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Tough on Black Asses: Segregation Ideology in the Early American Jazz Industry

Laurel Bettis

In the time it originated, in the early 1920's, jazz music was seen as "black music" because it was played almost exclusively by African-American musicians, so the racial culture of America directly impacted the struggles of the early jazz industry. When it was just beginning, the jazz industry faced challenges that related to how the highly segregated American society perceived music that had strong African and African-American influences. Jazz music originated in the sounds of black musicians in the South, but it soon spread to become a hugely popular genre in the sprawling metropolises of the North. In the 1920s, many Southern jazz musicians moved to Northern cities like Chicago and New York, hoping to enjoy the fame and affluence of the big city. Early jazz failed to find a supportive white audience in the South, in part because segregation and racism was so ingrained in the early Southern jazz industry, and many black jazz greats would probably never have been recorded if they had remained in the South. The shift to the North relocated jazz musicians to cities where racial segregation, although still prevalent, was not as severe and enduring as it was in the South. Although jazz musicians continued to face racism and segregational practices in the white areas of Chicago and New York, these cities were the first places in which black musicians were really given a chance to be respected as

artists. Though the jazz industry was founded in the heart of the South, it developed into a respected genre in the Northern cities because the racial culture of the North allowed for some steps to be taken towards racial integration.

What we would call “jazz” music was introduced to America around 1917 in New Orleans, and it had an entirely new sound. Jazz music borrowed the lilting syncopation of ragtime and blues music and incorporated elements of harmony, rhythm, and improvisation that made it a completely different type of music. Because jazz was such a unique and revolutionary genre, critics rushed to dissect the “roots” of jazz music. In both modern and early jazz criticism, the jazz sound is largely attributed to the experiences of Southern plantation slaves. Although there is more literature and controversy over the racial roots of jazz in modern jazz criticism, it appears that critics of both periods recognize slave spirituals and hollers as the formative sounds of early blues music, which formed the basis for early jazz music. Many critics posit that the jazz sound traces its lineage through the experience of African-American slaves and all the way back to the musical traditions of Sub-Saharan Africa. In exploring the African roots of jazz, these critics examine the experiences of early slaves who, taken from Africa, grew to become such an important part of Southern culture in America. If we are to see early jazz music as “black music,” and if we are to explore the roots of the jazz sound both in Africa and on the American plantation, it goes without saying that jazz music in America is rooted in the South.

The more intellectual and in-depth views of jazz's African heritage arise in more modern criticism and

history. Well-known and controversial historian Amiri Baraka argues that the structure and style of early blues (and, consequently, early jazz) descended directly from African call-and-response singing and shouts. He contends that even as the jazz sound evolved into a more mainstream format, it was uniquely and exclusively the music of African-Americans; as jazz developed, “The blues timbre and spirit had come to jazz virtually unchanged, even though the early Negro musicians use[d] European instruments.”¹ He argues that, rather than being indicative of a unified American sound, “*Blues* means a Negro experience, it is the one music the Negro made that could not be transferred into a more general significance than the one the Negro gave it initially” (emphasis in original).² Authors who view New Orleans as the birthplace of jazz (as many do) often note the wide variety of cultural influences in early 20th century New Orleans, and credit several cultures in the city with inspiring the unique sound of jazz. Because jazz developed in urban New Orleans, “jazz borrowed from, among other things, protestant hymns, British ballads, Spanish songs and Afro-Spanish rhythms, French quadrilles and marches, various West African rhythms, and melodic elements found in spirituals, the blues, work songs, and field hollers.”³

Even in the time it was first being created, jazz critics tended to attribute the core of the jazz sound to both slave spirituals and to African musical traditions.

¹ Imamu Amiri Baraka, *Blues People; Negro Music in White America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1963), 78–79.

² *Ibid.*, 94.

³ Neil Leonard, *Jazz and the White Americans; the Acceptance of a New Artform* (London: Jazz Book Club, 1964), 11–12.

Various articles published about early jazz in the time it was being produced (from around 1917 through the late 20s) indicate that critics in this period held a fairly unanimous view of the relationship between jazz and race. Judging by these articles, it appears that most Americans in this period viewed early jazz music as exclusively black music, and believed that both African heritage and the American slave experience played a role in the formation of the jazz sound. Some articles were supportive of the up-and-coming genre and praised the uniquely African musical genius of the slaves. One well-meaning critic was thrilled that, “The Negroes have simply used the weird African melodies as a fascinating vehicle for Biblical truths.”⁴ A 1919 article by a white Swiss musician Ernest Ansermet attributes the jazz sound to the “racial genius” of African-Americans. He describes various technical components of jazz music and contends that they are based in instinctual methods of African self-expression.⁵ Not all these critics, however, were as well-meaning and supportive as Ansermet.

