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From Potent to Popular: The Effects of Racism on Chicago Jazz 1920-1930

Abstract

This is a discussion of early jazz music and the changes in style it underwent because of racism. The author also admits her own biases in the end as well and discusses the difficulty in portraying history objectively.

**From Potent to Popular:
The Effects of Racism on Chicago Jazz
1920-1930**

Lynne Seago

Jazz was born after World War I in New Orleans, Louisiana, to a group of itinerant and illiterate African-American piano players who, “[s]eated at the piano with a carefree air that a king might envy, their box-back coats flowing over the stool, their Stetsons¹ pulled well over their eyes and cigars at a forty-five degree angle,... would ‘whip the ivories’ to marvelous chords and hidden racy meanings.”² In the beginning, jazz was distinctly Southern and distinctly Negro. By the end of the 1920s, however, both white and black jazz bands existed in the city of Chicago, and jazz was played for a national audience. Jazz style also changed, from Negro “hot” to a “sweet” style similar to the popular music of the day. These changes occurred because of racial stereotypes associated with jazz music by the white community, and the black community’s reaction to those stereotypes. Racism in Chicago during the 1920s changed jazz from a potent and distinctly Negro style of music to a diluted by-product of mainstream popular culture.

Negro bands moved to Chicago in the winter of 1917, after the Secretary of the Navy closed Storyville, the center of New Orleans jazz (also a red-light district), to protect a nearby naval base from prostitution.³ When they reached Chicago, Negro jazzmen found that housing discrimination forced them to live in the Black Belt on the city’s South Side, a lower-class district frequented by few white people. The “stadiest employment for blacks was [also] to be found in the Black Belt,” so bands performed for an almost exclusively black audience.⁴ Only black phonograph companies, such as *Okeh Race Records*, which released songs like “Jazz Crazy” and “You Might Pizen Me” in 1924, recorded Negro jazz music and released it to the black population.⁵

White phonograph companies refused to record Negro jazz because of the traditionalist opposition to jazz music in the general white population. Traditionalists, usually Protestant middle-class Americans of Anglo-Saxon ancestry, connected jazz to the Negro brothels, where it had first become popular in New Orleans. Milton Mezzrow, a jazz clarinetist, wrote that, in the twenties, Negro jazz “was called ‘nigger music’ and ‘whorehouse music’ and ‘nice’ people turned their noses up at it.”⁶ They refused to accept jazz because they believed it was immoral.

Traditionalists also disapproved of jazz because of supposed origins in “heathen” African spirituals. J.A. Rogers wrote in 1925 that, in jazz’s “barbaric rhythm and exuberance there is something of the bamboula, a wild, abandoned

dance of the West African and Haitian Negro.”⁷ Taking that idea a little farther, Mrs. Marx Obendorfer said that “Jazz originally was the accompaniment of the voodoo dancer, stimulating the half-crazed barbarian to the vilest deeds....[It] has also been employed by other barbaric people to stimulate brutality and sensuality.”⁸ Traditionalists thought jazz was barbaric, whether or not it actually had roots in Africa, and believed jazz’s “heathen” roots would influence Americans. Dr. Florence Richards, the medical director of a girls’ high school, said jazz’s influence was “as harmful and degrading to civilized races as it always has been among savages from whom we borrowed it.”⁹

Typically middle-class and educated in Western culture, traditionalists opposed jazz because it was a product of “culturally inferior” Negroes. They contrasted their own noble, formalistic styles of art with the “vulgarity and crudities of the lowly origin.”¹⁰ Traditionalists believed that a jazz song, in its crude, Negro form, “sounded like a crazy clarinetist broadcasting from a boiler room on a night when the static was particularly bad.”¹¹ They compared jazz dancing, which “began ... in the restless feet of the black,”¹² to a “a series of snake-like gyrations and weird contortions of seemingly agonized bodies and limbs.”¹³ Jazz dancing, like the music itself, grew from the lowly nature of Negroes.

A cartoon published in the *Chicago Tribune* in June of 1922 shows a Negro jazzman, with the stereotypical black face and white lips, playing a horn and dancing around in odd, exaggerated positions. He says, “I don’t mind this playing so much but, [sic] hopping all over the place at the same time is getting on my nerves.” In the last frame of the cartoon, he says, in typical African-American slang, “What chanct [with women] has a guy got what hasta work nights!!*!?!? Not a chanct Notta chanct!” [sic]¹⁴ The character’s use of slang instead of correct grammar shows his low social status and lack of education; his body positions demonstrate the perceived absurdity of Negro dance. The cartoon, which contains the only black face in the whole issue of the *Tribune*, shows traditionalist racist attitudes against Negroes, particularly Negro jazzmen.

