AMERICAN MUSIC

On February 12, 1924, Paul Whiteman and his orchestra performed a program of modern American music at the Aeolian Hall in New York City.¹ Although not the first instance of jazz featured in the respectable setting of a concert hall, this highly promoted performance proved to be the most anticipated and publicized.² In general, Whiteman's concert connected little to the live performances of New Orleanians in ramshackle halls, Chicagoans in South Side clubs, or New Yorkers in extravagant ballrooms. These musicians performed a functional form of jazz; the music served as the backdrop for dancing, socializing, or some commercial venture. Whiteman's concert, in contrast, eschewed a functional jazz performance for a show explicitly focused on redefining jazz music as a respectable entertainment. In the press release for the concert, Whiteman announced that he intended "to sketch, musically, from the beginning of American history, the development of our emotional resources which have led us to the characteristic American music of today; the most of which, by the way, is not jazz." "I intend to

¹For a description of the show, see Don Rayno, *Paul Whiteman: Pioneer in American Music*; Volume I: 1890-1930 (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 71-86; Henry Osborne Osgood, *So This is Jazz*, (1926; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1978), 129-42; Thomas A. DeLong, *Pops: Paul Whiteman, King of Jazz*, (Piscataway, NJ: New Century Publishers, 1983), 3-11; and Neil Leonard, *Jazz and the White Americans: The Acceptance of a New Art Form* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 80-1.

²James Reese Europe had already organized a similar concert several years earlier. See Rayno, *Paul Whiteman*, 75.

point out, “ he added, “with the assistance of my orchestra, the tremendous strides which have been made in popular music from the day of discordant jazz, which sprang into existence about ten years ago from nowhere in particular, to the really melodious music of to-day, which—for no good reason—is still called jazz.”³ To illustrate this point, Whiteman opened the program with a section entitled, “A History of Jazz.”

A whitewashed narrative of early jazz, this section of the concert illustrated both Whiteman’s commitment to enrich jazz with an aura of decency and his specific and dogmatic interpretation of jazz history. The history lesson included comparative demonstrations of his own music to serve as an example of the differences between the raw, unseemly jazz performed in nightclubs and the respectability-enhanced jazz pursued by Whiteman. The band thus performed one of their more popular recordings, “Whispering,” twice—once as a heavily syncopated example emphasizing the lowbrow elements of discordant jazz, and again as a lightly syncopated, legitimately played orchestral dance tune.⁴ The history segment also included songs made famous by earlier jazz bands, and in a backhanded homage to the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, Whiteman’s orchestra performed a cheeky version of “Livery Stable Blues.” Playing the song for laughs, the band exaggerated much of the discordant elements of Dixieland-style jazz in order to contrast that music with the less raucous orchestrations to follow.⁵ The musicians

³The press release is reprinted in David Meltzer, ed., *Reading Jazz* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1993), 166-7. Although supposedly Whiteman’s words, Hugh C. Ernst, Whiteman’s manager, wrote the release. See Robert Walser, *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 39-40.

⁴Rayno, *Paul Whiteman*, 84. For a studio version of the song, see Paul Whiteman, “*The King of Jazz*”: *His Greatest Recordings, 1920-1936* (ASV Records, 1996).

⁵Members of the audience apparently failed to see the joke, and Whiteman was stunned to hear the loud ovation for the tune. See James Lincoln Collier, *The Reception of Jazz in America: A New View* (Brooklyn: Institute for the Study of American Music, 1988), 32.

caricatured the barnyard sounds of a song that already served as a caricature of black music. On one level, Whiteman tried simply to debase earlier jazz in order to signify the strengths of his own music. On another level, however, Whiteman's interpretation of jazz history articulates a dismissal of African Americans as one white band perverts the music of an earlier white band that first became popular through an approximate abstraction of black music.

Aside from proclaiming his interpretive history of jazz, this concert underscored Whiteman's resolve to place jazz into a respectable context. The concert therefore centered on the public premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue*, a long-form symphonic jazz piece written specifically for the event by the young composer George Gershwin. A symphonic jazz hybrid, *Rhapsody in Blue* proved both the talent of Gershwin as well as the importance of Ferde Grofe, Whiteman's arranger who wrote the orchestral parts from Gershwin's piano score.⁶ Though billed as modern dance music, *Rhapsody in Blue* relates little to the contemporary jazz being performed by Jelly Roll Morton or Louis Armstrong. An arranged, symphonic stylization of jazz music, Gershwin's piece featured jazz instrumentation (plus strings) and an underlining jazz-influenced rhythmic pulse. The composition's various tempo changes and shifts in dynamics results in a piece more directly defined as a concert fixture rather than dance music. Olin Downes, the classical music writer for the *New York Times*, was impressed with elements of the performance, but noted that "this composition shows extraordinary talent, just as it also shows a young composer . . .

⁶Originally scored for only two pianos, Gershwin composed the piece in a rush. Whiteman had scheduled the concert late in 1923 and Gershwin dated the final manuscript of *Rhapsody in Blue* January 7, 1924. During the writing process, Gershwin would hand off hastily penciled sheets of music to Grofe, who would then arrange the piece for the full orchestra. Rayno, *Paul Whiteman*, 77. For a studio version of the song (with Gershwin playing piano), see Whiteman, "*The King of Jazz*."

struggling with a form of which he is far from being a master.”⁷ Still, Whiteman (and to some extent Gershwin) set out to lend respectability and credibility to jazz music, to blend jazz and classical music rather than create a singular jazz masterpiece. “This concert,” one writer notes, “was the culmination of [Whiteman’s] many years of attempting to merge jazz and symphonic music, and *Rhapsody in Blue*, in every sense, epitomized this union.”⁸ Discussing the concert later, Whiteman commented that “it proved one thing, they can’t go on questioning jazz forever.” “I proved, and it was conceded as such,” he continued, “that the popular highbrow conception of jazz was wrong.”⁹

The 1924 concert helped invent Whiteman as the “King of Jazz,” a title that continued to define the bandleader for most of his career. The concert, however, fell short of convincing all critics that jazz represented a viable (and harmless) form of American music. Still, Whiteman’s career, and in a limited sense the 1924 Aeolian Hall concert, illustrates the rapidly increasing undercurrent of mass acceptance. The eventual acceptance of jazz stemmed from the same sources that fueled jazz criticism during this period, and though superficially contradictory, these conflicting values served to underscore the cultural ambivalence that marked the 1920s.¹⁰ Whereas critics of jazz loosely shared a distrust and fear relating to the effects of modernity, the movement towards jazz acceptance served less as a reaction against cultural change than a casual approval of modern values. The music originally connected to artists and audiences outside of

⁷Olin Downes, “A Concert of Jazz,” *New York Times*, February 13, 1924, p. 16.

⁸Rayno, *Paul Whiteman*, 85.

⁹Rayno, *Paul Whiteman*, 86.

¹⁰See Lawrence W. Levine, “Jazz and American Culture,” reprinted in Lawrence W. Levine, *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 180.

mainstream culture, and white college students in particular sought out black music as a rebellion against the cultural confinement of traditional values. Americans removed from mainstream society through race, class, or ethnicity sought out jazz music as an alternative to a culture inaccessible to them.¹¹ Not until commercial jazz (a music generally disconnected from black art forms) increased in popularity, however, did jazz begin to impact American culture. The acceptance of jazz therefore depended on the eventual acquiescence of highbrow critics and middle class white audiences, and at the center of this cultural shift stood Paul Whiteman.