For many early white critics, the African roots of jazz were emphasized in order to indict the genre in a very racist way. In exploring the role of African traditions in jazz music, critics commonly referred to African civilizations and music as primitive or barbaric. Some jazz historians have noted that the early jazz era coincides with the period in which the ideology of “primitivism” was popular in America. Primitivism refers to the notion that more primitive or uncivilized

⁴ American Council of Learned Societies, *Jazz in Print (1856-1929) an Anthology of Selected Early Readings in Jazz History* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2002), 55.

⁵ Robert Walser, *Keeping time?: readings in jazz history* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9–11.

people were able to express their feelings more spontaneously and refreshingly than the civilized.⁶ The innovative rhythms and harmonies of early jazz were viewed by some white critics as basically modernized tribal chanting, not valuable American music. A lot of the criticism in this era, then, refers to jazz music as base, cheap, and unsophisticated. The way early critics discuss jazz music clearly reflects the way these critics felt about black musicians. Criticism from the 1920s to 1930s that focuses on the African roots of jazz clearly evidences the negative racial perceptions that were rooted in the Southern plantation culture of the 1800s. From the very beginning, jazz musicians faced prejudice because jazz was “black music,” which, in the South, translated as “slave music” or “African music”. Most early jazz critics who attributed the jazz sound to African influence demeaned jazz music and dehumanized the musicians who originated it.

A 1917 article published in the *New York Sun* discussed the aggressive rhythms of “contemporary savages,” meaning jazz musicians, and confidently announced that the word “jazz” came from “the old plantation days, when the 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-doctor and medicine-men on the Kongo used the same term at those jungle 'parties' when the tom-toms throbbed.”⁷ In a 1921 issue of *The Ladies' Home Journal*, a woman complained of the evils of jazz music

⁶ James Lincoln Collier, *Jazz: The American Theme Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 17–19.

⁷ Robert Walser, *Keeping time?: readings in jazz history* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 6.

and its ability to make its listeners sin. In explaining the threatening nature of syncopated rhythms, she states, “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. That it has a demoralizing effect upon the human brain has been demonstrated by many scientists.”⁸ She goes on to claim that music-therapy scientists had discovered that syncopated rhythms can lead to atrophied brain cells, and that “those under the demoralizing influence of the persistent use of syncopation, combined with inharmonic partial tones, are actually incapable of distinguishing between good and evil, between right and wrong.”⁹

Several articles published in the twenties in *The Etude*, a music teacher's magazine, reflect similar attitudes. In various articles and editorials by music teachers, jazz music is referred to as “primitive”, “barbaric”, “savage”, and “mongrel music.”¹⁰ *The Etude* editors wrote and published an article that explicitly explained that the magazine did not endorse jazz music and believed that jazz music had no place in music education. The article argued that young musicians would waste their talent playing the common, cheap, and sloppy sounds of “raw jazz,” terms that thinly veil their perception that black musicians were sloppy and crude arrangers. The editors go on to

⁸ American Council of Learned Societies, *Jazz in Print (1856-1929) an Anthology of Selected Early Readings in Jazz History*, 153.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Walser, *Keeping time*, 41-54.

explain that not all jazz music is bad, only the barbaric nature that is present in most dance-hall jazz. They concede that jazz music is acceptable in a few forms, such as, “high-class Jazz orchestras conducted by Paul Whiteman, Isham Jones, and [Fred] Waring,”¹¹ all of whom are white musicians. Another particularly pointed piece from *The Etude* was submitted by Dr. Frank Damrosh, the Director of the Institute of Musical Art, later known as Julliard, and stated:

If jazz originated in the dance rhythms of the negro, it was at least interesting as the self-expression of a primitive race. When jazz was adopted by the “highly civilized” white race, it tended to degenerate it towards primitivity. When a savage distorts his features and paints his face so 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.¹²

These articles clearly demean African-American musicians by accusing them of having “savage” African roots. Indeed, it appears that black musicians in the early years of jazz were taught to be ashamed of their African roots; Art Blakey said in an interview that he was once thrown out of **school** for presenting a history report that portrayed Africa in a positive light.¹³

Although early jazz critics said some very racist and negative things about African-American musicians,

¹¹ Ibid., 42.

¹² Ibid., 44.