Because of their racist attitudes, most whites supported white jazz bands over their Negro counterparts. White jazz first became recognized in 1917, when the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, a white group, created the first jazz record in New Orleans.¹⁵ Although African-Americans had created jazz music, whites were the first to record, and “the national image of jazz music was first that of white musicians.”¹⁶ Negro jazz bands moved upriver to Chicago, and many white musicians flocked to the city. They “studied jazz, ... from a handicap of feeble imitation and patient hours in Negro cabarets listening to the originators”—the Negro originators.¹⁷ With practice, whites learned the jazz style, formed their own bands, and marketed their music to a national audience. While black musicians were stuck playing for a limited, African-American audience, white jazz was becoming increasingly popular across the nation, to

the point where there was even a "widespread denial in America of the black man's role in the creation and development of [jazz]."¹⁸

White jazz became popular with a broad sector of the American public because white musicians played "sweet" jazz, a style which "produced soft, dreamy, subtly exotic effects, often presenting real beauty of tonal coloring."¹⁹ "Sweet" jazz was similar to music that was already popular with mainstream white Americans, and it did not contain the loud noises or the rough sounds of Negro jazz. "Sweet" jazz was also played in the beginning exclusively by whites. Moderate Americans claimed that the new jazz style "had been 'purified' by traditional music elements"²⁰ and began to associate jazz "less with the brothel and more with the concert hall as a native product of which Americans could be proud."²¹ Because "sweet" musicians were white, they could not be connected to "heathen" African ritual or Negro brothels, and their jazz became acceptable—and popular—because they were white.

Faced with the success of "sweet" jazz, African-Americans inside the city's Black Belt were taking to heart the racial implications of jazz. They supported black musicians, "Race heroes" like Louis Armstrong, who could make names for themselves despite the fact that "to most white men Negroes were nameless nonentities."²² But African-Americans denounced the "hot" New Orleans style that members of their own race, including Armstrong, had played.

Many African-Americans had moved to Chicago during World War I in search of jobs and a better way of life. Although they still faced discrimination and the perils of urban life, African-Americans realized that "in moving north [they] had made one step toward escaping from a vicious and degrading social situation."²³ Inside Chicago's Black Belt, they improved their lifestyles. They were also exposed, through motion pictures and advertisements, to "a world that was even further up [from theirs]: the world of the middle-class Chicago white man."²⁴ Black Americans who had taken the step out of the South and into a better life began to believe that they could take another step, this time into the world of the whites.

To prepare themselves for this step up in society, many blacks wanted to listen to music that had been accepted by mainstream society. They rejected "hot" Negro jazz, which was associated with their own culture and "clearly unlike the white man's popular music."²⁵ They compared jazz to the symphonies of whites, and labeled Negro jazz "uncultured" because most early jazz musicians could not read (music or words).²⁶ They saw Negro jazz as a "lesser" style of music.

The Chicago Defender, a militant Negro newspaper published weekly throughout the 1920s, also portrayed "hot" jazz as a "lesser" form of music; the newspaper supported "sweet" jazz over the traditional style. In his column, Dave Peyton advised Negro musicians, "if you are now in a jazz band, do not

give up the proper study on your instrument. You may be called upon to render real service and to play good music."²⁷ Peyton did not consider jazz to be "good music" of the appropriate status for blacks. Another article, "General Grant had Good 'Jazz' Ear," explained to the black community that General Grant had lived "in a jazz world all his own" where "everything in the form of music was mere noise."²⁸ The article equates jazz with noise, and suggests that the creators of jazz were tonedeaf. As a whole, *The Defender* does not accept "hot" jazz because it is an outgrowth of ignorance and low social status.

Other African-Americans in Chicago rejected "hot" Negro jazz because it was a part of the white stereotype of their race. These blacks noted that "the white world expected Negroes to stick to jazz and leave 'respectable' music ['sweet' jazz] to the white man. Jazz, the blues and the spirituals were products of the Negro community, and the white world... put a racial tag on all of them."²⁹ Many blacks wanted to rebel against the discrimination that faced them: they wanted to sing and play music of all styles, not just those that had been designated as "Negro." In a *Defender* article published in 1921, a talented African-American singer named Caroll Clark said that "after permitting him to sing 'The Swanee River' and such songs, [a white record company] insisted that if they granted his request to have his picture published it must not be identified with the finer ballads, but with the type of song which has come to be associated in the popular mind with the smart, sophisticated 'coon' who furnishes us with ragtime and jazz."³⁰ Mr. Clark then refused to sing for the company, who he claimed "demanded that he cheapen his art and belittle his race" by refusing to place his picture by songs seen as "inappropriate" for blacks to sing.³¹ *The Defender* supported Mr. Clark's claim, and asked other musicians to resist racial stereotypes by refusing to play Negro jazz.