Born in Denver in 1890, Paul Whiteman's early life related little to the biographies of most other contemporary jazz musicians. A western violinist contracted with large symphony orchestras, Whiteman developed a style unique during this period, and his comfortable middle class upbringing in Denver provided him with a set of environmental and musical circumstances much different from most other jazz artists. A life of comparable privilege defined Whiteman's early experiences, and a domineering father predetermined Whiteman's classical music training. A talented—if not a virtuoso—violin and viola player, Whiteman squelched a jazz-hued rebelliousness in pursuit of respectability through symphony orchestras. California drew out Whiteman's jazz defiance, however, as he discovered West Coast nightclubs. His experiences in San Francisco and Los Angeles provided Whiteman with the desire to combine the rhythm and spirit of jazz with classical music forms. By 1920, Whiteman and his band relocated to the East Coast establishing themselves in Atlantic City, where he continued tinkering with a style of music that integrated jazz rhythms into classical music.¹²

¹¹Levine refers to jazz as “one of the houses of refuge in the 1920s for individuals who felt alienated from the central culture.” Levine, “Jazz and American Culture,” 181.

¹²See DeLong, *Pops*, 12-29; and Rayno, *Paul Whiteman*, 35-51.

Whiteman's early career climaxed with the 1924 Aeolian Hall performance, but musically, Whiteman hit his stride with the numerous recordings he made during the mid to late 1920s. The music produced during this period represented the conflation of two types of music, and the resultant blurring of jazz forms helped bring innovative jazz to mainstream audience. In August 1920, Whiteman began recording for Victor Records, an arrangement that produced a number of popular recordings for the band. In 1928, however, Whiteman switched to Columbia Records in a media-invented spectacle that included a short film showing Whiteman tearing up his Victor contract. Whiteman still owed an array of recordings to Victor Records, and in a four-month period, Whiteman fulfilled his earlier contract by recording over sixty records for his former company. To compete with this new trove of unreleased records, Columbia also forced Whiteman into the studio, and in two weeks, the band had hastily recorded another two-dozen songs.¹³ The music during this period represented the highpoint in Whiteman's recording career as his band included some of the finest white jazz musicians active during the 1920s. In 1927, alone, Whiteman hired a number of musicians from Jean Goldkette's Detroit-based band, including trumpeter Bix Beiderbecke, saxophonist Frank Trumbauer, reedman Jimmy Dorsey, and trombonist Tommy Dorsey.¹⁴ In addition to these musicians, Whiteman hired the Rhythm Boys, a three-piece singing group featuring Bing Crosby, an increasingly popular singer who had developed a voice uniquely tailored for radio microphones. These musicians provided Whiteman's orchestra with the jazz integrity missing from his earlier bands, and Ferde Grofe adapted his arrangements to accommodate the new soloists. Though primarily composed and

¹³Rayno, *Paul Whiteman*, 197-8.

¹⁴DeLong, *Pops*, 110-3.

formally structured, these arrangements still remained somewhat flexible to accommodate certain soloists.¹⁵

In the summer of 1929, the Whiteman orchestra traveled to Los Angeles to commence filming *The King of Jazz*, an extravagant motion picture outlining Whiteman's contributions to jazz.¹⁶ After spending a large sum of money to house the band, the studio could not agree on a script.¹⁷ Warner Brothers finally decided on a revue-style show, but the band had to leave California to fulfill other engagements. In between the original meetings and the revised date of shooting, however, Beiderbecke left the band and moved back to Iowa in order to deal with his growing alcohol addiction. That fall, the band (without Beiderbecke) reconvened in Los Angeles to record the music for the soundtrack as well as commence primary filming of the full-band numbers.¹⁸ The first full-length Technicolor motion picture produced by Warner Brothers, *The King of Jazz* combined modern filmmaking techniques with a standard vaudevillian framework. Elaborate production numbers appeared between short skits, individual musical performances, and dance sequences.¹⁹ The sets included ornate ballrooms; giant, divided bandstands; optical

¹⁵See Rayno, *Paul Whiteman*, 43; and Collier, "Reception," 15.

¹⁶John Murray Anderson, *The King of Jazz* (Universal, 1930).

¹⁷Budget problems continued to plague the film throughout production. The original budget stood at 1.5 million dollars, but that figure increased rapidly once the primary filming commenced. For the pre-shooting history of the film, see Rayno, *Paul Whiteman*, 233-42; and Richard Barrios, *A Song in the Dark: The Birth of the Musical Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 181-2.

¹⁸Rayno, *Paul Whiteman*, 243.

¹⁹These vaudevillian-styled skits featured humorous songs, romantic ballads, broad jokes, and synchronized dancing. Rather than instrumental prowess, these skits and short pieces emphasize the hokier elements of the band's stage show. One skit, for example, focused on a musician's ability to play a song on a bicycle pump, and another set up had a musician pretending to play his girlfriend like an instrument.

illusions; and camera techniques that presented a forty-piece band in miniature. An elaborate spectacle, *The King of Jazz* combined modern filmmaking techniques with traditional entertainment elements to produce a narrative of American music as well as to posit Paul Whiteman as the primary instigator in the creation of jazz. By surrounding jazz performances with humorous sketches and popular ballads, Whiteman effectively placed jazz into the larger context of vaudeville entertainment. Rather than an aberration, Whiteman urged his audience to connect jazz music (or at least his symphonic form of jazz) with popular currents of modern American culture.

Despite this vaudevillian filigree, *The King of Jazz* centers on two major themes: the positing of Paul Whiteman as a major contributing force in the creation of jazz music, and the role (or lack thereof) of African Americans in the jazz narrative. The first of these themes centered on the importance of Whiteman in terms of creating jazz music. The first segment of the film was a short cartoon created by Walter Lantz, more famously known later as the creator of Woody Woodpecker. An attempt to illustrate Whiteman's title of the "King of Jazz," the narrator explains that the conductor "tiring of his life in the great city" went on a big game hunting excursion in "darkest Africa." In Africa, Whiteman is crowned the king of jazz simply by his ability to bring out the inherent musicality of Africa. "The cartoon," one writer argues, "ultimately portrays Whiteman as bringing music to Africa."²⁰ In support of this animated claim of Whiteman as "King of Jazz" the film segues directly to one of the only segments featuring legitimate jazz in the film, as Whiteman introduced the entire band over a banjo-driven dance piece. Although the song eventually devolves into a lightly syncopated classical piece, this

²⁰Krin Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 11.

segment features several distinguished moments including a strong violin and guitar duet by Joe Venutti and Eddie Lang.