¹³ Wayne Enstice and Paul Rubin, *Jazz spoken here: conversations with twenty-two musicians* (Da Capo Press, 1994), 19.

they were correct in attributing the sound of jazz to the experience of black Americans in the South. The originators of jazz and blues music were almost all born in the deep South. Pianist Jelly Roll Morton and saxophonist Sidney Bechet, who are often viewed as the very first musicians to play what we would call jazz, were both born in New Orleans. Many early jazz musicians had very difficult childhoods, being raised as African-American children in the harsh segregation and racism of the South. Louis Armstrong, who developed the quintessential jazz sound of the early and mid-1920s, was born in a black ghetto of New Orleans often referred to as “The Battlefield” because it was so dangerous. He was incredibly poor in his childhood years, raised by a single mother who occasionally worked as a prostitute to support the family. Bessie Smith, often called the Empress of the Blues, “lived the kind of life she sang about in her songs,” born desperately poor in Tennessee.¹⁴

The South is also where the history of African-Americans in the entertainment industry begins. Before the Civil War, minstrel shows emerged as a form of entertainment in the South and typically featured white comedians in blackface who derived their comedy from racial stereotypes and performed for all-white audiences. After the war, some black entertainers managed to find a place on the stage in minstrel shows, but were “artistically constrained by white audiences, who expected them to demonstrate demeaning racial stereotypes characteristic of antebel-

¹⁴ Ken Burns, *Jazz* (Washington, D.C.?: PBS DVD?; Burbank, CA, 2000).

lum minstrel shows.¹⁵ As minstrelsy continued into the 20th century, the comedy of these shows was interspersed with more dance and musical numbers from black entertainers. For this reason, elements of minstrelsy mixed with vaudeville and ragtime acts as these genres developed, and the early sounds of ragtime and blues were associated with black entertainers from the very beginning.¹⁶ Some of the vaudeville shows that evolved out of minstrelsy became fixtures in the “vice districts” of Southern cities.¹⁷ Ragtime and vaudeville shows in Southern speakeasies and dance halls commonly featured exclusively black entertainers, and as ragtime developed into early jazz music, some of the minstrel traditions in vaudeville carried over into jazz performances. In New Orleans, some of the very first jazz clubs were owned by men who also sponsored a minstrel troupe.¹⁸

Some minstrel acts developed into touring vaudeville companies that toured the South performing mostly musical numbers. When jazz music developed and became popular in the dance halls of cities like New Orleans, similar touring companies quickly set up concert circuits for jazz musicians to travel and perform in. Some of the earliest gigs for jazz musicians were arranged by the Theater Owner's Booking Agency, or T.O.B.A., a company that hired musicians for a touring vaudeville circuit throughout the South.

¹⁵ Kathy J Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution: Twenties America & the Meaning of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 40.

¹⁶ Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface?: a source book on early Black musical shows* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1980), 1–20.

¹⁷ Collier, *Jazz*, 12–19.

¹⁸ Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution*, 41.

Founded in 1920, the T.O.B.A. hired black musicians to play for all-black audiences in white-owned clubs.¹⁹ In this circuit, the work was very tough and the wages were terrible. This circuit “is remembered with humorous bitterness by many black performers as viciously exploitative,”²⁰ and is unsurprisingly recalled as an acronym for “Tough On Black Asses.”²¹ Trumpeter Clark Terry remembered the rough conditions of road life on the circuit; being relegated to sleep in host houses instead of hotels, he said in an interview, “I’ve slept in places that were so filthy and damp I wouldn’t dare take off my shoes. I slept with my hat, overcoat, shoes, overshoes, everything just to try to make it through the night.”²² Even in the 1930s, when Duke Ellington first signed on and began touring through the South, he also recalls being turned away from hotels and having to sleep on the train instead.²³

The tours through the South continued through the 20’s and 30’s as jazz increased in popularity, and black musicians began playing for white audiences as well as black audiences. Importantly, however, touring black musicians were not allowed to perform for integrated audiences at this time. Clark Terry recalled playing in venues with “the type of segregation that would make you bitter.”²⁴ In his experience, either whites would be dancing on the floor with black

¹⁹ Burton W Peretti, *Jazz in American Culture*, The American ways series (Chicago, Ill: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), 46.

²⁰ Christen K. Thomsen, “Jazz: From ‘Race’ Music to ‘Art’ Music? When Jazz Was ‘Popular’ Music: Incorporation and Transformation,” *Storia Nordamericana* 7, no. 2 (July 1990): 82.

²¹ Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution*, 44–45.

²² Enstice and Rubin, *Jazz spoken here*, 275.

