

# What Was This Thing Called Jazz?

Race, Fear and Hope in the Discussion of Jazz During the  
American Jazz Age



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Language- and Culture Studies:  
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## Introduction

### A New Understanding of the Understandings of Jazz

*All art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists...I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. – W.E.B. DuBois*

*We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. [...]  
If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. – Langston Hughes*

*I'm a spade, you're an ofay. Let's play. – Louis Armstrong*

The influence jazz had on America during the 1920s is undeniable. If anything should hint at its enormous impact, it is that this period in American history is also popularly known as 'the Jazz Age'. However, despite its immense popularity and influence, jazz was not loved or welcomed by everyone. Opinions of what jazz was, should be or could do were as varied as they were vehement. Critics, political activists, ideologists, musicians and the general public all had their own reactions and thoughts. On both sides of the segregated society the discussion of jazz was heated and diverse. For a large part, this multilateral reception of jazz was grounded in the racial connotations jazz encompassed, as well as the segregationist society in which jazz experienced its

heyday. Opinions concerning jazz were hardly ever separate from opinions concerning race. In this way, the discussion of jazz fostered the racialization of African Americans, adding to and facilitating the attribution of racial characteristics to African-Americans as a separate and distinct race.<sup>1</sup>

For this reason, jazz was not merely discussed as a musical form which people liked or disliked, but also as an instrument that could potentially lead to a more racially equal society, or on the contrary as an impediment to making racial equality a reality. As part of the black cultural boom of the Harlem Renaissance, jazz proved to be a thorny issue in the black progressive thought that dominated this movement. Its influence and popularity was often seen as counteracted by its engagement with sex, drugs and alcohol. As a representation of the African-American race, many questioned the effect jazz would have on the position of African Americans in American society. On the other side, white critics worried that the immense popularity of jazz and the interracial scene that was linked to it, would prove to be detrimental or even dangerous to the segregated society.<sup>2</sup>

So in which ways did jazz function as an instrument to discuss and dislodge racial issues in American society during the American Jazz Age? To answer this

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<sup>1</sup> John Hope Franklin and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (ed.), *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans Ninth Edition* (McGraw-Hill, 2010), 381; Lawrence W. Levine, "Jazz and American Culture," *The Journal of American Folklore*, 102/403 (Jan-Mar, 1989): 6.

Even though the ways in which the word 'race' functioned in the discourse of segregated American society of the 1920s has been long contested, the word will often be used as such in this essay. The main reason for this is that division of races was an established idea in the American society of the 1920s, which means that many of the primary sources used in this essay speak of race and understand race as something real and indicating inherent difference between the African-American population and Euro-Americans. However, race in this essay should be regarded as a social construction more than a natural trait that indicates insurmountable differences between people.

<sup>2</sup> Franklin and Higginbotham (ed.), *From Slavery to Freedom*, 413; Porter, Eric, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics and Activists* (University of California Press, 2002), 5; Maureen Anderson, "White Reception of Jazz in America," *African-American Review* 38/1 (2004): 135.

question, this thesis will explore different opinions concerning jazz and its influence on the segregated society of the 1920s. Different thoughts, ideologies and experiences of the importance of jazz as a representation of the African-American community will be placed within the proceedings and trends of the American “Jazz-Age.” Three specific groups will be examined: black and white critics, essays by members of the Harlem Renaissance and the black intelligentsia of the time, as well as personal experiences and ideas expressed by popular jazz musicians of the 1920s, will function as a guide to understand the racial importance of jazz in its rampant surge to becoming the symbolic music for the American twenties.

Existing research in the field of Jazz Studies is generally focused on jazz’s musical characteristics.<sup>3</sup> Scholars that have studied the relation between jazz and race often confined their research to one specific group or contemplated the discussion of jazz in a broader time scope.<sup>4</sup> In discussions of the Harlem Renaissance and its social importance, jazz is often overshadowed by literary and artistic successes. This essay

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<sup>3</sup> For example, jazz handbooks such as *The Red Book*\* by Jamey Aebersold and *The Jazz Handbook* by Barry McRae are almost exclusively concerned with leading jazz musicians and musical characteristics of jazz, bebop and the blues. \* “The Red Book” is available for download online.

<sup>4</sup> Researchers such as Maureen Anderson and Alwyn Williams have conducted interesting research into the discussion of jazz and the importance of race in this discussion, but mainly focus on the jazz reception of white critics or intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance. Books such as *Jazz in Black and White: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Jazz Community* by Charley Gerard (1998) and *The Reception of Jazz in America: a new view* by James Lincoln Collier (1988) provide important research into the connection between race and jazz in the jazz discussion. However, Gerard discusses the general connections made between jazz and race from the 1920s to now and treats early conceptions of jazz and race mostly as a precursor of the 1960s discussion. Collier mainly focuses on the importance of American music critics compared to European music critics of the 1920s. Eric Porter, who’s book *What is This Thing Called Jazz* (2002) has inspired the title of this thesis, takes a similar approach to the subject of jazz criticism by combining the practical history of jazz with historical understandings of jazz, but mainly focuses on black jazz criticism, and on later jazz criticism. This thesis attempts to go deeper into the reasons why jazz was such a loaded topic at the start of its popularity as well as how and why so many different groups struggled with their understanding of it by comparing and contrasting both white and black understandings of jazz in all layers of society during the 1920s, when race relations were tense and jazz quickly gained widespread popularity. This way a more complete notion of the connection between understandings of race and understandings of jazz is created.

attempts to add a new and more versatile view on the discussion of jazz, by combining existing (historical) research with personal statements and sources from the 1920s. By examining the anticipated and practical impact of jazz on American society, this thesis will also clarify the political significance of music and the ways in which racial ideologies can be intertwined with the reception of new musical forms. It will underscore the importance of looking at jazz as an ideological musical form, a cultural expression, and as an instrument that could challenge and underscore racial issues in American society. This study will show that music can be more complex than it might seem to be at first glance, and that the complexity of jazz was not just inlaid in its musical composition, but also in the racial and social composition of American society of the 1920s.<sup>5</sup>

To demarcate this research to a comprehensible size, it will predominantly be concerned with jazz as it occurred and flourished in the city of New York. As the hub of black cultural accession during the 1920s, including jazz, New York was a place where most people who spoke their minds on jazz had direct contact or experience with jazz and its influence. Furthermore, the Harlem Renaissance, the black cultural movement that implemented major changes in and ideologies concerning racial progress, was centered in the New York district Harlem. Even though jazz also flourished in other cities and areas, like New Orleans and Detroit, New York was where the American Jazz Age was most clearly represented and where many pioneers of jazz and the African-American movement resided. Additionally, the time scope of this thesis is based on what is now known as the “Jazz Age,” which knew its high

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<sup>5</sup> Samuel A. Floyd, *Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance*, (University of Tennessee Press, 1993) 3.

point in the 1920s. For this reason, the primary sources used are predominantly from the late 1910s, 1920s and early 1930s, or discuss experiences of this time.<sup>6</sup>

It is pivotal that in this research, jazz is understood as an instrument or tool that could be used in the pursuit of racial equality. Jazz in itself did not implement change: it was mainly because jazz was understood as a representation of a race that it was seen as dangerous or beneficial. The first part of this essay will therefore examine different views on jazz as representative of the African-American race, how these views were constructed and how they added to the racialization of African Americans. To understand different views on jazz's functionality in or negative effect on the pursuit of racial equality, it is first of all important to understand how and why jazz was understood as 'black music'. The first chapter will therefore attempt to clarify how characteristics of jazz were seen as inherent to its African-American origin and how this affected opinions concerning the influence of jazz on American society, as well as opinions concerning its musical value. The second chapter of this essay will focus on the more negative views on jazz and how it was seen as detrimental to establishing racial equality. Expressions of worry concerning the meaning of jazz for the African-American community or even complete rejections of jazz will again be combined with historical facts concerning jazz's influence on America's segregated society. The third and final chapter will be concerned with the perceived value of jazz as an instrument to be used in the pursuit of racial equality. Positive statements and ideologies concerning the possibilities of jazz, by musicians, critics and members of the Harlem Renaissance and Talented Ten will be combined with historical

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<sup>6</sup> Franklin and Higginbotham (ed.), *From Slavery to Freedom*, 381, 389; Clement A. Price, "Foreword: Race, Blackness, and Modernism during the Harlem Renaissance," in: Sandra L. West Aberjhani, *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York, 2003), xii.

information on how jazz was practically able to challenge segregationist practice and thought.

In the end, this thesis aims to disclose the issues jazz dislodged in American society of the 1920s within and between different groups and individuals. It will show the ways in which jazz was part of the struggle for racial equality and how in this role jazz was not always regarded as a positive contribution. By understanding ideologies, reactions and experiences of those concerned with jazz in their own time, this essay will show the actual complexity of jazz as the first 'true' American music that was born from America's racial past.

## Chapter 1

### Primitive, Marvel of Paradox or All-American

#### Jazz as Racially Representative

“The African Negro hasn’t it, and the Caucasian never could have invented it.” – J.A. Rogers

In order to employ the discussion of jazz to discuss racial issues, jazz had to be understood in some way as racially charged or -representative. During the 1920s and after, racial properties were attributed to jazz in a number of ways and with different agendas. This process added to the racialization of African Americans, confirming and adding to beliefs that African Americans belonged to a distinct race with distinct characteristics. This chapter will explore some of the most common ways in which jazz was typified and presented as racially representative of the African-American race, or in some cases as distinctly American, by white critics, the African-American intelligentsia and African-American jazz musicians of the 1920s, and how this typification was used to bring forward racist sentiments or contest them.<sup>7</sup>

At the start of the twentieth century, when jazz music started to come into being, American scientists, intellectuals and social critics all examined what was called the “Negro question.” As hundreds of articles on racial issues and African-

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<sup>7</sup> In this chapter, I will primarily quote articles, interviews and essays expressing opinions concerning the racial value and history of jazz from the Jazz Age. However, ever since jazz arose as a musical form, countless historians and researchers have given different views on the roots of jazz music in African and African-American culture. For example, Frank Kofsky has argued in the seventies, that sound patterns of jazz were influenced by ‘Negro speech’, which according to him stemmed from the illiteracy of black musicians. Contemporary musician and scholar Karlton Hester has asserted that early jazz styles retained many African influences in a cohesive form “to maintain it’s cultural uniqueness.”<sup>7</sup> For more information on different views on the racial history of Afro-American music during and before the 1920s, also see the article “Race Values in Aframerican Music” by Paul Fritz Laubenstein (1930). (Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism & the Revolution in Music* (New York, 1970) p. 135. Karlton Hester, *From Africa to Afrocentric Innovations Some Call “Jazz”*, (New York, 2000) ch. 2, pp. 3-4; Paul F. Laubenstein, ‘Race Values in Aframerican Music’, *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 16 no. 3 (July, 1930) pp. 378-403).