Whiteman's *The King of Jazz*, essentially a mainstream white film centered on the career of a mainstream white bandleader, provides a fairly substantive account of the way a number of white Americans viewed the role of race within the jazz narrative. Balancing the manifest purpose of the film in proclaiming Whiteman the "King of Jazz" is a second theme involving the subtle exclusion of African Americans from the creation and diffusion of jazz music. Although black characters (or at least characters presumed to be black) appear three times during the film, none of these instances feature a black adult; instead, African Americans appear only in the guise of cartoon animals, a small child, and a dancer covered in silver paint. In the Lantz cartoon, for example, no Africans appear, but a number of animated animals personifying native Africans parade through the segment and interact with Whiteman. At the beginning of the cartoon, Whiteman shoots at a lion, but the animal rips open his skin and the musket balls bounce harmlessly (but musically) off the lion's ribs like a xylophone. Whiteman then plays his violin in order to soothe the lion. Hearing the dulcet tones of his violin, the lion falls to his knees in an Al Jolson pose and sings "Mammy." Although the film makes no direct reference to race, the overt minstrel elements of this scene provide a subtle condemnation of African American agency in the creation of jazz music.²¹ "Jazz," Whiteman argues in the one scene featuring a black adult, "was born in the African jungle to the beating of the voodoo drum." A dancer in silver paint then proceeds to jump around on a large African drum as an introduction to Gershwin's

²¹In reference to this cartoon one scholar notes that "there are constant allusions to African Americans, and much of the film explicitly invokes minstrelsy, the film's grand predecessor in the ambivalent appropriation of blackness by whites." Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins*, 10. In one brief skit later in the film, Whiteman carries in his arms a black child.

Rhapsody in Blue. Throughout the film, African Americans are reduced to stereotypes, children, and heavily costumed dancers. Overall, “a more elaborate, more thorough denial of the African American role in jazz is difficult to imagine,” and *The King of Jazz* thoroughly whitewashes jazz history and removes African Americans completely from a jazz narrative dominated by Paul Whiteman.²²

These interconnected themes of racial myopia and the primacy of Whiteman in the jazz narrative coalesce in the final segment of the film. Entitled “Melting Pot of Music,” this section serves as Whiteman’s attempt to illustrate the “diversity” of American music. “America,” the title card proclaims, “is a melting pot of music wherein the melodies of all Nations are fused into one great New Rhythm—JAZZ!” The orchestra then presents in brief musical vignettes the various nationalities that supposedly coalesced to create jazz. A British foxhunt song thus segues into an accordion-based Italian melody followed by a Spanish dance song, a Highland bagpipe tune, a French minuet, and finally a Russian melody played on balalaikas.²³ These

²²Gabbard, *Jammin’ at the Margins*, 10; See 10-4 for entire film (directed by John Murray Anderson). At least one scholar admits to the implicit racism of the film, but still contends that *The King of Jazz* represents a triumph in film musicals. In his book on musical film, Richard Barrios (very much aware of the racial elements of this movie) argues that the movie was “in its way a glorious, unrepeatable stunt.” Writing about one of the musical numbers, Barrios contends that “setting aside some deplorable stereotypes the sequence is a delight.” Barrios, *A Song in the Dark*, 183.

²³Whiteman was not alone when he connected this disparate grouping of songs to the creation of jazz. J. A. Rogers, in his contribution to Alain Locke’s *The New Negro*, argues “jazz has always existed. It is in the Indian war-dance, the Highland fling, the Irish jig, the Cossack dance, the Spanish fandango, the Brazilian *maxixe*, the dance of the whirling dervish, the hula hula of the South Seas, the *danse du ventur*e of the Orient, the *carmagnole* of the French Revolution, the strains of Gypsy music, and the ragtime of the Negro.” “Jazz proper, however,” he adds, “is something more than all these.” J. A. Rogers, “Jazz at Home,” in Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (New York: Touchstone Press, 1992), 217. Also, despite the lack of African Americans in the “Melting Pot” scene, Richard Barrios writes, “that aside, it’s an exciting succession of sounds and images, song and dance of many (European) nations blended into a literal large pot.” Barrios, *A Song in the Dark*, 186.

diverse instruments and songs then blur together in a lightly syncopated classical style. Standing over this musical stew, Whiteman pretends to stir together each of these genres into something new, and uniquely American. The segment ends with a collision of visual and aural images. As dancers clad in western-fringe emerge from behind the cauldron, the band launches into “Stars and Stripes Forever” before segueing into a rousing upbeat jazz song. Africa disappears completely as Whiteman forcefully posits jazz as an American art form with definite European musical forbears. The western iconography connects jazz unambiguously to the American themes of democracy and expansion, and the inclusion of “Stars and Stripes Forever” signifies the adoption of a new jazz-themed national anthem for America.

The film premiered in Los Angeles in April 1930 to a noticeably mixed reaction. “Hot jazz fans,” one writer notes, “were disappointed and disgruntled by the preponderance of jazzless entertainment, but they forgot that they were not picking up the tab.” “For true connoisseurs of jazz,” the writer continues, “the unforgivable flaw was the absence of Bix from the soundtrack, a conspicuous void occasioned by Universal’s failure to begin filming on the band’s first trip to Hollywood.”²⁴ In the years following *The King of Jazz*, Whiteman remained committed to symphonic jazz, but he never recaptured the musical triumphs of the 1920s. Whiteman’s music reflected a growing acceptance of jazz, but his attempts at reconfiguring jazz into a classical framework all ended in disappointment. Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* ably mixed syncopation into an orchestral setting, and Beiderbecke and Trumbauer delivered strong solo and ensemble work to the band; but overall, Whiteman’s music failed to serve as the blueprint for future popular jazz. Mainstream jazz progressed along a different path from the one forged by Whiteman, and the jazz of the 1930s connected more to the New York sounds of Fletcher

²⁴Rayno, *Paul Whiteman*, 246.

Henderson and Duke Ellington than the King of Jazz. Whiteman's music, however, served as the catalyst for the conception of jazz criticism, and the early wave of jazz critics that emerged during this period viewed Whiteman as the primary arbiter of jazz taste. Thus, although Whiteman had little impact on the musical direction of mainstream jazz, his music played an exaggerated role in the burgeoning jazz narrative constructed by writers immensely influenced by symphonic jazz.

In 1926, Henry Osborne Osgood published *So This is Jazz*, one of the earliest books specifically on jazz music. "This book is," Osgood wrote, "so far as I know, the first attempt to set down a connected account of the origin, history and development of jazz music."²⁵ An enthusiastic supporter of Paul Whiteman, Osgood posited the bandleader as the primary example of real jazz. "For if it hadn't been for his ambition and initiative," Osgood wrote of Whiteman, "jazz would still be the same old tum-tum fox-trot music, with its eternal monotony."²⁶ Osgood's emphasis on symphonic jazz never emerged as the predominant focus for later jazz historians, and in general, Osgood's devotion to Whiteman almost seemed passé in 1926. During this same period, however, two other critics began casually organizing a new framework of jazz criticism. Working separately, Gilbert Seldes and Carl Van Vechten broke from the segregated (and narrow) jazz narrative posited by Osgood, and throughout their work, these two critics helped couple a respect for African American culture to their appreciation of mainstream jazz artists. Seldes, in particular, maintained "reservations of the Negro's artistic potential," but

²⁵Osgood, *So This is Jazz*, vii.