²³ Burns, *Jazz*.

²⁴ Enstice and Rubin, *Jazz spoken here*, 275.

patrons sitting up in the balcony, or occasionally there would be black patrons dancing while the white patrons watched from the balcony. With the addition of white patrons to the T.O.B.A. halls, jazz musicians sometimes faced daily threats and horrible racism from the white people they encountered on these tours. While on tour in Arkansas, Dizzy Gillespie offended a patron at a white dance when he ignored a penny the patron had thrown onto the stage. The man later waited for Dizzy to come out of the bathroom and assaulted Dizzy with a broken beer bottle, and Dizzy wound up with seven stitches on his head.²⁵ Fats Austin and Clark Terry were nearly killed in Jacksonville, Florida when Austin bumped into an old white woman and she claimed he tried to knock her down. Both musicians were chased by a murderous mob and only escaped by hiding in a construction site for several hours and covering themselves with mud and debris.²⁶ In 1927, while Bessie Smith was giving a tent concert in Concord, North Carolina, one of her band members saw six Klu Klux Klan members approaching the tent, and warned Bessie to start running. Smith, who was known for her tough attitude, ran towards the KKK instead, hollering at them to start running before she got the whole audience to chase them down. The klansmen fled.²⁷

Even into the 1940s, by which time there were several white jazz musicians and groups, integrated bands were not allowed to tour in the South. In 1941, Artie Shaw hired black trumpeter Hot Lips Page to go

²⁵ Ibid., 179.

²⁶ Gene Lees, *Cats of Any Color: Jazz Black and White* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 189.

²⁷ Burns, *Jazz*.

on tour with his band through the South. A few weeks later, he was informed that the booking agency wouldn't allow him to travel with a black musician in his band. His agent later presented him with a compromise, saying that Page could tour with the band, but he had to be 15 feet away from any of the other white band members during all parts of the performance. Artie Shaw refused to agree to that sort of racism, and canceled his tour rather than firing Page.²⁸ Shaw later hired Billie Holiday to sing with his band, making her the first black singer to perform publicly with a white band, and was met with a lot of disapproval and scandal. He was barely allowed to tour with Holiday, but was shocked at the way she was treated by some audiences. In some venues in the South, he recalls patrons asking him to "have the nigger wench since another song."²⁹

The legacy of minstrelism and blackface comedy in Southern venues had a lasting impact on jazz music. Some artists even recall that their music wasn't accepted and couldn't be performed for a white audience unless it incorporated aspects of Southern minstrel shows or blackface performances, even in more Northern locations. When Duke Ellington began playing vaudeville shows in Harlem in 1926, he and his band wore powder to lighten their faces when playing for white audiences.³⁰ Billie Holiday recalls similar experiences playing vaudeville shows on the T.O.B.A circuit in the South in her autobiography. She

²⁸ Artie Shaw, "100 Years Of Jazz Clarinetist Artie Shaw," interview by David Bianculli, May 21, 2010, National Public Radio,

<http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=126972706>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Burns, *Jazz*.

toured with Count Basie and a variety of other vaudeville acts, including a white Rockette-style troupe of dancers. After the first couple of shows, she says, the agency received too many complaints about “all those Negro men up there on stage with those bare-legged white girls,”³¹ and they had to rework the entire show. With the revisions to the show, the white dancers opened the show in a chorus line wearing black masks and “mammy getups.”³² Even worse, they told Holiday that her skin was too light, and she might be mistaken for a white woman in the lighting, so she wasn't allowed to sing with Basie's band of black musicians unless she wore dark grease paint on her face.³³ Holiday and Basie were both furious, but they were bound by contract, and so Holiday was forced to perform in blackface.

In 1930, Duke Ellington went to Hollywood to appear with his band in a comedy called “Check and Double Check,” featuring the popular comedy duo Amos and Andy, two white comedians who performed in blackface as bumbling, stereotyped black characters. The studio that produced the film, fearing that the bands' two members with the lightest skin would be seen as white, also required them to darken their faces.³⁴ The infamous Cotton Club in Harlem, where several musicians including Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway began their careers, played only for white audiences, although the club was owned and run by African-Americans. Once this location became a club for white patrons, the black performers had to change

³¹ Walser, *Keeping time*, 99.