Americans were published in American magazines between 1905 and 1914, articles on jazz and other black music became an integral part of the discussion of the problem of the “Negro.” Musicologists, anthropologists and the general public all contributed to the racialization of African Americans through discussion of their music. Frequently, these articles alluded to the African and black roots of jazz music. This typification of jazz characteristics as African was often used to promote racist sentiment by demarcating Harlem and other types of jazz as “primitive” and “evil.” This proved to be a beguiling strategy for white critics, since it made a degrading discussion of jazz and its musicians possible. Especially at the start of the twentieth century, when hierarchical formatting of different racial groups was being challenged by new scientific and historical insights, pointing out “primitive” attributes of jazz music could be used to justify racist thought and practice and to validate adhered racial hierarchies.<sup>8</sup>

According to historian Maureen Anderson, jazz articles that appeared in mainstream American magazines between 1917 and 1930 spoke more clearly of the negative prejudices white critics held against African Americans than their negative opinions of the music. Linking the African-American’s African past to jazz music was one of the main strategies these critics seemed to employ to racialize and express racial prejudice against African Americans. For example, the white author of the article “The Appeal of Primitive Jazz,” which appeared in *Literary Digest* in 1917, puts the roots of both the word “jazz” and the performance of jazz in Africa,

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<sup>8</sup> James Lincoln Collier, *The Reception of Jazz in America: A New View* (New York, 1988) 29; Anderson, “White Reception of Jazz in America,” 135; Price, “Foreword: Race, Blackness, and Modernism during the Harlem Renaissance,” xii; Frank Kofsky, “The Jazz Tradition: Black Music and Its White Critics,” *Journal of Black Studies*, 1/4 (June, 1971): 411.

“The word, according to Walter Kingsley, famous in the ranks of Vaudeville, is variously spelled jas, jass, jaz, jazz, and jacz; and is African in origin. [...] In old plantation days, when slaves were having one of their rare holidays and the fun languished, some West-Coast African would cry out, “Jaz her up,” and this would be the cue for fast and furious fun. No doubt the witch-doctors and medicine-men on the Kongo used the same term at those jungle “parties” when tomtoms throbbed and the sturdy warriors gave their pep an added kick with rich brews of Yohimbin bark.”

Not only does the author here link jazz’s roots to Africa, he also suggests jazz can be linked directly to witch-doctors, medicine-men and warriors, thus implying both mysterious and dangerous attributes to (the history of) jazz music. Additionally, he hints at the stereotype of the sexually unrestrained black male by suggesting the consumption of brews spiked with the aphrodisiac yohimbin during what he calls “jungle parties.” The author goes on to describe jazz musicians as savages and inherently degenerate when he states, “The music of contemporary savages taunts us with a lost art of rhythm. Modern sophistication has inhibited many native instincts.” The typification of jazz as a “savage” music and the illustrative language used in this article are exemplary of many articles that discussed the origin of jazz music.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, the author appropriates strategies used in scientific discussions of racial differences to discuss jazz and jazz musicians, equaling jazz with African war-music and jazz musicians with “contemporary savages” who cannot suppress their “native instincts.” By discussing jazz in this way, the author is able to conjure up convictions

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<sup>9</sup> Similar articles that use the same type of language will be discussed in the next chapter, in which more light will be shed on the ways in which these typifications served to warn against the dangers of jazz.

essential to segregated society that blacks are naturally inferior to whites, who do possess the “modern sophistication” he is referring to.<sup>10</sup>

Not all white critics were convinced that jazz originated with the African American’s African past however. In the sent-in letter “Ethnography of Jazz” for example, *New York Times* reader Haynes Trebor contests the African distinctiveness of jazz,

“Jazz has been under the scalpel before and its origin in the [N]egro seems to form the conclusion of the majority of the dissectors. I have always held to that belief and found the evidence quite sufficient to prove the case. It would seem that the naïve, primitive rhythm of the slave’s music gave rise to what is now termed jazz. But [...] I have hit upon a veritable paradox. The [N]egro of Jamaica has absolutely no music! He is from the same stock as the slave of the United States, coming from the same region of Africa. [...] There is every similarity in the two groups of [N]egroes. Yet I have never seen a West Indian [N]egro [...] who seems able to master any musical instrument. [...]The efforts of a local orchestra to play jazz is ludicrous.”<sup>11</sup>

Even though the author, who uses heavily racially charged and derogatory terminology in his article, seems to attribute some musical genius to the “American Negro,” the African American is still placed in a derogatory position in the author’s explanation of this “paradox.” Although the author contests existing theories that the “primitive” jazz music originates in Africa, and seems to claim that the African-American musician has at least some musical genius compared to the Jamaican musician, he wonders whether this musical genius stems from contact with “any

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<sup>10</sup> Anderson, “White Reception of Jazz in America,” 135; quotes: “The Appeal of Primitive Jazz.” *Literary Digest* (Aug. 1917): 28, in: Anderson, “White Reception of Jazz in America,” 136.

<sup>11</sup> Haynes Trebor, “Ethnography of Jazz,” *New York Times* (April 17, 1927).

particular kind of white man in the United States.” This question presumes not only the inability of African Americans to develop musical genius without a white mentor, but that *any kind* of white American male possesses the ability to teach African Americans their musical ways. Notwithstanding the willingness of the author to place the origin of jazz with the African American, he cannot seem to believe that any musical genius of the African American would be possible without the help of a white man. He ends his letter with two options: the origin of jazz either lies with the “Negro,” which is the theory he just contested, or the origin of jazz lies within the machine age.<sup>12</sup>

It was not just white critics, however, who attributed African roots to jazz music. Alain Locke for example, who was one of the leading African-American intellectuals during the Harlem Renaissance, linked jazz back to both Africa and the African-American past. In this way, Locke thus also racializes African Americans, attributing distinct characteristics to them as a group. In his essay “Negro Music and Dance,” Locke typifies jazz music as “distinctly Negro” and inherent to African-American life and culture, impossible to be imitated by others than the African-American. However, he also notably goes back to Africa to trace the roots of the musical characteristics of jazz,

“The racial mastery of rhythm is the one characteristic that seems never to have been lost. When customs were lost and native cultures cut off in the rude transplantings of slavery, when languages and rituals were forgotten and nature-worship displaced, rhythm memories and rhythmic skill persisted, later to merge with and transform whatever new mode of expression the Negro took on. [...] From a kernel of rhythm, African music has sprouted in strange lands, sending out offshoots of folk song and

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<sup>12</sup> Trebor, “Ethnography of Jazz.”

folk dance, going through the whole cycle of musical expression as far as the soil of the cultural conditions permitted.”

Locke thus points out African roots to typify jazz music as well, yet he avoids the racial terminology used by the author of “The Appeal of Primitive Jazz,” making this typification fit for claiming jazz music as distinctly “Negro” without conjuring up images of primitivism. He is also careful to separate the rhythmic characteristics of jazz from African “rituals” and “nature-worship”, which according to him were lost in the process of slavery and assimilation of the “American Negro,” avoiding agreement with claims of the “primitive” traits of jazz music being inherent to the African roots of the African American.<sup>13</sup>

Another famed member of the Harlem Renaissance, poet and writer Langston Hughes, also typified jazz as distinctly African-American. He was an avid promoter of jazz music and considered it to be one of the best cultural products of African-American culture, using jazz both as an influence for his literary work as a topic for essays. In his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes says of jazz music,

“[J]azz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a

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<sup>13</sup> Alain Locke, “Negro Music and Dance,” in: Margaret J. Butcher, *The Negro in American Culture, Based on Materials Left by Alain Locke* (New York, 1957), 70, 97. Alain Locke expands on the African and African-American roots of jazz and black music in other essays, such as “Should the Negro be Encouraged to Cultural Equality: The High Cost of Prejudice” (1927), “The Negro’s Contribution to American Culture” (1939), “Enter the New Negro” (1925) and the book *The Negro and his Music* (1936).

white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile.”<sup>14</sup>

In this excerpt, Hughes simultaneously establishes jazz as something born from and expressing African-American experience in America, as well as something working against American oppression, using the African tom-tom as a metaphor. Yet Hughes also refers to modern city life by mentioning subway trains. It seems as though for Hughes, jazz reflects all that is African-American in American society, both modern and historical. He further distinguishes jazz music as reflective of the African-American experience. He stated this sentiment clearly in 1925 in *Vanity Fair*, when he said that “[t]here seems to be a monotonous melancholy, an animal sadness, running through all Negro jazz that is almost terrible at times.” For Hughes, the emotion and struggle that were reflected in jazz music were what proved it was indeed a product of African-American origin.<sup>15</sup>

Historian and social critic George S. Schuyler, who from 1937 to 1944 was the business manager of the NAACP, offered a different approach to seeing jazz as reflective of African-American life in America. He explicitly used his discussion of African-American art and music as a means to discuss the social and racial status of the African American in American society. In his essay “The Negro Art Hokum” from 1926, he challenges racialization strategies and casts aside any claims of African-American art being inherent to the “Negro” in general. He argues that even though jazz music grew from slave songs and spirituals, they are not “Negro” as they

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<sup>14</sup> Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” *The Nation*, (1926): 694.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep river: music and memory in Harlem Renaissance thought* (Durham, 2001), 170; Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” 694; Langston Hughes, “The Black Blues,” *Vanity Fair* 24/6 (August, 1925): 86, in: Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume I: 1902-1941, I, Too, Sing America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 111.

are unknown to other black populations such as the African and West Indian. He goes on to emphasize that white Americans contributed to the development of jazz music, thus making it impossible to dismiss jazz as pure “primitive” and “Negro” music. After establishing that so-called “Negro” art and music in general are not inherent to the “Negro race,” he quickly goes on to discuss the perception of African Americans in American society,

“This, of course, is easily understood if one stops to realize that the Aframerican is merely a lampblack Anglo-Saxon. If the European immigrant after two or three generations of exposure to our schools, politics, advertising, moral crusades, and restaurants becomes indistinguishable from the mass of Americans of the older stock [...], how much truer must it be of the sons of Ham who have been subjected to what the uplifters call Americanism for the last three hundred years. Aside from his color, which ranges from very dark brown to pink, your American Negro is just plain American.”<sup>16</sup>

After this statement, Schuyler goes on to list numerous circumstances that both black and white Americans deal and live with, concluding with the question, “How, then, can the black American be expected to produce art and literature dissimilar to that of the white American?” Then, after listing some of the most prominent black and white artists of the 1920s, he states that “they all reveal the psychology and culture of their environment - their color is incidental.” Furthermore, in the concluding paragraph of his essay, Schuyler discusses different scientific views that are often brought up in American society to cast the African-American as “inferior and fundamentally different”, referring to the use of these views by the KKK and concluding that this

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<sup>16</sup> George Samuel Schuyler, “The Negro Art Hokum,” *The Nation* (June 16, 1926).

“old myth palmed off by Negrophobists [...] must be rejected with a loud guffaw by intelligent people.”<sup>17</sup>

“The Negro Art Hokum” provides a good example of how it was not only whites who were able to express and enforce racist ideas and ideologies by discussing racial stereotypes in the same breath as discussing music and art, but how African Americans were able to use the same techniques to counter these racist expressions. Schuyler explicitly denies the existence of a negroic artistic sentiment that can be connected to Africa. To support his argument that America produced what is called “Negro” art, he argues that the African American is part of the same cultural hub as Anglo-Saxon American and is in fact “merely a lampblackened Anglo-Saxon.” For this reason, the African American does not create “Negro” art, but American art. Schuyler not only takes this as proof that “Negro” art, literature and music should not be discussed as such, but as proof against eugenic thought of the inherent difference between races.<sup>18</sup>

Other black intellectuals also alluded to African-American life in America to discuss the complexity of jazz’s cultural roots. Jamaican-American historian and social critic Joel A. Rogers discussed the racial origin of jazz music in broader extent in his essay “Jazz at Home,” which was included in the anthology *The New Negro*, composed by Alain Locke. He starts his essay off by putting cultural and racial paradox at the premise of jazz music,

“Jazz is a marvel of paradox: too fundamentally human, at least as modern humanity goes, to be typically racial, too international to be characteristically national, too much abroad in the world to have a special home. And yet jazz in spite of it all is one

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<sup>17</sup> Schuyler, “The Negro Art Hokum.”