²⁶Osgood, *So This is Jazz*, 123. Interestingly, Osgood notes that "Whiteman's program was modern, using the word in the sense of 'recent', but it was only the *Rhapsody in Blue* that had even a touch of modernity in style." Osgood, *So This is Jazz*, 143.

black artists played a larger creative role in his writing than earlier scholars had allowed.²⁷ Likewise, Van Vechten's admiration for black artists tended to include a slight patronizing attitude. Inspired by Whiteman's Aeolian Hall concert, Van Vechten wrote a series of articles on George Gershwin, but the transplanted Iowan quickly fell under the spell of the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural rebirth of black America at least partially directed by wealthy white patrons. "Van Vechten," one scholar notes, "wove himself throughout the history of jazz, noting his every presence and rationalizing every absence."²⁸

The work of Seldes and Van Vechten established the early pattern of mainstream critical acceptance of jazz: an acknowledgement of black agency coupled with an attachment to white artists. In conjunction with the emerging critical discourse on jazz music, magazines devoted to jazz began to appear in the 1930s. This nascent jazz press helped expand and invigorate the audience for jazz music, and together this new printed expression of jazz acceptance "absorbed and catalyzed the throbbing populist energy unleashed by swing's youth audience."²⁹ In 1934, *Down Beat*—originally a "trade sheet for Chicago dance band musicians"—emerged as the most important national magazine centered on jazz music.³⁰ That same year in France, Hugues Panassie published *Le jazz hot*, "the most important full-scale study of jazz," and in large

²⁷Macdonald Smith Moore, *Yankee Blues: Musical Culture and American Identity* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1985), 94. Seldes and Van Vechten, Moore writes, "gravitated to jazz at least in part because of the black sexuality they associated with it." Moore, *Yankee Blues*, 104.

²⁸Moore, *Yankee Blues*, 96. See also Gennari, "Politics of Culture and Identity," 89-91.

²⁹John Remo Gennari, "The Politics of Culture and Identity in American Jazz Criticism," PhD. Dissertation (University of Pennsylvania, 1993), 130.

³⁰Gennari, "Politics of Culture and Identity," 131. By 1939, *Down Beat* had a national audience of 80,000 readers. Ibid.

measure this book created the market for legitimate studies of jazz.³¹ Although Paul Whiteman's popularity served in part as an inspiration for these new critics, these writers also emerged during the early 1930s as a new cultural framework came to define the nation. Many of the elements of this change had existed for decades, but the devastating economic climate of the late 1920s only served to accelerate this cultural transformation.

Two weeks before the primary filming of *The King of Jazz* commenced the stock market crashed. This economic disaster had both immediate and long-lasting impacts on the music business, and Paul Whiteman's band directly experienced certain difficulties that foreshadowed the coming storm of the 1930s. In terms of *The King of Jazz*, the depression called into question both the cost of the film as well as its box office capabilities. At its opening in early 1930, the film brought in respectable receipts, but demand for the movie dropped off quickly as customers became much more cautious with discretionary income. This growing consumer tightness also affected the marketability of the band, and after a decade of robust commercial activity, Whiteman's record sales dropped immensely. In addition, venue promoters shied away from establishing extended concert schedules with the band. The economic circumstances of the period also forced a redistribution of the band's payroll, and Whiteman could no longer afford to offer star musicians considerable salaries as he had throughout the 1920s.³² The Depression thus affected the musical structure of the band, as Whiteman failed to renew contracts with key

³¹Scott DeVeaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography," *Black American Literature Forum* 35:3 (Autumn 1991): 531. An English translation of *Le jazz hot* (entitled *Hot Jazz*) appeared in 1936.

³²George Gershwin, for example, made \$5000 to appear with the band, and Ross Gorman, Whiteman's star clarinetist, received over \$400 a week at the peak of the band's popularity. See Rayno, *Paul Whiteman*, 248; and James Lincoln Collier, *Reception of Jazz in America*, 17.

members of his orchestra, and this reduced payroll compelled Whiteman to cut loose the Rhythm Boys from his roster.³³

Paul Whiteman suffered through the immediate effects of the economic collapse, but more dramatically, the Great Depression created a new economic and social context for a new musical culture that in turn fostered a new style of jazz.³⁴ Between 1917 and 1929, the successes of the record, radio, and film industry; the development and expansion of an urban culture; the career of popular jazz performers such as Rudy Vallee and Paul Whiteman; and the eventual emergence of jazz criticism converged to generate a new and thoroughly modern sound. “The onset of the Great Depression,” one jazz historian writes, “had a chilling effect on the jazz world, as it did on the whole entertainment industry.”³⁵ Record sales collapsed as consumers refused unnecessary entertainment expenses. At its height in 1927, the record industry documented sales of 104 million. Five years later, record sales stood only at six million.³⁶ The economic crisis hastened corporate integration, and in the late 1930s, the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) purchased Victor and Columbia Records; the two largest radio corporations now owned the two largest record labels.³⁷ In addition, the repeal of Prohibition implied that club owners no longer needed to hire jazz bands to attract customers,

³³For the effects of the Great Depression on Paul Whiteman, see Rayno, *Paul Whiteman*, 247-8.

³⁴For the effects of the Great Depression on jazz music, see Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 135-7; and Burton W. Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz: Music, Race, and Culture in Urban America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 164-70.

³⁵Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 135.

³⁶Peretti, *Creation of Jazz*, 164-5.

³⁷Peretti, *Creation of Jazz*, 170.

and musician unions had reduced influence as slashed monthly fees retained members but emptied coffers.³⁸ The despairing economics of the jazz scene in the early 1930s affected all musicians, but the Great Depression directly challenged the jazz careers of white players connected to the middle class. These musicians actively chose an occupational situation removed from mainstream society, and for many of these players “the Depression was the greatest test of their dedication to jazz careers.”³⁹ Overall, the Great Depression only helped to accelerate many of the musical changes affecting jazz over the last half-decade, and together, the cultural, social, and musical developments of the 1920s helped create a new style of jazz in the 1930s.

As the Great Depression affected the consolidation of business, the economic situation of the early 1930s hastened the commercialization of jazz as musicians took jobs that once looked beneath them in the music industry. Musicians who had once criticized music once deemed too commercial—even by generally respected artists such as Duke Ellington—came to see this style of music more positively once Depression-era bills continued to pile up.⁴⁰ Connected to the jazz of the past, this new genre known as swing reflected the modern age in ways only hinted at by earlier music. Thus, commercial possibilities and mass popularity helped to define swing music, and this period “is undoubtedly the only time in history when jazz was completely in phase with the social environment, and when it both captured and reflected the broadest musical common-

³⁸Peretti, *Creation of Jazz*, 164-5.

³⁹Peretti, *Creation of Jazz*, 166.

⁴⁰Peretti, *Creation of Jazz*, 167-71.

denominator of popular taste in the nation.”⁴¹ In large measure, swing developed out of the big band sound realized by the New York bands of Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington. These bandleaders established the swing template of large bands (twelve to fifteen-piece groups) divided into distinct sections of brass, reed, and rhythm instruments performing a riff-based syncopated music that also allowed for solo improvisation. By the 1930s, various musicians had simplified the complexities inherent in the arrangements of Henderson and Ellington to produce a streamlined music that emphasized concise riffs and a steady rhythmic pulse. In many ways, the musical developments of the early 1930s simply accentuated the musical ideas first set forth by Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington: larger bands playing arrangements that emphasized group riffs and limited individual solos. The Swing Era of big band jazz served as a reduction of the New York scene of the late 1920s. Riffs became simpler, bolder; melodies became more concise; and the rhythm section became the basic instrumental base for bands, especially once recording techniques improved allowing for better low-frequency fidelity. The Great Depression accelerated much of this change as bands pursued a more commercial sound in the wake of greater competition and decreased job security.⁴²

The primary articulation of this new sound—and the musician most connected with the commercial possibilities of this music—was Benny Goodman. Born in Chicago in 1909, Goodman grew up in a large, working-class family headed by first generation immigrant

⁴¹Gunther Schuller, *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz, 1930-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 5-6.