³² *Ibid.*, 100.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Burns, *Jazz*.

their acts to include more minstrel traditions³⁵. For example, most early minstrel shows were set on antebellum plantations in the South, and the plantation setting colored the creation of early jazz clubs such as the Cotton Club in New York and a few Plantation Clubs in other cities.³⁶

Thus, jazz music originated and gained popularity in Southern vice districts and touring circuits. In the late 1910s and 1920s, however, several changes occurred that encouraged Southern jazz musicians to take their acts up North. For one thing, a market for authentic blues and jazz music began to develop in New York. In 1921, the first all-black recording company was created in New York and recorded Southern artists under the label Black Swan.³⁷ Southern jazz and blues legends like Ethel Waters, Trixie Smith, and Fletcher Henderson were paid to make recordings in Long Island, New York. Some jazz musicians also went to the North because that's where their touring performances took them. Several famous New Orleans musicians, including Louis Armstrong, went North for the first time playing for dances on Fate Marable's river boats.³⁸ One of the more negative factors that influenced the regional shift of jazz was the closing of Storyville in 1917. Storyville was the most notorious vice district in 1910s New Orleans, and was home to some of the original jazz greats and some of the first jazz clubs. However, in 1917, this secretary of the Navy ordered that Storyville be shut down because of its notorious crime and prostitution rings, forcing many

³⁵ Walser, *Keeping time*, 60–63.

³⁶ Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution*, 42.

³⁷ Sampson, *Blacks in blackface*, 52–53.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 75–77.

jazz musicians out of the clubs where they made a living.³⁹ Many of the most talented jazz musicians decided to move to the North, where they had a growing audience waiting for them. In letters he wrote shortly before his death, New Orleans jazz legend Joe “King” Oliver speaks of saving up for a ticket to New York, where he knew he would be able to find good work as a musician.⁴⁰ Some Storyville players were forced instead to find work in the T.O.B.A. circuit or even in the traveling minstrel shows that survived into the 1920s.⁴¹ Many musicians and performers were also swept up in the “Great Migration” of the 1920s, in which thousands of black Southerners relocated to Northern cities in the hope of finding stability and success.⁴² In this period, New York and Chicago became the crucial hubs in which jazz music was played and developed. Though musicians in these cities also faced some harsh racism, and very often played in segregated clubs, it was in these cities that jazz music became available to audiences of all different races, and it was in these cities that the first integrated audiences enjoyed jazz.

The story of jazz music and segregation is particularly complex and problematic in New York, where jazz music gained popularity in two very different neighborhoods, Harlem and Times Square. The midtown area surrounding Times Square and Broadway was a predominantly white neighborhood, mostly middle and upper class. In Harlem, the jazz audience consisted

³⁹ Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution*, 47.

⁴⁰ Nat Shapiro, *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya; the Story of Jazz by the Men Who Made It* (New York: Rinehart, 1955), 185.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴² Burns, *Jazz*.

mostly of very poor black residents.⁴³ However, before jazz became a music sensation in New York, the city showed itself to be much more hospitable to black musicians than the South had been. James Reese Europe founded and played in the first African-American group to ever make records in 1913.⁴⁴ During World War I, Europe led the band for the all-black Fifteenth Regiment, and incorporated his syncopation and ragtime styles into their music. He was extraordinarily popular in Europe, and came back as an honored and decorated soldier: he was the first African-American officer to see combat in this war. Unlike some musicians that came after him, Europe was proud that his band played “black music;” in a 1919 article, he referred to jazz as “negro music” and even argued that black musicians should only play music in this style, saying that, “negroes should write negro music. We have our own racial feeling and if we try to copy whites we will make bad copies.”⁴⁵ Upon his return, James Reese Europe and his band were given a victory parade, and he was celebrated as the pride of Harlem as well as of midtown New York. Supportive integrated crowd came to watch his band play in New York and later in other Northern venues where they went on tour. When Europe was killed by an angry coworker in 1919, people from all over New York were devastated, and New York granted him the first official funeral granted to a black citizen.⁴⁶

After Europe's death, however, it seems that jazz music lost its popularity with white audiences in

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Walser, *Keeping time*, 12–14.

⁴⁵ Robert Walser, *Keeping time?: readings in jazz history* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 12–14.

⁴⁶ Burns, *Jazz*.

midtown New York, and the sounds of early jazz began to grow more and more popular in Harlem. When jazz music came from New Orleans to New York in the 1920s, it had been played for several years already as ragtime or vaudeville acts of urban “vice districts,” and jazz almost immediately found a place in the Prohibition-Era speakeasies of poor Harlem neighborhoods. Here, black musicians played for black audiences, and segregation did not become an issue until a modified version of this Southern music became popular with white audiences.