<sup>18</sup> Schuyler, “The Negro Art Hokum.”

part American and three parts American Negro, and was originally the nobody's child of the levee and the city slum."

In his essay, Rogers gives a complex interpretation of the origin of jazz, alternating between claiming African-American origins and exposing jazz as a universal sentiment, which can be found in music ranging from "the Highland fling" and "the Spanish Fandango" to "the hula hula of the South Seas" and "the danse du ventre of the Orient." Interestingly enough, Rogers uses the same type of terminology used by white critics when arguing the difference between jazz and African music: "[J]azz time is faster and more complex than African music. [...] It bears all the marks of a nerve-strung, strident, mechanized civilization. It is a thing of the jungles - modern man-made jungles." It seems as though Rogers here reclaims and reinterprets commonly used references to the jungle, while defining jazz as something non-primitive, but modern; a child of "mechanized civilization."<sup>19</sup>

Although Rogers mentions different roots and qualities of jazz, he concludes jazz to be African-American, stating "[It is] difficult to say whether jazz is more characteristic of the Negro or of contemporary America. As was shown, it is of Negro origin plus the influence of the American environment. It is Negro-American." After establishing that jazz music and its sentiment are profoundly African-American, Rogers goes on to attribute American values to the music, promoting it as something that America should be proud of,

"The African Negro hasn't it, and the Caucasian never could have invented it. Once achieved, it is common property, and jazz has absorbed the national spirit, that

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<sup>19</sup> J. A. Rogers, "Jazz at Home," in: Alain Locke (ed), *The New Negro, with an introduction by Arnold Rampersad*, 99-224 (New York, 1997, original: New York, 1925), 216, 217, 218.

tremendous spirit of go, the nervousness, lack of conventionality and boisterous good-nature characteristic of the American, white or black, as compared with the more rigid formal natures of the English-man or German.”

Like Schuyler, Rogers defines jazz as something representative of the American, “white or black”, thus integrating equalitarian thought into his discussion of the music. Rogers does however claim that the correct execution of jazz music and performance requires a certain “Negro rhythm” that only African Americans possess. After giving an anecdote of white musicians failing to play good jazz music and white women failing to move to the music effortlessly like black women can, he states: “The performance of the Negro musicians is much imitated, but seldom equaled.” The conclusion that can be drawn from Rogers essay, is that the African American not only provided the world with a music that is universally loved, but it that has essential American characteristics that only the African American could produce in music, which in turn provided America with a music that could compete with the rest of the world.<sup>20</sup>

White critics were also aware that there was a difference in jazz performance by white and black musicians, or at least a presumed difference that could be used to enforce the presumed difference between the white and black populace. Instead of acknowledging the ability to authentically play jazz to African-American musicians, white critics often argued that white musicians were the ones to take jazz from a “primitive” and “noisy” music to a higher and more cultivated realm. Musical critic Virgil Thompson for example, argued that white jazz composer Paul Whiteman “[had] refined [jazz,] smoothed its harshness, taught elegance to its rhythms, blended its jarring polyphonies into an ensemble of mellow harmonic unity.” It is not difficult

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<sup>20</sup> Rogers, “Jazz at Home,” in: *The New Negro*, 219, 220.

to detect the imagery of the white teacher who refines the savage student in this quote.<sup>21</sup>

The discussion of the racial characteristics and representation of jazz, as well as the difference between black and white jazz musicians, was not confined to white critics and the black intelligentsia. Jazz musicians also took part in the discussion. One of the most prominent advocates of the racial distinction of jazz music was African-American jazz musician Duke Ellington. He purposely integrated spirituals- and folk influences in his music and referenced to African-American history and culture in many of his songs and song-titles, such as *Black and Tan Fantasy* (1927) and *Creole Love Call* (1927). Doing this, Ellington consciously promoted the idea that jazz music was African-American. He expressed his conviction that the music he played was distinctly African-American by saying that “[t]he music of my race is something more than the ‘American idiom’” and that “[m]usic, like any other art form, reflects the mood, temperament, and environment of its creators.” In an interview from 1930 he stated, “I am not playing jazz. I am trying to play the natural feelings of a people.” Like many other African-American musicians and intellectuals, Ellington emphasized the inability of white musicians to correctly play jazz music and explicitly stated that “The white man has never been able to throw himself into song and feeling the way the Negro does.” Ellington thus considered and promoted jazz as something natural to his race, which only someone of his race could play. Although critics used the same conviction to express racist sentiment, Ellington successfully used it to express racial pride.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Collier, *The Reception of Jazz in America*, 33.

<sup>22</sup> Floyd, (ed), *Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance*, 117, second quote, 122; Duke Ellington, “The Duke Steps Out,” *Rhythm* (October, 1931), in: Tucker, Mark (ed), *The Duke Ellington Reader*, (New York, 1993), 49; Florence Zusner, “‘Opera Must Die,’ Says Galli-Curci! Long Live the Blues!,” *New York Evening Graphic Magazine*

Another black jazz musician who took part in the discussion of jazz and its racial roots was James Rees Europe. Europe traveled Europe with a military jazz band during the First World War and was one of the main promoters of jazz as a racial music. Like Schuyler, he contested the origin of jazz in the African diaspora. In an interview with the *New York Tribune* he concurs with Ellington that jazz is something natural for the African American when he states “The Negro loves anything that is peculiar in music, and this “jazzing” appeals to him strongly.” Then, after listing some of the original ways in which African Americans play their instruments, he states: “It is natural for us to do this; it is, indeed, a racial musical characteristic.”<sup>23</sup>

Europe goes on to assign the musical genius of jazz to the African-American and away from the white man, contesting the argument made in “Ethnography of Jazz” and enforcing statements made by Rogers and Ellington with a short anecdote,

“After the concert was over, the leader of the band of the Garde Républicain came over and asked me for the score of on of the jazz compositions we had played. He said he wanted his band to play it. I gave it to him, and the next day he again came to me. He explained that he couldn’t seem to get the effects I got, and asked me to go to a rehearsal. I went with him. The great band played the composition superbly-but he was right: the jazz effects were missing.”

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(27 December, 1930), in: Tucker, Mark (ed), *The Duke Ellington Reader* (New York, 1993), 45.

<sup>23</sup> “James Reese Europe Explains Jazz,” *The Literary Digest* 61/4 (April 26, 1919), accessed May 17, 2013, [http://academic.cengage.com/music/book\\_content/049557273X\\_wrightSimms/assets/ITOW/7273X\\_72\\_ITOW\\_Europe.pdf](http://academic.cengage.com/music/book_content/049557273X_wrightSimms/assets/ITOW/7273X_72_ITOW_Europe.pdf); For further information on James Reese Europe and his views on jazz, see “James Reese Europe and the Prehistory of Jazz” by R. Reid Badger and “James Reese Europe and the Infancy of Jazz Criticism” by Ron Welburn.

By stating that a white musician could perfectly play the score, but was unable to play the “jazz effects,” Europe suggests that the musical genius of jazz can only be found in the African-American musician.<sup>24</sup>

In the interview, the discussion of jazz moves from a discussion of the music to a discussion of the men who play jazz. Europe attempts to ameliorate the opinion of him and other African-American musicians by emphasizing their contribution to the American war effort during WWI. Although references to his war service are made throughout the article, Europe’s reason for doing this becomes most clear in the last paragraph, when he states that [T]he men who now compose the band [...] are all fighters as well as musicians, for all have seen service in the trenches.” By emphasizing the service of his black musicians during WWI, Europe challenges the belief that African Americans should have a subordinate position in American society. Historically, African Americans have used war service to climb the social ladder and contest ideas of racial subordination. Europe combines this strategy with the argument that jazz is a racially original music, which can only be played well by African Americans. By doing so, he attempts to take advantage of the high social status of soldiers as well as the growing appreciation of jazz music in both Europe and America.<sup>25</sup>

White critics however, were aware of the strategies used by black writers and responded to these types of arguments by creating different ways of racist stereotyping. In the article “Delving into the Genealogy of Jazz” for example, the author counters Europe’s attempt to glorify black musicians who served during the war, by presenting them as bad soldiers as well as having a bad influence on the white

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<sup>24</sup> “James Reese Europe Explains Jazz.”

<sup>25</sup> “James Reese Europe Explains Jazz,”; Kimberly L. Phillips, *War, What Is It Good For? Black Freedom Struggles & The U.S. Military* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 4.

soldiers. He claims that black musicians merely entertained the white soldiers, who were the ones to fight, and needed “relaxation and solace and cheer” in order to “forget what was past and to abandon themselves wholeheartedly to the joyous hilarity of the present moment.” According to the author, black musicians during the war were not “fighters as well as musicians” as Europe argues, but merely provided much-needed entertainment for the white soldiers, who actually fought in the trenches and “with days and weeks of grim endeavor and physical strain behind them, turned to the Jazz furnished by their bands.” He goes on to argue that white soldiers should be excused for their indulgence in jazz music because of the hard-ships they endured at the front.<sup>26</sup>

The author of “Delving into the Genealogy of Jazz” also makes a connection between the war and jazz music in a different way, again saturated with racist sentiment. After stating that “Jazz is ordered and calculated noise”, he utilizes war-terminology to further denigrate jazz music and black musicians by employing noises of war as a metaphor for jazz music,

“The howitzers of Jazz band’s artillery are stationed in the “traps.” Under this heading we find all the instruments of percussion [...] for the production of various weird noises, and a host of other implements, often the personal conceptions of the individual players of the traps. The trombones may represent field guns, while the clarinets, oboes, saxophones, alto horns and cornets, furnish the rapid-fire batteries. The range being point-blank, it is easy to see why the effect of “drum-fire” is complete.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> “Delving into the Genealogy of Jazz,” *Current Opinion* (August 1919): 97, in: Anderson, “White Reception of Jazz in America,” 139-140; Anderson, “White Reception of Jazz in America,” 139.

<sup>27</sup> “Delving into the Genealogy of Jazz,” 97.