⁴²Thomas J. Hennessey, *From Jazz to Swing: African-American Jazz Musicians and Their Music, 1890-1935* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 124-56.

parents.⁴³ As a working-class Jewish Chicagoan, Goodman defined the role of the outsider disconnected from mainstream culture. Goodman combined this outsider social status with a professional musical education, and as a young boy, Goodman commenced a lifelong obsession with practicing his clarinet.⁴⁴ Goodman studied both with his synagogue band as well as a local Hull House group, and by the age of ten he received clarinet instruction from Franz Schoepp, a clarinetist who also tutored members of the Chicago symphony.⁴⁵ Goodman thus “got what was probably the best early training of any jazz musician of his generation,” and this training coupled with a burgeoning interest in hot jazz produced a prodigiously talented and confident clarinet player.⁴⁶ Younger by almost a decade than most of the first wave of jazz players such as Louis Armstrong and Bix Beiderbecke, Goodman signified a new generation of jazz musician as he combined classical training with jazz improvisation. Unlike Whiteman and his fumbling attempts at a classical-jazz fusion, Goodman inherently brought classical technique into jazz performance. First learning jazz from phonograph records, Goodman garnered quick respect with his improvisational abilities, and in 1925 the clarinetist joined Ben Pollack’s band, a group considered “one of the finest Chicago-style dance bands of the day.”⁴⁷ By the late 1920s,

⁴³For Goodman’s early life, see Schuller, *Swing Era*, 10-11; and James Lincoln Collier, *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1-12.

⁴⁴For Goodman’s early musical life, see Collier, *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era*, 13-27.

⁴⁵Schoepp, Collier writes, “may have been the finest clarinet teacher in the United States at the time.” Collier, *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era*, 17. See also Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 138-9.

⁴⁶Collier, *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era*, 17.

⁴⁷Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 139. Although living in Chicago, Goodman was too young to experience many live performances, and the clarinetist would only have been a young teenager during the city’s jazz heyday in the early 1920s.

Goodman had emerged as a strong hot jazz clarinet player, and his prodigious combination of technical skillfulness and instrumental versatility—he merged a solid full-range tone with the ability to play both clean and harsh parts—made Goodman one of the most sought after clarinetists during this period.⁴⁸

In conjunction with his instrumental prowess, an integral part of Goodman's success—and thus a significant participant in terms of jazz acceptance as well—concerned the actions of the clarinetist's manager, John Hammond. A wealthy Yale university dropout, Hammond proved an incalculable boon for Goodman's career as he helped to extend Goodman's audience throughout the 1930s. Born in 1910, Hammond connects clearly to earlier jazz enthusiasts such as Carl Van Vechten, and in many ways Hammond personified the stereotypical white college student drawn to the foreign sounds of jazz music. Rather than simply listening to jazz records or attending jazz concerts, Hammond (and this new cohort of white intellectuals) became an intimate player in the business, and during the late 1920s and early 1930s, a number of wealthy white jazz aficionados entered the business as managers. Black artists managed by wealthy white men—most notably, Louis Armstrong and Joe Glaser, and Duke Ellington and Irving Mills—experienced considerable success, but also fell victim to inequitable business arrangements. Hammond's relationship to Goodman differed somewhat from these other associations, especially in terms of the lack of an implicit racial hierarchy.⁴⁹ Outside of managing artists, however, men such as Hammond and Van Vechten also served as cultural gatekeepers, and this role connected to the increased power of national radio broadcasts.

⁴⁸Schuller, *Swing Era*, 12-4.

⁴⁹Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 139-40. See also Collier, *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era*, 93-109.

Organized network radio produced an audience captive to the tastes of corporate executives, and Hammond gladly served as the cultivator of the musical sense of discernment for a national audience.⁵⁰ Hammond, then, through his position at Columbia Records, played an active role in the careers of other jazz artists during this period, and helped promote Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, and Count Basie.⁵¹ More importantly, Hammond's innate musical knowledge coupled with his power within the recording industry connected swing music with a larger audience. In general, Hammond profoundly impacted the Swing Era, and "no other nonmusician, and indeed only the major instrumentalists, has had as broad an effect on the music as he did."⁵²

With the assistance of Hammond, Goodman discovered a national audience on the radio, and in 1934 the clarinetist began a stint as bandleader on *Let's Dance*, a three-hour radio program sponsored by the National Broadcasting Company (NBC).⁵³ In conjunction to a larger audience, this job—which went out to fifty affiliate stations—provided Goodman with financial security during the worst years of the Great Depression. Goodman used the resources proffered

⁵⁰"The rise of network radio," Gioia notes, "much more than the earlier spread of record players, transformed the general public into passive receptors of entertainment chosen by a few arbiters of taste." Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 137.

⁵¹Later, Hammond played an important role in developing the careers of Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen. James Lincoln Collier, *The Making of Jazz: A Comprehensive History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Co., 1978), 261. See also Gennari, "The Politics of Culture and Identity in American Jazz Criticism," 105-15.

⁵²Collier, *Making of Jazz*, 261. "John Hammond's achievement," one historian writes, "was to maintain a strong ideological animus against commercialization even as he spent most of his working days commodifying and marketing the art of his favorite musicians." Gennari, "Politics of Culture and Identity," 105.

⁵³For the *Let's Dance* radio show, see Collier, *Making of Jazz*, 262; Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 140; Schuller, *Swing Era*, 8-9; and Collier, *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era*, 164-5.

by NBC to create a formidable band with inventive arrangements and innovative soloists.⁵⁴ During his tenure on the radio, Goodman perfected his style of swing music with the addition of drummer Gene Krupa and arranger Fletcher Henderson, musicians introduced to the clarinetist by Hammond.⁵⁵ Krupa, the most famous member of Goodman's band, eschewed an overt swing feel, maintaining instead a stomping on-the-beat style centered on the snare, tom-tom, and kick drums. A bottom-heavy drummer, Krupa used cymbals sparingly and focused more on providing a solid—if occasionally ostentatious—foundation for Goodman's band. "Krupa's approach to the drums," one jazz historian writes, "for all its showmanship, was surprisingly unsyncopated and gleefully ignored the two great hooks of jazz rhythm—accenting the back beat and swinging the down beat—in favor of a relentless on-the-top groove."⁵⁶ Emphasizing flashy solos over modest fills, a driving stomp over a nuanced swing, Krupa's thundering, crowd-pleasing roar underpinned many of Goodman's most successful swing recordings in the 1930s.