Because early jazz music was so rooted in Southern ragtime and blues music, it was typically played by a small combo of instruments including piano, drums, bass, and sometimes brass instruments or vocal soloists. Early jazz music was played in small ensembles and frequently incorporated improvisation into its performances. Pianists in the jazz clubs of New Orleans and other early jazz cities were defined by their ability to improvise, and clubs frequently held “cutting contests” between musicians to determine who had the most improvisational skill.⁴⁷ As jazz gained popularity in the North, however, many white audiences were put off by the hot jam sessions and cutting contests that were typical of Southern jazz performances. In the popular ballrooms of Harlem and Times Square, there grew a high demand for jazz music that one could dance to.⁴⁸ The dance music, which became what we would call swing music, was typically played by a larger ensemble of piano, bass, drums, and several brass instruments. The music required specific ar-

⁴⁷ Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution*, 51–55.

⁴⁸ Samuel Barclay Charters, *Jazz; a History of the New York Scene* (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1962), 119.

rangements for a large ensemble and used written sheet music, unlike the early speakeasy jazz that was improvised over a set of unwritten chords. This form of jazz music became extremely popular in New York, especially with white audiences in the ritzy ballrooms of the Times Square area. In his autobiography, Duke Ellington recalls that he could play with a small combo in Harlem clubs, but always had to get an 11-piece band together for gigs at the Cotton Club, because that music was in such high demand.⁴⁹

Fletcher Henderson, who was one of the first black musicians to arrange jazz music for a larger ensemble, gained popularity first in the black clubs of Harlem, but soon was in demand by white audiences. He was booked to play for the Roseland, an all-white club in the Times Square area, and soon many black musicians were taking the stage in this part of town, but they were playing a different kind of jazz. Around the same time Henderson was experimenting with what would become the “Big Band” sound, a white musician named Paul Whiteman formed the first popular 12-piece white jazz band and was immediately named the “King of Jazz,” much to the disgust of many black musicians. Whiteman frequently bought arrangements from Henderson, and between their two bands, Henderson's style of jazz was the first jazz music that was widely accepted by white audiences, and this style diverged significantly from the sounds of New Orleans and even other Northern cities. When Louis Armstrong moved from Chicago to New York and began playing with Fletcher Henderson, he was told that his style

⁴⁹ Duke Ellington, *Music Is My Mistress*, A Da Capo paperback (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976), 75–77.

was “too black” for the Roseland.⁵⁰

With jazz growing in popularity with both white and black audiences, the music began to flourish in segregated speakeasies. Popular black musicians began booking gigs to play in midtown clubs for white audiences. Clubs like The Roseland and The Palace became important venues for African-American musicians to perform, and they became enormously popular with upper-class white audiences. Later into the twenties, however, many white audience members became interested in what would be considered a more fundamental jazz sound. In this era, many Harlem clubs were suddenly flooded with white patrons, and although several Harlem clubs were still segregated, it was in Harlem that the first integrated audiences for jazz music formed.⁵¹

In the early 1920s, virtually all of the jazz clubs in New York were segregated. Even some of the black clubs of Harlem changed their rules to become establishments for exclusively white patrons, while retaining the black musicians as entertainers. The Cotton Club, which became the most famous jazz speakeasy in Harlem by the mid-twenties, became a whites-only club when white listeners began flocking to Harlem, although the owners of the club were black. Even before the Cotton Club and other all-white Harlem clubs existed, some white patrons would attend “midnight rambles” in this part of town. These were performances for white audiences in a black venue (usually more underground venues in the vice districts) after the regular show for black patrons had

⁵⁰ Burns, *Jazz*.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

ended,⁵² and often featured more lewd and racy material than the other vaudeville shows. In other clubs, however, jazz speakeasies became places where all races could come and enjoy jazz music freely. The Savoy Ballroom in downtown Harlem is noted by many to be the first integrated club in America, and here black and white patrons alike danced to Fletcher Henderson and other jazz greats. Soon, other club owners began secretly allowing black and white audience members to mingle in the previously all-black Harlem clubs. These establishments, called “black and tans,” almost always featured black musicians, but “were designed to draw substantial white patronage.”⁵³ In these clubs, it was more common to have a mix of black and white patrons, and the respect for the musicians seemed to outweigh and neutralize most racial tension in the audience. In fact, some argue that whites frequented the black and tans specifically because they were attracted to the idea of black entertainment, and they “believed that the black roots of jazz were what gave it value.”⁵⁴

Black and tans existed as early as the late 19th century and continued to exist for decades. In the earlier years of the black and tans, the venues usually had separate sides of the room for black and white patrons, but by the 1930's all the patrons interacted freely and “segregation never crossed anyone's mind.”⁵⁵ In the early jazz years, lots of white listeners were attracted to the dangerous notions associated with the black subculture of jazz. Music that was played by

⁵² *Ibid.*, 16–17.