Later in his article, the author calls jazz a “ragged combination of letters that suggests bumping and snorting, wind and banging blinds, broken glass and devil-may-care of it all.” and terms jazz musicians “monkeys.” The author does not leave it at this, however, but continues his metaphorical racist rant by describing the music-making of an African-American jazz band with the popping of popcorn, suggesting distinct similarities with lynching,

“Put a whole band in a giant popper, hold it over the glowing coals of an ample crater, and, shaking well, command it to make some jolly music – the production would be meticulously true to Jazz form. [...] The wheezes of the scorching horns; the popping of overheated drumheads; the groans and pleadings of the musicians, with now and then a pure silvery note from a thoro[ugh]bred piper who cared not a rap that he was to be roasted for his art; the ravings of the crowd looking on; dervishes and holyrollers expressing themselves; the chuckles of a few cannibals; and over all the rancous imperturbability of old horse fiddles.... That would be a Chicago Jazz band. ”

This article explicitly demonstrates how the discussion of jazz could be used to express, and spread, racist thought. The article was printed during the Red Summer of 1919, in which race riots exploded into widespread racial violence all over the country. The article also provided a map with places to find black jazz bands, thus suggesting that the article was not meant to merely discuss jazz and the authors dislike for the music and its musicians, but to actually rally up fellow-racists to the lynching of black jazz bands.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> “Delving into the Genealogy of Jazz,” 97; Anderson, “White Reception of Jazz in America,” 139, 141.

The examples provided in this chapter establish the ways in which jazz was not merely discussed as music, but as something that could be representative of, or even interchangeable with, African-American musicians and –people, facilitating the racialization of African Americans. This happened on both sides of the color line and for different reasons. The characterization of jazz elements as African provided a way to typify jazz and its musicians as “primitive” and “degenerate,” but also a way to acknowledge and attribute inherent musical genius to African Americans. By alluding to the historical and contemporary influences on jazz, black intellectuals and -musicians were also able to argue that jazz was something modern and African-American, or even all-American. Effectively, this made it possible to express equalitarian sentiment and protest the social standing of African Americans in American society. However, the discussion of jazz could also, as the last article shows, be used to incite to aggression against African Americans. This demonstrates how the ways in which jazz was seen as racially representative could be used to actively influence groups of people and American society at large. Although the author of “Delving into the Genealogy of Jazz” used this fact to incite aggression, it was also believed to work the other way around. The next chapter will discuss the ways in which the concept of jazz as a racially representative influenced ideas and ideologies concerning the possibilities of jazz as an instrument to implement positive social change and racial progress.

## Chapter 2

### Loose Morals and Attacks on White Homogeny

#### Perceived Dangers of Jazz

*“One Touch of Jazz Makes Savages of Us All” – Current Opinion 1918*

The previous chapter showed that jazz during the 1920s was commonly perceived as inherently linked to African-American culture and history and how this facilitated the racialization of African Americans in the public discussion of jazz music. Since American society in the 1920s was still deeply racist and segregated, jazz was often considered upsetting to the social and racial status quo. Although some, as will become clear from the next chapter, saw this as an opportunity to bring positive change to the social standing of African Americans, it was regularly considered a dangerous occurrence. On both sides of the segregated society fears existed that jazz might have a negative effect on American society due to the interracial arena in which jazz existed and because of its connotations with sex, drugs, and African Americans. Concerns for America’s morality and the preservation of ‘good’ music were widespread. This chapter will discuss different types of fears regarding jazz that existed with the general public, black and white critics, musicians and the African-American intelligentsia, as well as the ways in which these fears resulted in warnings, provoked intense racism and led to the refusal to recognize jazz as a contribution to American and African-American society.

One of jazz’s attributes that caused the most commotion was the regular interracial contact that took place in the jazz world. Even though some considered this to be a positive attribute to jazz, which could broaden horizons for both whites and

blacks and could create possibilities to eliminate racial prejudice, it was most often regarded with suspicion or even horror. Different scholars have noted that interracial relationships usually had an exploitative character, with whites as patrons and direct consumers of jazz. Blacks and whites also got together in more informal relations at parties and dances, engaging in friendships and sexual exchanges. It is difficult to determine how many of these relationships were exploitative or amicable, but it is certain that they excited much protest from whites and blacks alike.<sup>29</sup>

There was a certain hypocritical character to the interracial contact that existed during the jazz age, as white society could consume African-American culture while still keeping in place the white-over-black power relations that were engrained in American society. Through jazz and other black culture, whites engaged in a flirtation with the despised and feared, but also intriguing ‘American Other.’ Jazz was often perceived as exotic, excessive, primitive, passionate and lustful and as such it stood for everything that America was not. Jazz provided whites with a doorway into America’s forbidden backyard. The black community did not always welcome this. A black journal even suggested in 1928 that “white people are taking a morbid interest in the night life of [Harlem].” White audiences tried hard to keep segregation at hand when venturing out into the forbidden paradise of Harlem. When enjoying Harlem nightlife at dances, performances and clubs, white audiences expected venues to protect their white ruling-class status and for performances to affirm the stereotypical primitive and savage-like image of black music. A strange form of cultural

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<sup>29</sup> Burton William Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz: Music, Race, and Culture in Urban America* (Urbana, 1992), 177; Price, “Foreword: Race, Blackness, and Modernism during the Harlem Renaissance,” xiii; Collier, *The Reception of Jazz in America*, 9; Ted Goia, *The History of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 124.

entertainment was created, where whites could enjoy proximity of the “good side” of black life, but could simultaneously keep a desired distance.<sup>30</sup>

The phenomenon of ‘white slumming parties’ well illustrates the strange relationship white Americans had with Harlem’s nightlife. A journalist from the *New York Age* noted about these parties, “[they were] where white people from downtown could be entertained by colored girls.” When they wanted “to go on a moral vacation,” or wanted to lessen “the asperities of a Puritan conscience.” An advertisement trying to bring white audiences to Harlem wrote,

“Here in the world’s greatest city it would both amuse and also interest you to see the real inside of the New Negro Race of Harlem. You have heard it discussed, but there are very few who really know. [...] I am in a position to carry you through Harlem as you would go slumming through Chinatown. My guides are honest and have been instructed to give the best service. [...] Your season is not completed with thrills until you have visited Harlem.”

Harlem and jazz thus provided white audiences with permissible thrills that could not be had outside of Harlem. Instead of learning to appreciate black culture in its complete value, whites were often tempted to merely enjoy the aspects they could consume for their own satisfaction. This was the flipside of Harlem’s cultural boom, in which artists initially attempted to create a distinct African-American culture that celebrated black racial identity, free from white oppression.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Price, “Foreword: Race, Blackness, and Modernism during the Harlem Renaissance,” *xiii*; Levine, “Jazz and American Culture,” 7; “Nordic Invasion of Harlem,” *New York Age* (September 5, 1922), in: Gilbert Osofsky, “Symbols of the Jazz Age: The New Negro and Harlem Discovered,” *American Quarterly* 17/2 (Summer, 1965): 236; Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?*, 710; Goia, *The History of Jazz*, 125.

<sup>31</sup> Gilbert Osofsky, “Symbols of the Jazz Age: The New Negro and Harlem Discovered,” *American Quarterly*, 17/2 (Summer, 1965): 235; “The Rise of Harlem As An

Even though jazz challenged America's conceptions of race and endorsed interracial contact, it came into bloom in an extremely racist society. Racism was therefore palpable in the jazz world in many ways. One of the most striking examples of this is Harlem's famed Cotton Club, where African-American music and theatre were performed on stage every night, but where only white audiences were allowed. Most jazz musicians who did not want to conform to the needs or requests of their white audiences were excluded from jobs. At times they were forced to denigrate themselves to work. Billie Holiday recalled that for a performance she was supposed to give with Count Basie, the dancers were fitted with "special black masks and mammy dresses" and the managers forced her to use a "special dark grease paint" on her face, since her skin was "too yellow" compared to the black musicians and "somebody might think [she] was white if the light didn't hit [her] just right." Even though Count Basie tried to break his contract over this incident, he was unable to. It is instances like this that show even in the jazz world, where many racial loopholes were created, segregation and discrimination exerted a strong influence.<sup>32</sup>

The racist sentiment of the 1920s is also reflected in the discussion of jazz by white critics. During the 1920s, many articles were published discussing the dangerous effects jazz might have on American society and especially on America's youth. Most critics asserted that jazz would corrupt the youth by fostering libidinous and improper behavior, race mixing, and by causing a drunk-like state of mind. Some even compared jazz to a drug or disease that should be prevented from spreading. In a

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Amusement Center," *New York Age* (November 2, 1935), in: Osofsky, "Symbols of the Jazz Age: The New Negro and Harlem Discovered," 235; "The Slumming Hostess," *New York Age* (November 6, 1926), in: Osofsky, "Symbols of the Jazz Age: The New Negro and Harlem Discovered," 236; Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz*, 196-197.

<sup>32</sup> Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?*, 8, 9; Price, "Foreword: Race, Blackness, and Modernism during the Harlem Renaissance," *xiii*; Billie Holiday and William Dufty, *Lady Sings the Blues* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 61.

*New York Times* article in 1922, Dr. E. Elliot Rawlins warned against the dangerous effects of jazz music.

“Jazz is killing some people; some are going insane; others are losing their religion. The young girls and boys, who constantly take jazz every day and night, are becoming absolutely bad, and some criminals. Jazz [...] should not be used by the very young, or in copious amounts by the old. Jazz, like any other drug, should be used only when needed, in a specific dose, and by those who know how it should be used. A little jazz is all right an proper; an overdose is harmful.”

This article perfectly illustrates how jazz was not merely seen as music, but was reconstructed in the discussion of it in order to understand and warn against its influence. A different article, titled “Why ‘Jazz’ Sends Us Back to the Jungle,” stated a common fear that “[o]ne touch of ‘Jazz’ makes savages of us all.” These types of articles played into the concern that contamination with bad genetics would keep America from maintaining, and gradually improving, “America’s hereditary stock.” This type of contamination was commonly thought of as constantly endangering America. In an article from 1924, Lt. Com. John Philip Sousa is quoted suggesting that “jazz, like the poor, are [...] ever with us.” The same article argues “[w]hen a savage distorts his features and paints his face as to produce startling effects, 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,” suggesting that jazz only has a deteriorating effect on whites.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Kathy Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution: Twenties America & The Meaning of Jazz* (New York, 1992), 152, 156; E. Elliot Rawlins, *The New York Times* (12 February 1922): 1, in: Alwyn Williams, “Jazz and the New Negro: Harlem’s Intellectuals Wrestle with the Art of the Age,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, 21/1 (July, 2002): 13-14; “Why ‘Jazz’ Sends Us Back to the Jungle,” 165; “Where is Jazz Leading America?:

These articles suggested that it was not merely “bad genes” that could thwart the project of creating a powerful American breed, but that African-American music might have a similar deteriorative effect. This shows how deeply rooted the conviction that jazz music and the African-American race were intertwined was, and how this went along with extreme racial fears of jazz itself. The confirmation of the legitimacy of these fears by authorities such as doctors, scientists and military commanders, simultaneously established racist practices like segregation that served to keep the African-American race from “contaminating” white society as legitimate. An example of this is a “Letter to the Editor” of the *Musical Courier* from 1913, which stated,

“SIR – Can it be said that America is falling prey to the collective soul of the [N]egro through the influence of what is popularly known as ‘rag time’ music? Some sociological writers of prominence believe so; all psychologists are of the opinion. One thing is infallibly certain: if there is any tendency toward such a national disaster, it should be definitely pointed out and extreme measures taken to inhibit the influence and avert the increasing danger – if it has not already gone too far.”