In addition to Krupa, John Hammond had also coordinated the meeting between Goodman and Fletcher Henderson (who had been musically idle for several years), and Henderson successfully wedded his arrangements to the strengths of Goodman's band. "The special nature of Henderson's contribution," one jazz historian writes, "lay in his access to a gold mine of material compiled during his own lengthy stint as a bandleader, as well as in his deep

⁵⁴"But Goodman, blessed with the *Let's Dance* budget," Collier writes, "was able—indeed required by his employers—to hire the best writers he could." Collier, *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era*, 151.

⁵⁵In addition, Goodman added the talented trumpeter Bunny Berigan during this time, and aside from Krupa and Henderson, Hammond also convinced Goodman to hire pianist Jess Stacy and singer Helen Ward. Schuller, *Swing Era*, 8.

⁵⁶Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 142-3. Later in this passage, Gioia connects Krupa's quasi-rudimentary style to the origins of jazz drumming. Gunther Schuller refers to Krupa as "an oftentimes annoyingly overbearing drummer." Schuller, *Swing Era*, 21.

sensitivity to the swing style that was about to dominate American airwaves.”⁵⁷ Henderson extended the elements he had first developed in New York, and with Goodman’s band the arranger established a musical schematic based around the reed section with saxophones providing the basic components of the song augmented with crisp brass passages and a strong rhythm section. More than any specific instrumental change, however, Henderson brought to the band a sensitivity to dynamics, and many of his most successful arrangements merged contrasts in tone and volume with a powerful rhythm section. These elements came together in “King Porter Stomp,” perhaps the greatest example of the swing synergy between Goodman and Henderson.⁵⁸ Besides a pounding rhythm section, stimulating solos, and several overt shifts in dynamics, “King Porter Stomp” utilized an innovative arrangement that emphasized textural contrasts such as underpinning a high octave clarinet solo with low-pitched trombones. Also, as an African American, Henderson’s position in Goodman’s band represented a growing tolerance for integrated units, and although not the first integrated band, Goodman’s group served as a nationally recognized example of black and white jazz musicians working in tandem.⁵⁹

In early 1935, Goodman signed a recording contract with Victor Records, a career boon particularly after NBC cancelled the *Let’s Dance* program the following month. Between his radio exposure and record sales, Goodman escaped much of the economic turmoil of the period, and the clarinetist expanded this success by embarking on a national tour later in 1935. The

⁵⁷Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 141.

⁵⁸Schuller contends that this song “already embodied all the stylistic elements the Swing Era was to represent at its peak.” Schuller, *Swing Era*, 21.

⁵⁹Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 143. “In the racially charged atmosphere of the day,” Gioia argues, “the symbolic importance of Henderson’s role with the Goodman band loomed almost as large as the music itself.” Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 141.

early engagements on this 1935 tour proved less than successful, and Goodman's band "was riddled with uncertainty and pressured by middle-American public taste to play the least adventurous part of its repertory."⁶⁰ Despite record sales and radio broadcasts, audiences failed to embrace the style of swing music performed by Goodman, and the band considered returning to New York. In California, however, Goodman began to notice that audiences were warming up to the music, and by the time the band hit Los Angeles later that summer crowds collected early for the show. Although recently canceled, Goodman's *Let's Dance* radio program had an enthusiastic audience in southern California as the time difference allowed the show a primetime airtime.⁶¹

On August 21, 1935, Goodman's West Coast tour climaxed with the first night of an extended stay at the Palomar Ballroom in Los Angeles.⁶² Goodman had explored the sweeter side of jazz with many of his recordings during the early 1930s, but from this tour onward, the clarinetist "cast his lot with the black-influenced dance rhythms and improvisational creativity of hot, swinging jazz."⁶³ The dancers in Los Angeles craved the hot Henderson-arranged music Goodman had recently recorded, and the opening night at the Palomar vindicated Goodman's swinging style of jazz. "Swarming the bandstand in their excitement," one scholar notes, "the Los Angeles audience sent a signal, one soon heard all over the nation, that Goodman had tapped

⁶⁰Schuller, *Swing Era*, 20. See also Collier, *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era*, 164-5.

⁶¹For the late airtime of the radio program, see Collier, *Making of Jazz*, 262; Schuller, *Swing Era*, 20; Collier, *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era*, 166; and Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 140.

⁶²Goodman's band stayed at the Palomar until October of that year. See Collier, *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era*, 158-69.

⁶³Gennari, "Politics of Culture and Identity," 130.

into something real.”⁶⁴ Goodman’s revolution in sound had found an audience, and the crowds at the Palomar in 1935 signified the acceptance of jazz music. “The essential message Goodman received from the young audience that night and in subsequent weeks,” one scholar argues, “was that the Fletcher Henderson style arrangements, and Goodman’s smart performances of them, had struck home at last.”⁶⁵ For one night everything came together, and Goodman’s triumph at the Palomar signified the beginning of the Swing Era. For the next several years, musicians such as Goodman, Chick Webb, Glenn Miller, and Count Basie discovered tremendous success as the public clamored for swing music. Two decades removed from its subculture origins, jazz in the late 1930s exemplified mainstream popular music. “Never again,” one writer notes, “would popular music be so jazzy, or jazz music so popular.”⁶⁶

The Palomar concert thrust Goodman into the national spotlight, and the clarinetist would continue to build upon his successes throughout 1935. In a larger sense, however, the show fulfilled jazz music’s manifest destiny as jazz garnered a national audience interconnected through record sales, radio broadcasts, and film appearances. By the mid-1930s, a jazz frontier no longer existed as records, radio broadcasts, and films brought jazz music to a national audience. On one level, Benny Goodman’s performance in Los Angeles completed the circuit begun by Paul Whiteman as another white Midwesterner brought jazz music to a national audience. In a larger sense, however, Goodman represented the culmination of the entire story of jazz—from its subculture origins, stylistic evolution, and subsequently enormous popularity.

⁶⁴Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 145.

⁶⁵Schuller, *Swing Era*, 21. “A large segment of the public,” Schuller continues, “seemed to prefer the best and most advanced arrangements the band had to offer.” Ibid.

⁶⁶Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 145.

Goodman fused first-rate musicianship with the rhythmic inventiveness of New Orleans jazz, and produced a modern jazz expression infused with traditional instrumentation and verve. His popularity, however, stemmed directly from the revolution in values that took place during the previous decade. A newly liberated youth culture adopted Goodman as their champion, and swing music served as the national soundtrack for an entire generation.⁶⁷ “It was not, then, that Goodman had created a demand for swing,” one writer argues, “the demand for something along these lines was already there and already, to an extent, being fed.” “What happened,” he continues, “was that Goodman’s version of the music suited the youthful taste more exactly than did that of his competitors.”⁶⁸ Still, Goodman personified the age of swing, and his music served as the primary articulation of a new culture transformed by the larger shift in values that created modern America.

⁶⁷“To its adolescent fans,” one historian argues, “swing was theirs.” Gennari, “Politics of Culture and Identity,” 130.

⁶⁸Collier, *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era*, 166.