⁵³ Collier, *Jazz*, 18.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

black musicians was viewed as more exotic and valuable, and white audiences flocked to various types of venues to watch black bands play. However, the appreciation that white audiences had for African-American musicians cannot always be viewed as racially positive. Again, the notion of primitivism affected white Americans' perception of jazz music.⁵⁶ Although the idea that jazz music was more expressive and exciting eventually helped to draw an audience, rather than making people regard jazz as “savage music,” it also carried with it some very negative racial stigmas. When Duke Ellington began headlining at the Cotton Club in the mid-twenties, the white patrons of the club excitedly referred to his sound as “jungle music,” a term which plagued African-American musicians in midtown New York for decades afterwards.⁵⁷

Even as jazz music gained popularity in the clubs of New York, the jazz recordings of black musicians were not nearly as readily available or as popular in midtown New York. Influential jazz writer John Hammond recalls that, after he first fell in love with jazz music in London, he had a difficult time finding recordings of black jazz musicians in New York City. White-owned record stores typically wouldn't stock the music of black musicians, and the records of those musicians were marketed only towards the “Negro audience”. In order to find recordings of Sidney Bechet, Mamie Smith, and others, Hammond had to go to record stores in the black ghettos of New York.⁵⁸ In his time, before the Harlem craze, “there was no such

⁵⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁷ Burns, *Jazz*.

⁵⁸ Walser, *Keeping time*, 88.

thing as integration. There were very few places where the White public went, where Negro musicians could be heard,"⁵⁹ and New York was just as segregated as the South. Hammond later became one of the most influential people in the history of jazz music because he wanted to bring the true jazz sounds of Harlem to a wider audience. He began to write about jazz music, and he importantly urged Americans to re-evaluate their perception of black jazz musicians. Hammond organized jam sessions for black musicians on local radio stations, and later convinced a British record label (for no American labels would) to record and produce records of the black musicians in Harlem. Many jazz musicians in the 1920s owed their careers to John Hammond.⁶⁰

New York proved to be a pretty hospitable city to black jazz musicians as the "jazz craze" of the 1920s continued. Blues legend "Big" Joe Turner fondly recalls that he was given a paying music job within his first few hours of playing piano in a New York club⁶¹. Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong were huge stars in both Harlem and Times Square, and they became respected public figures through their music.⁶² In New York, they were truly respected as artists, and they enjoyed all the wealth and fame that had previously been afforded only to white musicians. It was in New York City that these musicians became hugely popular with both black and white audience, so it was in this city that these musicians made the first attempts at using jazz for a change in the racial culture of the United

⁵⁹ Ibid., 89.

⁶⁰ Burns, *Jazz*.

⁶¹ Shapiro, *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya; the Story of Jazz by the Men Who Made It*, 174.

⁶² Burns, *Jazz*.

States. Although not all of these early attempts were successful, it is important that some of the first calls for integration came out of the jazz industry in New York. Although jazz retained its popularity in Southern cities such as New Orleans, these Southern venues were almost never integrated, and the black artists in these areas never gained the respect from white audiences that would have allowed them to call for change.

In 1938, radical literary journal *New Masses* sponsored a concert at Carnegie Hall in New York City entitled “From Spirituals to Swing,” or “An Evening of American Negro Music”. This concert incorporated pieces from African tribal music up through big band and swing hits, and chronologically tracked the development of “black music” in America. The concert was played by jazz legends including Count Basie, Lester Young, Walter Page, and Earl Warren. Most importantly, the music was played by an integrated orchestra, and the program notes very clearly explained that the aim of the concert was to create a world in which the great jazz artists, black and white, would be able to play together publicly. The concert was dedicated to Bessie Smith, who had died the previous year, and the program notes discussed at length the struggles faced by black musicians and the lack of credit they received for the music they produced.⁶³ Some jazz artists also attempted to put integrated bands on the Broadway stage. Dave Brubeck also wrote a musical entitled *The Real Ambassadors* in the late fifties that incorporated pro-integration ideals by poking fun at hypocritical racism, and suggesting that black musicians were the new face and

⁶³ Walser, *Keeping time*, 101–105.

voice of America.⁶⁴ The show starred Louis Armstrong and Carmen McRae, and although some of the music from this work survived, Brubeck was never allowed to produce it onstage because the cast was integrated.⁶⁵ By this time, all-black musicals had already been appearing onstage, such as Gershwin's 1935 opera, *Porgy and Bess*, but an integrated cast was still considered unacceptable for Broadway.