This article very clearly constructs the problem of jazz as a racial problem, in expressing fears that the “collective soul of the [N]egro” is influencing American society through its music. We are left only to guess what type of “extreme” measures the author is thinking of to solve this “problem.”<sup>34</sup>

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Opinions of Famous Men and Women In and Out of Music,” *Etude* (August, 1924): 520, 518, in: Anderson, “White Reception of Jazz in America,” 143; Stephen J. Gould, “The Internal Brand of Scarlet,” *Natural History* 107/2 (1998): 22.

<sup>34</sup> Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution*, 158; Gould, “The Internal Brand of Scarlet,” 22; Walter Winston Kenilworth, “Remarks on Ragtime,” *Musical Courier* (May 18, 1913): 22, in: Matthew Mooney, *The Music That Scared America: The Early Days of Jazz*, 25 (University of California, 2006), 25.

The article “Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation,” which appeared in *Ladies’ Home Journal* in 1921, provides an excellent example of the different ways in which the fear for the primitive, authoritative voices and the fear of degrading of society were combined in the argument against jazz.

“We have all been taught to believe that ‘music soothes the savage beast,’ but we have never stopped to consider that an entirely different type of music might invoke savage instincts [...] Welfare workers tell us that never in the history of our land have there been such immoral conditions among our young people, and in the surveys made by many organizations regarding these conditions, the blame is laid on jazz music and its evil influence on the young people of to-day. Never before have such outrageous dances been permitted in private as well as public ballrooms [...] Jazz originally was the accompaniment of the voodoo dancer, stimulating the half-crazed barbarian to the vilest deeds. The weird chant, accompanied by the syncopated rhythm of the voodoo invokers, has also been employed by other barbaric people to stimulate brutality and sensuality [...] With this evil influence surrounding our coming generation, it is not to be wondered at that degeneracy should be developing so rapidly in America.”<sup>35</sup>

Religious leaders also warned against the dangers of jazz, underscoring the perceived bad moral that was attributed to jazz. In 1922, Reverend Dr. Percy Stickey Grant told his parish in New York’s Episcopal Church of the Ascension on Fifth Avenue that jazz “is retrogression. It is going to the African jungle for our music. It is a savage crash and bang.” Rabbi Stephen Wise claimed that when the soul of America had

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<sup>35</sup> Anne Shaw Faulkner, “Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?” *Ladies’ Home Journal* (August, 1921): 16, 24.

returned, jazz “will be relegated to the dark and scarlet haunts whence it came and whither unwept it will return.”<sup>36</sup>

Some critics tried to solve the problem of jazz not just by warning against its consumption, but also by distinguishing between white and black jazz, thus evading the racial connotations with jazz while still accepting it as good music. George Ade, in the article “Where is Jazz Leading America: Opinions of Famous Men and Women In and Out of Music” states that “if Paul Whiteman boys play ‘jazz,’ then I am in favor of that particular variety of jazz’.” In this type of argumentation, critics usually made a distinction between ‘Highbrow’ and ‘Lowbrow’ jazz, interchangeable with Caucasian and African-American jazz. These terms were derived from the conviction that intelligence could be read from the position of the brow, hierarchized with the low brow of the ape and ‘Human Idiot’ at the bottom and the high brow of the enlightened Caucasian at the top. This type of discrimination thus again relied on scientific differences to fortify racist arguments against jazz. Henry Fink for example, in the article “Jazz-Lowbrow and Highbrow,” which appeared in *Etude* in 1925, asserts, “lowbrow jazz is African.” His reasoning for this is that “wild African tribes as described by explorers and missionaries [...] with their drums and gongs and rattles [produce] musical orgies rather than performances.” He then goes on to state that when jazz music is played by white musicians it can rightly be called jazz music, but when played by African Americans, it is merely noise from the jungle.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Reverent Dr. Percy Stickey Grant, “Rector Calls Jazz National Anthem,” *New York Times* (January 30, 1922), in: Levine, “Jazz and American Culture,” 11; Levine, “Jazz and American Culture,” 11, 12; Rabbi Stephen Wise, in: “Where is Jazz Leading America?: Part II of a Symposium, *The Etude* 42 (1924): 595, in: Levine, “Jazz and American Culture,” 12.

<sup>37</sup> George Ade, in: “Where is Jazz Leading America?,” 515, in: Anderson, “White Reception of Jazz in America,” 143; Levine, “Jazz and American Culture,” 11; Henry T. Fink, “Jazz-Lowbrow and Highbrow,” *Etude* (August, 1924): 527, in: Anderson, “White Reception of Jazz in America,” 144.

Many white critics alluded to Paul Whiteman as an example of what highbrow jazz should sound like. As a famous white jazz musician and bandleader, Whiteman became the poster child for both ‘white’ and ‘high cultured’ jazz. According to some scholars, Whiteman and other white jazz orchestrators like George Gershwin, tried to disassociate jazz from African Americans. Some music critics left black jazz completely out of the picture when discussing the origins of jazz, usually inspired by the European jazz appreciation and arguing that jazz was of high culture as well as truly Anglo-Saxon in origin. Black critics loathed this form of cultural appropriation and linked it to past instances of cultural appropriation by whites. Maude Cuney-Hare, who personally was averse to jazz music, said of this, “Just as the white minstrels blackened their faces and made use of the Negro idiom, so have white orchestral players today usurped the Negro in Jazz entertainment.” Whiteman himself has been interpreted by some scholars as being responsible for making jazz an acceptable music in the higher classes and opening up a way for black musicians to be taken seriously. However, many have also argued that Whiteman was not concerned with the African-American cause and was himself racist. He hired only white musicians and after visiting a performance of African-American pianist Earl Hines said to him after the show, “If only you were white.”<sup>38</sup>

Although much of the published discussion of jazz took place in publications owned or managed by whites, black critics also spoke out against jazz. They often feared that the association with jazz would reflect poorly on the African-American community. Critics such as Dave Peyton encouraged black musicians to establish themselves as serious musicians who could play as well as white and European

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<sup>38</sup> Levine, “Jazz and American Culture,” 16; Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution*, 160; Maude Cuney-Hare, *Negro Musicians and Their Music* (Washington D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1936), 148; John Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (Chicago, 2006), 44; Anderson, *Deep River*, 233, 234; Paul Whiteman, in: Stanley Dance, *The World of Earl Hines* (New York: Scribner's, 1983), 177.

musicians. He believed that black musicians focused too much on “hot jazzy tunes” and should not confine themselves to merely playing ‘black’ music, “We have played music as we think it should be played without trying to find out if we are playing it correctly. So few of us have the time to visit the grand symphony orchestras, the deluxe picture houses and other places where things musically are done correctly.”

Lucien H. White added that jazz “produc[es] a conglomerate mixture of dissonances, with a swing an a lilt appealing only to the lover of sensuous and debasing emotions.”

L. H. White and many other black critics believed that black musicians who played this type of music transgressed “upon the outpourings of the racial heart when it was wrung and torn with sorrow and distress,” and “would be cast out [...] as unorthodox and unclean.” For black critics, race and racial representation were commonly at the center of their judgment of jazz music. Jazz was connoted with negative stereotypical imagery and would, according to critics, reflect badly upon the African-American race as a whole. It is interesting to note that in black magazines like *The Crisis* and *The Opportunity*, jazz either got little attention or was derogatively discussed.<sup>39</sup>

Not all African Americans of the general public were happy with jazz either. A considerable group was opposed jazz for religious or moral reasons. Many church leaders warned against “the devils music.” Others, mainly the African-American middle class, simply thought of jazz and blues as popular entertainment for the uneducated and unsophisticated lower classes. Different musicians recall being shunned by their families for associating with jazz. One of the soloists in Ellington’s

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<sup>39</sup> Dave Peyton, “The Musical Bunch,” *Chicago Defender* (January 28, 1928): 21, in: Levine, “Jazz and American Culture,” 12; Lucien H. White, *New York Age* (April 23, May 7, July 23, 1921, July 8, 1922), in: Levine, “Jazz and American Culture,” 12; Richard Aldrich, “Drawing a Line for Jazz,” *New York Times* section VIII (December 10, 1922), in: Levine, “Jazz and American Culture,” 12; Levine, “Jazz and American Culture,” 12, 13; Alwyn Williams, “Jazz and the New Negro: Harlem’s Intellectuals Wrestle with the Art of the Age,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, 21/1 (July, 2002): 7.

band for example, Lawrence Brown, was urged by his father to leave his family if he wanted to keep playing jazz. Pianist Lil Hardin recalls her mother calling it “wuthless immoral music, played by wuthless, immoral loafers expressin’ their vulgar minds with vulgar music,” and being forced to sneak out to play outside her mother’s house.<sup>40</sup>

William ‘the Lion’ Smith, a renowned jazz pianist, pointed out a specific reason why many African Americans in Harlem disliked jazz music, “The average Negro family did not allow the blues or even the raggedy music played in their homes [...] Among those who disliked this form of entertainment the most were the Negroes who had recently come up from the South to seek a better life.” Musician W.O. Smith added that Southern blacks were often looked down upon by long-time residents of Harlem, and were trying to disassociate themselves with anything that could link them back to their Southern roots, including the popular types of jazz that were rooted in New Orleans and the Deep South. But it was not just Southern immigrants who tried to stay away from jazz in fear of negative stereotyping. Many black middle class families were afraid that the primitive image of the music would reinforce the stereotypes they were so avidly trying to get rid of. Additionally, the practicalities of segregation and the economic state of the majority of African Americans played a significant role in the low number of African Americans that listened to jazz. Many of those who did enjoy jazz, but did not want to go to speakeasies or rent parties, did not have access to the chic and often segregated clubs where the more sophisticated jazz

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<sup>40</sup> Collier, *The Reception of Jazz in America*, 13; Stanley Dance, *The World of Duke Ellington* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970), 120; Lil Hardin, Note (probably by George Hoefer) from interview in Lil Hardin Armstrong folder, vertical file, Rutgers archives. in: Collier, *The Reception of Jazz in America*, 14.

was played. The small group of African-American upper class families, who could, usually chose not to associate with jazz and thus did not visit these venues.<sup>41</sup>

The African-American intelligentsia was very aware that jazz was becoming increasingly popular *and* hated amongst both black and white Americans and some believed the outcome of this could prove to be detrimental to the African-American community. Although most believed jazz could in some ways help to promote African-American culture, they were often conflicted concerning the immoral image jazz had. As the primary concern of many black intellectuals at the time was to provide America with a more positive image of the African American, some believed jazz had no place in the crusade towards racial equality. The one that spoke out loudest against jazz was W.E.B. DuBois. He valued the folk culture retained in black spirituals and was a fan of black orchestral music, but he was less enthusiastic about the music that was played in speakeasies and informal gatherings. He preferred those musical performances where whites would be astonished rather than offended by the black performers musical capabilities. He wanted to promote highly qualitative and respected music with obvious black roots, like spiritual hymns, in order to prevent white Americans from saying, “He did that because he was an American, not because he was a Negro; he was born here, he was trained here.” He believed that “until the art of the black folk compels recognition they will not be rated as human.”<sup>42</sup>

In the eyes of DuBois, jazz, the blues and other types of popular black music had little to offer his aim to establish an intellectual image of African Americans as

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<sup>41</sup> Willie the Lion Smith and George Hoefer, *Music on My Mind* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 101; W.O. Smith, in: Goia, Ted. *The History of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 95; Goia, *The History of Jazz*, 95; Williams, “Jazz and the New Negro,” 1; Randall Sandke, *Where the Dark and the Light Folks Meet: Race and the Mythology, Politics, and Business of Jazz*, (Lanham, 2010), 145, 149.