CONCLUSION

“TWENTY YEARS OF JAZZ”: BENNY GOODMAN AT CARNEGIE HALL, 1938

Yet if the music is part of the story, it is also the landscape against which the story takes place. Blurred at the edges and unsure of its center, this America is still a wilderness—the musical, social wilderness that is left even when the natural wilderness is gone. Excited and intrigued by the place for just that reason, the worried man has to get on without maps.¹

On January 16, 1938, Benny Goodman and his band performed at Carnegie Hall in New York City. Opening with “Don’t Be That Way,” Goodman’s band exploded onto the stage with strong ensemble work, blaring solos, and a propulsive rhythm section.² Following energetic solos by Babe Russin on tenor saxophone and Harry James on trumpet, the band launched into a long group decrescendo before Gene Krupa hit a raucous drum break to conclude the number. The crowd loudly approved, and over the next two hours, the band held court at Carnegie Hall with Goodman’s band producing some of the strongest jazz music of the Swing Age. The first half of the show centered on a section entitled, “Twenty Years of Jazz,” a planned tribute to the group’s jazz

¹Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock ‘n’ Roll Music* (New York: Dutton, 1982), 49.

²When Goodman heard the new arrangement of “Don’t Be That Way,” he “decided immediately that this was his icebreaker.” Irving Kolodin, Liner Notes, *Benny Goodman at Carnegie Hall—1938—Complete* (Columbia Records, 1999), 12. For other descriptions of the show, see Albert Murray, *Big Band Jazz* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1974), 228-9; and James Lincoln Collier, *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 214-229.

forbearers. Through the performance of five songs, the band limned a brief schematic of jazz music highlighting individual songs as well as specific bands and musicians.³ The first song, “Sensation Rag,” touched on the ragtime and New Orleans roots of jazz as well as the work of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, who had recorded the song in the late 1910s. “I’m Coming Virginia” followed, a tribute to Bix Beiderbecke, the infamous Midwestern trumpet player long dead from alcohol abuse. These two songs—along with Ted Lewis’s “When My Baby Smiles at Me”—reflected the influence white jazz musicians had on Goodman, but the history segment also included two numbers associated with black bands. Harry James, Goodman’s white trumpet player, approximated Louis Armstrong on “Shine,” a song that dated back to 1910 but had been a sizable hit for Armstrong in the 1920s; and the band concluded the segment with “Blue Reverie,” a Duke Ellington composition from 1936. For this number, Goodman invited Ellington sidemen Johnny Hodges, Harry Carney, and Cootie Williams to play with the band, an inclusion that signified the first major integrated jazz performance.⁴ Connecting backward to the musical antecedents of jazz as well as anticipating the future with an integrated band, the Carnegie Hall concert signaled the acceptance of jazz music as a mainstream (and uniquely American) musical expression.

³This section, music critic Irving Kolodin writes, “brought out the family feeling that all good jazz musicians have for their celebrated predecessors, permitting a backward look at such landmarks of the popular music field as the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, Bix Beiderbecke, Ted Lewis, Louis Armstrong, and the perennial Duke Ellington.” Kolodin, Liner Notes, *Benny Goodman at Carnegie Hall*, 12.

⁴Goodman had played publicly with black musicians as early as 1936, but the Carnegie Hall concert served as the primary introduction of an integrated band to a large audience. See Turk Van Lake, Liner Notes, *Benny Goodman at Carnegie Hall*, 34.

The importance of this concert was not lost on the musicians, the audience, or the various critics involved in the event. Goodman fretted over the song selection in the weeks prior to the show, crowds lined up outside of the venue on a blustery day hopeful to obtain entrance to the sold out show, and the *New York Times* published a long review of the concert the following morning. Further illustrating the importance of the evening, sound engineers recorded the program and sent one of the copies to the Library of Congress.⁵ And everyone, it seemed, approved of the performance—with the glaring exception of the *New York Times* music critic Olin Downes. Fourteen years earlier, Downes had enthused over Paul Whiteman’s 1924 Aeolian Hall concert, and in 1938, Downes attempted to place Goodman into a similar context. Downes confided to his readers that he attended the concert “expecting a new, original, and elemental kind of music; one that we had been told marks a novel and original form of expression.” Unhappy with the results, Downes wrote “this is not the sort of thing that Paul Whiteman triumphed in introducing to the polite musical world some fourteen years ago in this city.” “Whiteman has been practically canonized by the younger generation,” Downes contended, “and relegated to last by the Goodmans, Dorseys, Duke Ellingtons and such of the present.” Labeling Goodman’s music as “a curious reduction, almost disintegration of music into its component elements,” Downes argued “there is hardly an attempt at beauty of tone, and certainly none at construction of melody.” In addition, Downes disavowed any inclusion of innovative or novel musical elements in Goodman’s

⁵Collier, *Benny Goodman*, 218.

music. “These are effects and devices as old as the hills to any one who has listened in the last fifteen years to jazz music,” he wrote, “they are merely carried to extremes.”⁶

The audience, however, enthusiastically welcomed Goodman and his band, and “it took some minutes to establish quiet.” “The audience broke out before the music stopped,” Downes wrote, “in crashing applause and special salvos as one or another of the heroes of the orchestra rose in his place to give his special and ornate contribution to the occasion.” Downes conceded that the music represented only one component of the evening’s importance “We went to discover a new, original, thrilling music. We stayed to watch a social and physical phenomenon.” Downes admitted that he “may be a hopeless old-timer, sunk in the joys of Whiteman jazz, unable to appreciate the starker, modern product.”⁷ Despite the reservations of Downes, the year 1938 signified the high point of the Swing Era. The popularity of swing helped resuscitate the ailing record industry, and by the late 1930s total record sales exceeded 50 million units with over 17 million swing records in particular. That same year, two million listeners regularly tuned into Benny Goodman’s radio program three times a week.⁸

Several months after Goodman’s Carnegie Hall triumph, Jelly Roll Morton recounted his interpretation of jazz history to Alan Lomax, and these two events—Goodman’s New York success and Morton’s New Orleans narrative—illustrate the complexity of jazz history as well as the rapidity in which jazz emerged as a nationally

⁶New York *Times*, January 17, 1938, p. 11.

⁷New York *Times*, January 17, 1938, p. 11.

⁸For record sales and broadcasting statistics, see Neil Leonard, *Jazz and the White Americans: The Acceptance of a New Art Form* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.), 179.

accepted popular music.⁹ In 1938, Morton, the prematurely old chronicler of jazz prehistory who drew up a fragmented map of blurred borders and shadowy limits, struggled to escape the indifferent response to a career two decades past its prime. Perennially out of fashion, Morton's music existed on the wrong side of what constituted popular music; ahead of his time for most of his life, by the late 1930s, Morton's music seemed hopelessly antique. In contrast, Goodman stood as the crisp representative of modern jazz, a musician who had fused together the lessons of the jazz past to create an altogether new and very commercial musical expression. As Goodman reiterated the past in order to charge ahead, Morton—who would be dead in three years—fought to (re)define his legacy in a story that had all but erased him.

Two outsiders with two convergent histories, Jelly Roll Morton and Benny Goodman underscore the intrinsic elements of jazz: a music based on a rhythmic pulse and harmonic structure at once primitive and modern, and a music born out of cultural tension, a racial-ethnic-regional hybrid capable of connecting disparate groups of listeners. A dispossessed Creole struggling through egotism to construct a career positioned somewhere between two racially distinct worlds; and a lower-class Jewish Chicagoan, drawn to the fascinating and foreboding sounds of a foreign culture. Outsiders connected to other outsiders, and this newly invented subculture of jazz artists and audiences thrived along the larger fault lines threatening to transform mainstream American culture. By the late 1930s, jazz (in its mass-produced incarnation of swing)

⁹“The struggle,” one scholar writes concerning the construction of a particular history, “is over possession of that history, and the legitimacy it confers.” Scott DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography,” *Black American Literature Forum* 35:3 (Autumn 1991): 528.

had emerged as the popular expression of modernity, and through record sales, radio broadcasts, and motion pictures, a music by and for outsiders served as the fundamental connecting unit of American culture.