The segregation of the jazz industry remained at a national level long after New York musicians attempted to make some changes in the practices of the industry. Artie Shaw recalls having to give up TV appearances because he had black musicians in his band.⁶⁶ Dave Brubeck also recalls an instance in which he had to give up a TV slot to Duke Ellington because he had just hired a black bassist, and Ellington happened to have an all-black band at the time. Brubeck's managers offered a compromise where his bassist could be heard and recorded when the band played their set, but couldn't be seen on television. Brubeck refused to play with those restrictions, so he lost his spot.⁶⁷ Similarly, Ellington often had to turn down gigs and television appearances when he had Louis Bellson, who was white, on the drums.⁶⁸ With this example in mind, Brubeck claims that by this time (the late

⁶⁴ Dave Brubeck, "Celebrating Jazz Pianist Dave Brubeck's 90th Birthday," interview by David Bianculli, December 3, 2010, National Public Radio,

<http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=131731507>.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 86–88.

⁶⁶ Artie Shaw, "100 Years Of Jazz Clarinetist Artie Shaw."

⁶⁷ Enstice and Rubin, *Jazz spoken here*, 87.

⁶⁸ Dave Brubeck, "Celebrating Jazz Pianist Dave Brubeck's 90th Birthday," interview by David Bianculli, December 3, 2010, National Public Radio,

<http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=131731507>.

fifties), people didn't have too much of a problem with black musicians but integration remained a poignant issue.⁶⁹

In time, jazz music gained popularity with the audiences of New York, and the African-American jazz musicians grew to be respected nationwide for the music they produced. Popular jazz musicians like Louis Armstrong in New York were able to make and sell recordings that gave them a national following.⁷⁰ As the radio became more and more important to the musical culture of America, the Cotton Club began broadcasting live recordings of the in-house jazz band on certain nights of the week. Duke Ellington recalls in his autobiography that it was because of the Cotton Club's broadcasts that he gained a national and international fan base.⁷¹ As their music reached a national audience, jazz artists gained enough respect and popularity to push for integration on a national level. Even as early as the thirties, some musicians were attempting to portray African-Americans in a more positive light through cinema and theater. Duke Ellington was one of the leading African-American musicians to push for equality in this period, and he produced several works that were intended to support and empower African-Americans. In 1934, he worked on a short film for Paramount entitled *Symphony in Black* that avoided the “stereotypical, racist depictions of African-Americans which mar most early jazz films.”⁷² In 1941 he wrote *Jump for Joy*, a musical which Ellington stated was an “attempt to correct the

⁶⁹ Enstice and Rubin, *Jazz spoken here*, 87.

⁷⁰ Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution*, 54.

⁷¹ Ellington, *Music Is My Mistress*, 77.

⁷² Fred Waller, *Symphony in Black* (Paramount Pictures, 1935), <http://www.redhotjazz.com/sib.html>.

race situation in the U.S.A. through a form of musical propaganda.⁷³ Ellington's most deliberate and intensive piece that addressed the race in American society premiered in 1943, a 3-part symphonic piece entitled *Black, Brown, and Beige*. This work traced the African-American musical history all the way from indigenous African drumming up through modern Harlem jazz.⁷⁴ Although this work wasn't brought back to the stage until 1977, Ellington importantly drew attention to the black experience in America and how African-Americans had come to express their experiences through music.

Although not all of the attempts to change the racial perceptions of white audiences in America were successful at the time, the fact that jazz music remained extraordinarily popular even into the 1950s evidences the changing racial culture that came with jazz music. Segregation was an extremely prevalent influence in the practices of the early jazz industry of the deep South. As this music grew in popularity in the Northern cities, however, and as jazz musicians became truly respected as artists, the industry created places where integrated audiences could hear this "black music". Over time, jazz music even became a deliberate mechanism of social change in breaking down segregational ideology and racial prejudice. Because jazz moved to and mutated in the North, the musicians were granted more opportunities and more fame with white audiences than they ever could have gained in the South, and the opportunities in the

⁷³ Duke Ellington, *Music Is My Mistress*, A Da Capo paperback (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976), 175.

⁷⁴ Mark Tucker, "The Genesis of 'Black, Brown and Beige'," *Black Music Research Journal* 13, no. 2 (October 1, 1993): 67-71.

North eventually made black jazz musicians respected and influential nationwide.

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