<sup>42</sup> Williams, “Jazz and the New Negro,” 1, 3, 5; W.E.B. DuBois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” in: Mitchel, Angelyn, *An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism From the Harlem Renaissance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 67.

‘New Negroes.’ His rejection of jazz as a valuable African-American cultural product probably came from his conviction that art and politics were always inseparably connected. As he stated in his “Criteria of Negro Art”, he believed that “ all art is propaganda and ever must be.” On top of this, he was concerned that the jazz industry forced African-American artists to reinforce negative black stereotypes, in order to entertain the white public and keep segregationist tendencies in place. He noted that “the white public today demands from its artists, literary and pictorial racial pre-judgment which deliberately distorts truth and justice, as far as colored races are concerned, and it will pay for no other.” Like many other black leaders, DuBois hoped that disassociation with jazz would lead Southern immigrants to adjust to the ‘right’ modern ways of the urban North. Although other black intellectuals, like Alain Locke and J.A. Rogers, were also conflicted concerning the role jazz could play for African Americans, they often believed that the polishing of the music might result in a positive contribution as opposed to DuBois, who was generally convinced that jazz had no place in black advancement.<sup>43</sup>

The attempts of DuBois and other black intellectuals to promote racial equality through black music and art was picked up on by white intellectuals who were determined to keep the racial status quo. In a published debate of the question whether African Americans should be encouraged to cultural equality, Alain Locke cleverly intertwined a call for racial equality with a call for cultural equality. This was reacted to by Lothrop Stoddard, a white historian and eugenicist, who in his essay answered the same question. Stoddard understood Locke’s carefully molded argumentation and used it to discuss the dangers of letting cultural equality equate with racial equality. After establishing that racial difference is not based on social

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<sup>43</sup> Williams, “Jazz and the New Negro,” 8, 16; W.E.B. DuBois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” 66, 67; Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution*, 138.

ideas and thus cannot be changed through art or culture as Locke suggests but on scientific differences, he argues the dangers of both interraciality and attempts by black intellectuals to force racial recognition along with cultural recognition. He concludes that cultural equality is only permissible when the racial hierarchy with whites on top remains. Stoddard's essay summarizes all the different fears that existed concerning jazz, namely the dangers of interracial contact, potential threats to white America's gene pool, increased hope for racial equality instilled in African Americans and potential social uproar. The central sentiment is most avidly summarized when Stoddard writes, "[I]f it be cultural recognition and appreciation that they really want, let talented Negroes get after the insurgent intelligentsia which seeks to use art as a battering-ram to smash the color-line. Art was intended for no such purpose, and if it is used that way, Negro talent will be blighted and perverted in the vain attempt."<sup>44</sup>

The difficulty with jazz was that it was praised and criticized for the same attributes. Supporters and protesters of jazz both brought its lack of traditionalism, racial component, individualism and its indigenous American character to the front of their discussion of it. Fears of demoralization of the youth, deterioration of music in general, interracial contact and of advancement of African Americans were combined in the resistance against jazz. The reasons why jazz was loathed or feared varied greatly, but were present with the black and white public, musicians, critics and intellectuals. It was precisely the relationship between the music and African Americans that caused the most issues. In the discussion of the dangers of jazz, the border between discussion of music and discussion of race was extremely elusive. However, the belief that jazz and race were connected also sparked hope that jazz

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<sup>44</sup> Alain Locke, "Should the Negro be Encouraged to Cultural Equality: The High Cost of Prejudice," *The Forum* (October 1927): 509, 510; Lothrop Stoddard, "Should the Negro be Encouraged to Cultural Equality: The Impasse At The Color-Line," *The Forum* (October 1927): 512, 513, 515, 516, quote: 517.

could be employed to promote and even realize racial equality. The next chapter will discuss the different ways in which jazz was given a place in ideas and ideologies of African American advancement.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Levine, "Jazz and American Culture," 13.

## Chapter 3

### An Instrument for Social Enlightenment and Constructive Social Reform

#### Jazz as Possibility

*All the world wants rhythm bad  
Colored folks are might' glad  
'Cause they've got rhythm for sale...*

*Up in Harlem they are doing swell  
Nature gave them something  
They can sell...*

*Since the emancipation came  
Jungle rhythm has made a name  
But the terms ain't quite the same  
'Cause we've got rhythm for sale*

“Rhythm For Sale” – Washington and Sublett

As evidenced in the previous chapter, jazz and everything it supposedly stood for evoked many fears. This chapter will review the more positive prospects of what jazz could mean for the African-American community and American society as described by the black intelligentsia, musicians, white critics and the black and white public. It will elucidate the ways in which jazz was seen as a positive contribution to the advancement of African Americans and American culture, and how some came to believe jazz could contribute to the crusade for racial progress of the Harlem Renaissance and the uplift of the African-American race in American society. Just as it did for the creation of fear of jazz, the conceptualization of jazz as a reflector of the African-American race or of American culture plays an important role in ideologies concerning jazz during the Jazz Age. It is important to keep in mind that the extent to which jazz was seen as a racial representation varied and differed from person to

person and from group to group. For this reason, jazz was able to assume a different role in the ideologies and ideas discussed in this chapter.

During the Jazz Age, jazz influenced the African-American community both socially and culturally, by communicating Southern immigration to Northern cities and through rent parties and jazz performances, by encouraging the affirmation opposed to the rejection of African-American identity and culture and by creating a communal bond through pleasure and escape from racist society. Furthermore, jazz provided a platform for interracial contact through performances, parties and business relations. As early as 1911, concert master of the New York Symphony Society, David Mannes, noted, “Through music, which is a universal language, the Negro and the white man can be brought to have a mutual understanding.” Important figures of the Harlem Renaissance such as W.E.B. DuBois, Alain Locke, J.A. Rogers and James Weldon Johnson, saw further potential in jazz as documentation of black history and in its emotional and participatory character. They were often conflicted however regarding jazz’s cultural ranking and were sometimes more interested in other forms of black art that were considered of a “higher” cultural value. In their concern to rid African Americans from the stereotypes of what they termed the “Old Negro,” they were hypercritical in determining what would reflect well on the “New Negro.” Regardless of the different valuations of jazz that existed, jazz came to stand out to many as an arena where some of the strict racial borders embedded in American society seemed to dissolve, even if diminutive.<sup>46</sup>

Numerous scholars during the 1920s recognized the distinct cultural contribution of the African American and started to speak out against the object of

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<sup>46</sup> Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution*, 116, 117, 125, 164; Price “Foreword: Race, Blackness, and Modernism during the Harlem Renaissance,” xiii; Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?*, 7, 11, 12; David Mannes, in: Franklin and Higginbotham (ed.), *From Slavery to Freedom*, 416; Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool*, 5; Yuval Taylor, (ed.), *The Future of Jazz* (Chicago, 2002), 31.

“Americanization,” which had an important role in American politics at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They argued that by letting distinct ethnic groups maintain their individual cultural aspects, instead of trying to assimilate them to American culture, would cultivate valuable cultural contributions to America at large. A positive scholarly approach to the African-American contribution to American society was boosted by an immense growth in scientific and philosophical research into the racial distinctiveness of African-American cultural products and how looking past racial stereotypes could contribute to the realization of some sort of “interracial cooperation.” This resulted in the first serious debate concerning the “artistic and human value” of black music during the 1920s.<sup>47</sup>

Some even considered jazz and other types of black music to be the biggest cultural contribution America had made to the rest of the world. Charles Johnson, in an article in *The Opportunity* in 1925, concluded: “What an immense, even if unconscious irony that the Negroes have devised! They, who of all Americans are most limited in self-expression, least considered and most denied, have forged the key to the interpretation of the American spirit.”<sup>48</sup> The appreciation of jazz music in American society also resulted in a discussion of who was to claim jazz music. An article in the *Literary Digest* for example, claimed jazz to be “a native product” and “completely American.” African Americans saw the popularity of black musicians such as James Reece Europe abroad and grew hope that this might change their standing in American society. A 1919 article from the *Chicago Defender* mentioned, “[James Reece Europe] has the white man’s ear because he is giving the white man something new. He is meeting a popular demand in catering to this love of syncopated

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<sup>47</sup> Osofsky, “Symbols of the Jazz Age,” 232, 233.

<sup>48</sup> Williams, “Jazz and the New Negro,” 8-9; Charles Johnson, *The Opportunity* (May 1925): 132-133, in: Williams, “Jazz and the New Negro,” 5, 8, 9.

music he is jazzing away the barriers of prejudice.” African-American critical thinkers of the time were not unseeing of the possibilities that the widespread appreciation of jazz music and its connotation with African Americans created for the promotion of racial equality.<sup>49</sup>

One of the most avid believers in the possibility of black culture, art and music to generate racial progress was Alain Locke. He wrote numerous essays on the ways in which this could and should be done, and on the role jazz and other black music played in this.<sup>50</sup> Locke attempted to rid American society of old racial stereotypes by encouraging the recognition of the African-American artistic genius and -contribution to American society. In his discussion of what he called “cultural equality,” he often cleverly intertwined the discussion of cultural equality with racial equality, and warned that the postponement of cultural equality could easily result in racial uprisings. He was exceedingly clear in his intentions when he wrote, “[H]ere we sight what is probably the next crusade in the ascending path of Negro art, its use as an instrument for social enlightenment and constructive social reform.” One of the biggest hopes he had was that the appreciation of black culture in American society would in extent generate the appreciation and acceptance of the African-American population into American society. In 1927 he argued,

“For the present it seems that the interest in the cultural expression of Negro life is genuine, and that it heralds an almost revolutionary revaluation of the Negro [...] It is

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<sup>49</sup> Johnson, *The Opportunity*, 132-133; “Buying American in Music,” *Literary Digest* (1934), 24, in: Levine, “Jazz and American Culture,” 13; Levine, “Jazz and American Culture,” 16, 17; “Jazzing Away Prejudice,” *Chicago Defender* (May 10, 1919), in: Franklin and Higginbotham (ed.). *From Slavery to Freedom*, 391.