Less than four decades separated jazz music's apex of popularity during the Swing Era from its whispered origins in the 1890s when two pioneers separately tinkered with two musical genres. A transplanted Texan, Scott Joplin methodically perfected a piano style that showcased a near mathematical technique coupled with a rolling melodicism that invigorated late-nineteenth-century American music. During this same period, W. C. Handy discovered an expression of the rural South that upended the popular music conventions of the time. Cleaning up the rhyme scheme while retaining the music's harmonic uniqueness, Handy successfully merged a form of black folk music with Tin Pan Alley song structures to produce a commercially viable style of the blues. Both ragtime and the blues prefigured the syncopated rhythms and harmonic intricacies of jazz, but these early forms also connected to a burgeoning marketing arrangement through the sale of sheet music and piano rolls (and eventually phonograph records). This element of profitability would define in large measure jazz music, but ragtime and the blues existed outside of the massive commercial culture that developed alongside jazz music.

As Joplin and Handy formulated their careers, a different set of musicians noisily conceived of an altogether new style of music. In and around New Orleans, black, white, and Creole musicians constructed a music based in improvisation that reflected the urban and rural anomalies present in a city still strongly sutured to the countryside. Buddy Bolden, Jack Laine, and Jelly Roll Morton all contributed to the rapidly emerging jazz

form—either through musical innovation, instrumental instruction, or compositional experimentation, and these musicians helped construct a novel form of cultural expression. A transient form of dance music, the music performed by New Orleanians at the dawn of the twentieth century hardly had a name much less commercial viability. New Orleans, however, signified the confluence of elements that sparked the jazz revolution, and throughout the twentieth century, musicians, critics, and audiences would continually revisit and rediscover the city and its place in jazz history. Later musicians would extend and reconfigure the lessons of ragtime, the blues, and the early jazz of New Orleans, and this early formational period continually cast a sharply defined shadow across the Jazz Age.

Although New Orleans failed to serve as the urban center of jazz development during the 1920s, many of the city's musicians rose to prominence with careers in larger cities. Three cities in particular played important roles in the gradual diffusion of jazz, and although musicians performed jazz in other cities during this period, Chicago, New York City, and Los Angeles combined dynamic jazz scenes with technological innovation to transmit jazz to the nation. In the early 1920s, for instance, Chicago replaced the undocumented sounds of New Orleans with commercially viable recordings, a step that helped connect jazz to the marketplace. Small bands dominated the Chicago jazz scene, and trumpeter Louis Armstrong, in particular, endeavored to redefine the parameters of the music. His recording of "West End Blues," for example, combined traditional instrumentation with a new sense of melody and harmony to connect jazz back to New Orleans as well as provide a modern context for jazz improvisation.

Despite the fact that Chicago maintained arguably the most dynamic jazz scene during this period and the recording industry began to make connections on a regional scale, the city remained somewhat disconnected to mainstream culture. In contrast, New York City represented the center of the ever-expanding entertainment world, and the city's jazz musicians had greater access to a national audience through radio broadcasts. Connected to a powerful and urbane black community, New York's jazz scene featured larger bands, playing more complicated arrangements, to a more diverse audience than had bands in Chicago. Duke Ellington personified in many ways the New York jazz style, and throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s, Ellington's band held court at the Cotton Club, the premiere white club in the city. Ellington's music drifted away from the improvisational focus of Chicago jazz as the composer began to emphasize the more elaborate melodies, harmonies, and rhythms attainable by a larger, 12- to 15-piece band. The jazz of New Orleans and Chicago served less as stylistic templates for the New York scene than as an ancestral mode of musical expression. Also, New York removed the regional boundaries that limited earlier jazz scenes by transmitting jazz music to a national audience through radio broadcasts.

This pattern of national diffusion continued with the emerging jazz scene of Los Angeles. The jazz performed in Los Angeles connected much more explicitly with mainstream musical forms, and the prominent musicians working in southern California focused less on improvisation than on commercial viability. A relatively small black community provided a different social context for the jazz played in Los Angeles, and in general, diffusion rather than musical innovation defined the jazz contributions of the area. Hollywood gravitated immediately to the jazz community that did exist in Los

Angeles, and the early film industry quickly adapted jazz music to their artistic goals. In 1927, Hollywood brought jazz to a national audience with the release of *The Jazz Singer*, the first major talking picture. Movie studios also released a number of jazz-themed musical shorts to accompany longer films, and many local musicians found lucrative employment in Hollywood during the late 1920s. Although a different style of jazz, the Los Angeles musical scene had a massive impact on the acceptance of jazz as the film industry projected the music to the nation.

As jazz reached a larger and more diverse audience through record sales, radio broadcasts, and motion pictures, the music encountered a massive backlash. Many critics of jazz posited the music as detrimental to the traditional American values of morality, thrift, and responsibility, while other jazz opponents feared the supposed impact of African American values on the nation. Black critics, too, feared that Americans would generally view jazz as a mode of black expression, and many of these black detractors struggled to distance the African American community from the more outrageous elements of the emerging jazz culture. Much of this criticism, though rooted in specific, if anecdotal, evidence of moral degradation, signified a reaction to the larger cultural transformation that had started to redefine American life since the 1890s. The tensions stemming from the increased roles gained by many women and African Americans as well as growing concerns over industrialization and urbanization therefore provided much of the context for the jazz debate. The larger social and cultural changes that helped produce a national audience for jazz, in other words, also fueled the subsequent controversy as more Americans came into contact with jazz.

By the 1930s, however, jazz seemed much less threatening as many Americans began to accept the modern order. During this period, two musicians attempted a melding of respectable music with jazz rhythms, and though separated by ten years and differing in emphasis, the careers of Paul Whiteman and Benny Goodman helped make jazz an acceptable expression of American culture. While Whiteman endeavored to force jazz into a classical context through such ambitious pieces as George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, Goodman streamlined jazz into a well-rehearsed and arranged soundtrack for dancing. Classically trained, Goodman appreciated the technical elements of traditional music, but the Chicagoan also sought out a large audience by centering his band on a stomping rhythm section. By the mid-1930s, Goodman's music had attained a nationwide audience through record sales, radio broadcasts, and tours, and the Swing Era helped complete the musical arc begun in the rural South as a folk music predominately performed by African Americans emerged as the quintessential expression of American culture during the Great Depression. Created by (and reflective of) the larger pattern of modernization reconfiguring the nation between the 1890s and the 1930s, jazz music thus serves as an unambiguous articulation of the cultural transformation of America in the early twentieth century.

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VITA

Courtney Patterson Carney was born in Texas in 1974. He graduated from Baylor University in 1996, and received the Master of Arts degree from Louisiana State University in 1998. In 2002, the LSU Department of History awarded him the T. Harry Williams Dissertation Fellowship. At the Fall Commencement, 2003, he will receive the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.