<sup>50</sup> Some of these essays are discussed in this thesis. For a general account of Locke’s thoughts on black music specifically, see his book *The Negro and His Music* (1936).

to be hoped that general American opinion can be persuaded to follow its most enlightened segment in this direction of progressive recognition of the Negro.”<sup>51</sup>

In his discussion of the social purposes of black art however, Locke was conflicted about jazz music. He appreciated the individualism that was inherent to the music, as well as the potential for the group dynamic embedded in its performance. Yet he believed that there was a potential danger in linking jazz music to his crusade for racial equality. Although he attempted to promote the African-American race by stating that playing jazz music took severe talent and discipline, and often emphasized its rootedness in African-American history and culture, he was aware of the loose lifestyle associated with popular jazz music. He was pleased with the interracial collaborations that happened in jazz, as well as with its international popularity, but he warned against distraction from jazz’s social potential through economic- and further temptations. Nonetheless, he eventually concluded that jazz in itself did not cause immorality and that its popularity was merely a sign of modern social change, not of moral downfall.<sup>52</sup>

Other critical thinkers of the Harlem Renaissance were equally inspired by the growing acceptance of jazz music by American society. The recognition of any sort of cultural contribution to the nation by the white American population was something that sparked hope in many. Harlem Renaissance writer and poet James Weldon

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<sup>51</sup> Alain Locke, “The Negro’s Contribution to American Culture,” *The Journal of Negro Education*, 8/3 (July, 1939): 521, 522, 529; Locke, “Should the Negro be Encouraged to Cultural Equality: The High Cost of Prejudice,” 507, 508; Alain Locke in: Jeffrey C. Stewart (ed.), *Race Contacts & International Relations: Lectures on the Theory and Practice of Race* (Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1992), 99; Alain Locke, “The American Negro as Artist,” in: Stewart, Jeffrey C. (ed.), *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke* (New York and London: Garland, 1989), 147. Originally published in *The American Magazine of Art* 23 (September 1931).

<sup>52</sup> Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution*, 122, 123, 117; Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (Washington D.C.: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936), 82, 83, 87, 89, 90.

Johnson constituted that white American society started recognizing “that the Negro is a creator as well as creature [...] a giver as well as [...] receiver.” To this he added, “I am coming to believe that nothing can go farther to destroy race prejudice than the recognition of the Negro as a creator and contributor to American civilization.”

Notwithstanding his enthusiasm regarding these possibilities, Johnson was aware of the limitations that he and other African-Americans faced. Still, he believed that African-Americans should try anything to change their social circumstance and should not be discouraged by current circumstances.

“We should establish and cultivate friendly interracial relations whenever we can do so without loss of self-respect. [...] Here we are, caught in a trap of circumstances, a minority in the midst of a majority [...]; we have got to escape from the trap, and escape depends largely on our ability to command and win the fair will, at least, and the good will, if possible, of that great majority.”<sup>53</sup>

Even though Johnson, like Locke, disapproved of the less cultivated sides of the jazz world, he did acknowledge that jazz provided a realm in which these interracial relations could be built, without loss of self-respect.

“I spoke of our wonderful music as being the touchstone, the magic things, by which the Negro can bridge all chasms [...] It is through [this] that we may find the easiest approach to the solution of some of the most vital phases of our problem. It is the

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<sup>53</sup> Osofsky, “Symbols of the Jazz Age,” 232; James Weldon Johnson to Carl Van Vechten, envelope dated March 6, 1927. James Weldon Johnson Collection of Negro Arts and Letters, Yale University, in: Osofsky, “Symbols of the Jazz Age,” 232.

path of least friction. It is the plane on which all men are willing to meet and stand with us.”<sup>54</sup>

It was through art and music that Johnson saw the doorway to social change. The association of these art forms with his race was extremely important to his purpose for the use of art and music to bring the possibilities he observed to fruition.

“A people may become great through many means, but there is only one measure by which its greatness is recognized and acknowledged. The final measure of the greatness of all people is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art. No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior.”<sup>55</sup>

Writer and poet Langston Hughes also believed in the potential benefits of jazz music for the advancement of the African-American community. However, he was focused on a slightly different and less grand-scaled benefit than Locke and Johnson envisioned. He believed that the enthusiasm for black art that existed among white Americans did not necessarily mean an acceptance of the black population. He understood the enthusiasm coming from the white community as an extension of the type of minstrel show fascination for human abnormality, as a “sideshow freak” or “clown.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Negro Americans, What Now?* (New York: Viking, 1934), 83; Spencer, John Michael, *The New Negroes and Their Music: The Success of the Harlem Renaissance* (Tennessee, 1997), 12, 13, 29.

<sup>55</sup> James Weldon Johnson, 1922, quoted in: Harcourt, Brace and World, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York, 1958), 9.

<sup>56</sup> Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution*, 116; Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” 693, 694.

Despite his skepticism regarding the acceptance of black art and music by the white populace, Hughes did believe that jazz music and black art and literature could instill a new sense of racial pride in African Americans. In his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” after criticizing the racial shame of the “Nordicized Negro intelligentsia” and middle class African Americans who would rather be “dull like the Nordics” and who believed that “white is best,” Hughes claims that “[t]he present vogue in things Negro, [...] has at least [...] brought him forcibly to the attention of his own people among whom for so long, unless the other race had noticed him beforehand, [...] was a prophet with little honor.” This sensibility is most clearly encapsulated in his call to “[I]et the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing the Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand” and [...] “cause the smug Negro middle class turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty.” However, Hughes’ dream of jazz bringing social change in the way of racial pride did not come as fast as he had hoped. In 1956 he said, “To me jazz is as a dream deferred. A great big dream – yet to come – and always yet – to become ultimately and finally true.”<sup>57</sup>

The potential for creating racial pride through music was also picked up on by musician Duke Ellington. He consciously promoted black history and culture through his music and linked his work to the aim of the Harlem Renaissance. In 1931, in an article in *Rhythm*, Ellington stated his worry that “what is being done by Countee Cullen and others in literature is overdue in our music.” Ellington wanted to bring it upon himself to change this, by writing a piece of music that would “portray the experience of the colored races in America in the syncopated idiom [...] I am putting

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<sup>57</sup> Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” 694; Langston Hughes, *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (New York, 1951), 75.

all I have learned into it in the hope that I shall have received something really worth while in the literature of music, and that an authentic record of my race written by a member of it shall be placed on record.”<sup>58</sup>

Ellington also involved his musicians in his cause. He said of trumpeter Arthur Whetsol, “He was aware of all the Negro individuals who were contributing to the cause by commanding respect.” Of Rex Stewart he stated likewise, “[He] has been taught the responsibility of commanding respect for his race and to this end he maintained [...] a dignified, decent-sort-of-chap image, and he never strayed from it.” For Ellington, his image and that of his fellow musicians were pivotal in gaining racial respect from the rest of America and Europe. It was not uncommon for black jazz artists to dress in tuxedos to create a respectable aura for themselves. Ellington was no exception. Through his status as a respected African-American musician, Ellington expected to command respect for African Americans in general and to change negative racial stereotypes.<sup>59</sup>

Not all African-American musicians felt equally connected to the Harlem Renaissance however. Famed jazz singer and bandleader Cab Calloway for example, who like Ellington regularly performed in the Harlem-situated Cotton Club, said of his music making during the 1920s, “Those of us in the music and entertainment business were vaguely aware that something exciting was happening, but we weren’t directly involved.” Multi-instrumentalist and bandleader Benny Carter agreed with this statement: “We in music knew there was much going on in literature, for

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<sup>58</sup> Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?*, 38, 39; Tucker, “The Renaissance Education of Duke Ellington,” 123; Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool*, 1; Ellington, “The Duke Steps Out,” 22.

<sup>59</sup> Tucker, “The Renaissance Education of Duke Ellington,” 119; Duke Ellington, interview in *The Call* (December, 1931), 54, 125, in: Tucker, “The Renaissance Education of Duke Ellington,” 119, in: Floyd, Samuel A. (ed). *Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance: A Collection of Essays*, 111-127; Sandke, *Where the Light and Dark Folks Meet*, 94-95.

example, but our worlds were far apart. We sensed that the black cultural as well as moral leaders looked down on our music as undignified.”<sup>60</sup>

This did not mean that musicians who did not directly feel related to the Harlem Renaissance did not see any racial value or pride in their music. For black musicians, jazz music often functioned as a means of communal expression. Some had even larger hopes for jazz music. Saxophonist Sonny Rollins later said of jazz that “[it] has always been a music of integration.” He explained this by distinctively mentioning jazz as something transcending its musical qualities,

“Jazz was not just a music; it was a social force in this country, and it was talking about freedom and people enjoying things for what they are and not having to worry about whether they were supposed to be white, black, and all this stuff. Jazz has always been the music that had this kind of spirit.”<sup>61</sup>

Others thought jazz and other types of black music were something that helped African Americans to deal with their American past. Sidney Bechet said of this in his autobiography *Treat it Gentle*,

“After emancipation [...] all those people who had been slaves, they needed the music more than ever now; it was like they were trying to find out in this music that they were supposed to do this with freedom: playing the music and listening to it – waiting for it to express what they needed to learn once they had learned it wasn’t just

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<sup>60</sup> Goia, *The History of Jazz*, 95; Cab Calloway, in: Goia, *The History of Jazz*, 95; Benny Carter, in: Ed Berder’s liner notes to Benny Carter’s recording, *Harlem Renaissance* (MusicMasters 01612-65080-2), in: Goia, *The History of Jazz*, 95.

<sup>61</sup> Levine, “Jazz and American Culture,” 19, 15; Sonny Rollins in: Ira Girtler, *Swing to Bop: an Oral History of the Transitioning Jazz in the 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 303, 311.

white people the music had to reach to, nor even to their own people, but straight out of life, and to what a man does with his life when it finally is his.”<sup>62</sup>

Thus to some musicians, jazz could bring progress to the African-American race just by expressing a feeling that was part of the African-American experience. The interracial character of the jazz world additionally inspired many African musicians. Jazz bassist Milt Hinton stated, “We were miles ahead of everybody else, [...] [m]usicians have been integrating way before society decided to do that.”<sup>63</sup>

The interracial character of jazz also inspired white jazz musicians who believed in the racial value of jazz and its potential for generating racial equality. People like Bud Freeman took it upon themselves to promote racial mixing and appreciation of black culture and music. Trumpeter Conte Condoli said, “some of the guys I know like Sweets [Edison], Clark Terry and Dizzy: you would never now there was any kind of racial scene because they were just glorious – great people”. Jimmy Maxwell, also a trumpeter, later mentioned about his interracial contacts in the industry: “when you’re working in a band, you forget who’s black and who’s white.” He even acknowledged some reverse racism on his part: “[I]t took me many years to get mad at a black guy. I always sort of backed off. So, in other words, I had a prejudice in reverse, there was a difference in my mind.” Others such as Benny Goodman, Milton Mezzrow and Wingy Manone were invested in the promotion of jazz and black culture as well. Some, like Mezzrow, who checked African American on his army draft registration, even adopted black life to the point where they liked to believe they were African American. Maxwell later stated he was often flattered by remarks saying that he was trying to be black by playing jazz music, “I had the feeling

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<sup>62</sup> Sidney Bechet, in: Williams, M. *The Jazz Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 14.

<sup>63</sup> Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool*, 55.

in those days that black people had the edge in jazz. [...] [W]hether it's a matter of race or culture or whatever [...] that means nothing.”<sup>64</sup>

In addition to white musicians taking the cause for the promotion of racial equality to heart, some white critics took it upon themselves to promote racial equality through their discussion of jazz. John Hammond believed that his appreciation of jazz functioned as a ‘catalyst’ teaching him to confront racial discrimination. Charles Edward Smith, Hughes Panassie and Winthrop Sargeant were other white critics who valued jazz as an art form as well as its racial character. Some went very far in this aim. Hammond was so dedicated to the promotion of racial equality in his discussion of black music, that he denigrated attempts at racial promotion by some black musicians. When evaluating a performance by Duke Ellington, Hammond described his music and musicians as “un-Negroid.” He even criticized Ellington for “consciously [keeping] himself from any contact with his people [and] from thinking about such problems as those of the Southern share croppers, the Scottsboro boys, intolerable working and relief conditions in the North and South.” He later stated about his own work, “I write best when I am angry, when protesting injustice, criticizing bad music or uncaring musicians.” He was further horrified by the shock value of Billy Holiday’s “Strange Fruit,” which confronted lynching in the South but did not suit his idea of racial activism.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Chip Deffaa, *Voices of the Jazz Age: Profiles of Eight Vintage Jazzmen* (Illinois, 1929), 134; Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution*, 151, 153; quote Condoli: Conte Condoli, in: Sandke, *Where the Dark and the Light Folks Meet*, 7, 23; Jimmy Maxwell, National Endowment For the Arts/Smithsonian Institution Jazz Oral History Project (JOHP), 27-29. Currently owned and housed by the Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University, Newark, Dan Morgenstern, director. in: Sandke, *Where the Dark and Light Folks Meet*, 22.

<sup>65</sup> Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution*, 153, 163; John Hammond, “The Tragedy of Duke Ellington,” *Metronome*, 1935, in: Tucker, Mark (ed), *The Duke Ellington Reader*, (New York, 1993) 118-120; John Hammond and Irving Townsend, *John Hammond on Record* (New York: Ridge Press/Summit Books, 1977) 51; Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool*, 55.

Other white critics despised Hammond's approach and believed he should stick to mere musical criticism and disregard his discussion of racial issues. Otis Ferguson wrote for example,

“When he goes around saying ‘white musician’ the way you’d use the term ‘greaseball,’ he not only confuses his readers and upsets his won standards but starts the Jim Crow car all over again, in reverse. Some will tell you that you’re not doing much to eliminate a color line by drawing it all over the place yourself, and certainly something ought to be done among those of Mother Hammond’s Chickens who have been led into believing that criticism consists in saying: Which is better, black or white? And raising all that hell.”

John Hammond demonstrates however, that the discussion of jazz was indeed used to generate social changes and to question and even attack racial prejudice in American society, and that this type of action was not just confined to the black intelligentsia.<sup>66</sup>

One of the more interesting figures that took part in the crusade for racial progress through black art and music was Carl Van Vechten. As a white member of the Harlem Renaissance, Van Vechten saw in jazz the epitome of black folk culture. He believed that the true African-American spirit was encapsulated in this music and that the survival of its authenticity was threatened by the tendency of black musicians to also play classical and European pieces. He casted himself as a crusader of African-American folk culture, encouraging “authentic” musical performances and critiquing anything that adapted too much to white culture. When describing a personal vision of a perfect African-American performance he wrote,

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<sup>66</sup> Otis Ferguson, in: D. Chamberlain and R. Wilson (ed.), *The Otis Ferguson Reader* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 102.

“I offer a wild pantomimic drama set in an African forest with the men and women nearly nude as the law allows. There, in front of a background of orange-tinted banana fronds and amethyst palm leaves, silhouetted against a tropical blue sky divided by a silver moon, the bucks, their assegais stabbing the sky [...] and their lithe-limbed, brown doxies, meagerly tricked out in multi-hued feathers, would enact a fantastic, choreographic comedy of passion.”

It is not difficult to note the exotic and primitive elements in the ideal that Van Vechten describes here. His fantasy of “nearly nude” men and women performing in front of a background of “orange-tinted banana fronds and amethyst palm leaves” seem to suggest a certain racial fetishizing on Van Vechten’s part. However, his writings often contained a certain sympathy that prevented his writings from deserving to be typified as merely exoticizing racist.<sup>67</sup>

Despite his essentialist tendencies, Van Vechten truly believed that the preservation of ‘authentic’ black culture was endangered and should be protected for the sake of the African-American community. In his essay “Moanin’ Wid A Sword In Ma Han: A Discussion of the Negro’s Reluctance to Develop and Exploit His Racial Gifts,” he suggested ways for African Americans to preserve their culture and to discover the true “beauty of a black voice.” He also actively helped black artists find white publishers and patrons. His love for black culture and life went so far that he even stated in a letter to a friend in 1925, “If I were a chameleon my color would now be at least seal-brown.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Anderson, *Deep River*, 95, 96, 98; Carl Van Vechten, “Prescription for the Negro Theatre,” *Vanity Fair* (October 1926): 92, 98, in: Anderson, *Deep River*, 95-96.

<sup>68</sup> Carl Van Vechten, “Moanin’ Wid a Sword In Ma Han,” *Vanity Fair* (February 1926): 61, in: Anderson, *Deep River*, 100; Carl Van Vechten, to Arthur Davison Ficke, August 3, 1925, in: Kellner, Bruce (ed.), *Letters of Carl Van Vechten* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1987), 80; Anderson, *Deep River*, 100, 101.

There were many critics of Van Vechten and his venture to save authentic black culture. White writer Harold Preece, whose article appeared in *The Crisis* in 1936, argued that the ways in which “Van Vechten’s white Negrophiles who promoted the notion that Negroes could gain social acceptance on the basis of their unadulterated folk culture [...] resembled in essence those who were fully entertained by the minstrel show.” Many others, including W.E.B. DuBois, Arthur Huff Fauset and Sterling Brown disapproved of his celebration of the primitive and his white patronage. Zora Neale Hurston however, who on her anthropological quests also tried to retain traditional African-American folk culture, was quoted saying that she considered Van Vechten to be the first “Negrotarian” and that if he “was a people instead of a person, [she] could then say, these are my people.”<sup>69</sup>

Not everyone during the 1920s was as committed to the crusade for racial progress as Van Vechten, Locke, Ellington, Hughes and others mentioned in this chapter, or to the use of black music and art as part of this crusade. It sometimes seems as though jazz’s racial equality only existed in a few individual cases and that the belief in jazz’s potential for generating racial equality was only part of the ideology of a few. However, these ideologies and ideas do show that jazz and the public discussion of jazz were considered a potential instrument to discuss and possibly change conceptions of race in American society. As a reflection of African Americans and their history, jazz was believed to get across new conceptions of the African-American race as a whole, to both the white and black community. Although some worried jazz might reflect negatively on African Americans, there were some

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<sup>69</sup> Spencer, *The New Negroes and Their Music*, 5; Harold Preece, “The Negro Folk Cult,” *The Crisis* 43/12 (Dec. 1936): 364, in: Spencer, *The New Negroes and Their Music*, 5; Anderson, *Deep River*, 101; “Zora Neale Hurston, in: Anderson, *Deep River*, 101.

who believed avidly in the positive imaging of jazz and its potential to generate social change.

## **Conclusion**

### **So What Was This Thing Called Jazz?**

Jazz and the uproar it caused during the 1920s provided a way to discuss different ideas regarding race in America. By attributing different characteristics to jazz as music, its history and its influence, the discussion of jazz was used to warn, inspire, excite and influence people. Its strong connection to African American history and culture meant that jazz and its fast growing popularity exposed and tested the fundament of America's segregated and generally racist society. This fostered a backlash of increased racism and fear of jazz, as well as a provocation of hope and ideologies concerning the ways in which jazz and other types of African-American culture and art could be used to establish a more positive image of and life for African Americans.

As this thesis has shown, the ways in which jazz was believed to be connected to the African-American race varied greatly. Some believed the connection between jazz music and African Americans was merely a musical one, tracing back to African musical traditions. However, many interpreted this type of musical connection as a connection between the "primitive" musical influences in jazz and the "primitive nature" of African Americans. This opened a doorway to attributing values of jazz music to African Americans, facilitating and adding to the racialization of African Americans. More often than not, this valuation process reinforced a negative or hierarchical racial stereotyping, with white Americans high above African Americans. By understanding jazz as racially representative, the discussion of jazz could be used to indirectly, or even directly, express racist sentiment, but also to promote a more positive understanding of the African-American race.

Apart from jazz providing an instrument to discuss race in general, it also excited different fears. These fears were heavily influenced by the perceived connections between race and jazz. Not only did the symbolical value of jazz as African-American averse many to the music, it was also the ways in which jazz practically challenged America's racial policies that excited much protest. The popularity of jazz exposed many young Americans, both black and white, to a new and ill-understood music and created an arena in which interracial contact was of frequent occurrence and ambiguous character. Fears that jazz would corrupt the youth, promote promiscuous behavior, challenged racial differences or reflected badly on African Americans kindled protest by critics, musicians, intellectuals and the general public on both sides of the segregated society. This resulted in a multitude of warnings against the effects and use of jazz, as well as the refusal to recognize jazz either as music or as African-American.

However, the challenges jazz posed to America's racial policies also incited hope for possible social change. Jazz musicians, black and white, were inspired by the interracial contact and collaboration that existed in the jazz world. Members of the Harlem Renaissance and black intellectuals saw in jazz a way to instill new racial pride in African Americans, get rid of negative black stereotypes and to promote racial equality. People like Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Duke Ellington and Carl van Vechten all considered jazz to be an instrument that could bring positive change for both African Americans and America as a whole.

Of course the sources used in this thesis and the prominent voices of the jazz discussion that are brought to light do not constitute the complete array of opinions, fears and hopes regarding jazz that existed in America during the 1920s. They do, however, show that the opinions that existed were extremely varied and often intense.

They also show that many of the opinions regarding jazz that were expressed reflected, or were at least influenced by, opinions of race. Further research could be done to better elucidate the ways in which different types of jazz inspired different types of hopes, fears and opinions, or how the discussion of contemporary music that is understood as racially representative, such as hip hop or rap, compares to the 1920s discussion of jazz. It could also be interesting to conduct further research into the interchange of the American and European discussion of jazz, and how the European appreciation of jazz influenced the opinions of jazz in America. Although I have attempted to show the complexity and stratification of the American jazz discussion during the 1920s, it would be interesting to go further into the motives and ideologies of the different groups I discussed. An entire study could be attributed the opinions of jazz as expressed by W.E.B. DuBois or Alain Locke. Unfortunately the size of this thesis does not allow for such an elaborate discussion of specific opinions or people.

This thesis provides an interesting addition to existing research on the history of jazz and race through its distinct focus on the reception of jazz during the American Jazz Age and its inclusion of different groups from both sides and all layers of segregated America. By examining the reception of jazz and its connectedness to African-Americans by different groups at the start of its popularity, when segregation and racist theory were still deeply imbedded in American society, the connection between music, race and the reception of racially representative music becomes avidly clear. Combining primary and secondary sources by and about white and black critics, intellectuals, musicians and the general public, this research demonstrates the multifarious reception of jazz and the important role that conceptions and politics of race and racialization played in this for both sides of segregated America.

The goal of this thesis was to show how music, race, politics and ideologies are connected and how the discussion of music can go beyond the discussion of musical qualities. Furthermore, by uncovering the different ways in which jazz was used to discuss racial issues, political values and the future of African Americans and America as a whole, this thesis shows that jazz was and cannot be understood merely as African-American *or* American music. It is a music that is part of, and questioned, American history and society and that today is still difficult to understand. Instead of trying to define jazz, this thesis demonstrates the ways in which jazz was understood during the time it became popular and what the implications of this were for the place jazz was given in American society. But the main conclusion that can be drawn from the communal struggle with the understanding of jazz, is that jazz was something different to everyone.

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