Black jazz musicians were receptive to these attitudes and the shifting nature of their black audience. Since arriving in Chicago in the early 1920s, African-American jazz musicians played for a limited audience—Negroes who frequented their night clubs in the Black Belt or bought their records through black phonograph companies. By the end of the 1920s, this audience was dwindling. Most African-Americans favored the "sweet" jazz of the white bands, and refused to support old-fashioned Negro styles.

Although the "sweet" style decreased the interest in Negro jazz among the black community, it made the white community more aware of jazz. Like blacks, however, whites favored "sweet" jazz, because they "could not understand a music too radically different from the popular music they were used to."³² White jazz bands performed before large groups of people outside the city's Black Belt and sold records to a wider section of the population than ever before.

Because of these audience changes, black jazz bands abandoned the traditional "hot" Negro style for the "sweet" style that was popular across the

country. This shift allowed Negro bands to resist racial stereotypes, raise pride among the Negro community, and sell more records to a larger section of the population. It also destroyed the integrity of Negro jazz, transforming it from a potent racial expression into a diluted by-product of mainstream culture. It was "a plague, profitable but profligate, that has done more moral harm than artistic good."³³ Negro musicians abandoned their "marvelous chords and hidden racy meanings"³⁴ for an "unsuccessful mixture of two disparate musical traditions,"³⁵ a cultural and racial smorgasbord with no sound or symbol as powerful as the humble troubadour "whipping the ivories" in his Stetson.

* * *

A written history of jazz music during the 1920s, like all other types of written history, can never be totally accurate. Jazz recordings and performances are past events that cannot be re-created. White "racists" and black "victims" can never be brought back to life to testify about their experiences. To write a history about racism and jazz, as I have tried to do, a historian can only look to the documents—first person accounts of the era as well as secondary responses to them. From those accounts, a historian draws up a biased, incomplete version of the past that presents (supposed) historical facts and evaluates them according to "time, evidence, cause and effect, continuity and change, and similarity and difference."³⁶ My history of jazz, like all histories, captures some piece of the truth; it is not (and can never be) one hundred percent accurate.

According to Keith Jenkins, a post-modernist historian, "history remains inevitably a personal construct" because no historian "can divest himself/herself of his/her own knowledge and assumptions."³⁷ My history is biased because of my own thoughts, experiences, and position in time. I am a white, middle-class female. I am a child of the 1980s, and I was taught, as early as elementary school, about issues like racism and sexism. I read stories about Southern slaves and German Jews; I learned to sympathize with American Indians who lost their lands to white men on the frontier and women who were not given any rights until the twentieth century. I have never listened to jazz ("hot" or "sweet"), but I became interested in jazz music after listening to modern swing, a version of the 1930s style which rose to popularity again last summer. When looking into jazz, I immediately noticed racism, a concept which I had learned to recognize years before.

This introduction to racism led me, in my high school and college years, to an interest in race-relations and the oppression of African-Americans. I have read literature by African-American writers like James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, and Maya Angelou. I admire men like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Frederick Douglass. I sympathize with these people, who present first-person accounts of the racism they have experienced, and I respect their efforts to give black people hope and freedom.

When researching racism in jazz music, I sided with African-American musicians trying to preserve their culture and music style. I disapproved of white mainstream Americans who let intolerance inhibit them from enjoying a music different from their own. My position as a modern American looking for racism and sympathizing with its victims kept me from being objective on the subject of early jazz. I could not write an accurate history because of my personal biases.

Besides my own personal biases, my history contains biases expressed in my primary and secondary sources. For example, *The Chicago Defender*, a militant Negro newspaper in which I found many of my primary documents, is hopelessly biased towards African-Americans. The *Defender* was distributed only to members of the black community, and contained articles intended to fight discrimination and unite all African-Americans. Its opinion on Negro jazz was not objective because of its political motives as well as its entirely Negro audience.

Many of my secondary sources, which contained opinions on “hot” and “sweet” styles, were also biased. Most of these were written in the 1960s, the era of the Civil Rights Movement. At that time, African-Americans and others concerned with Civil Rights began to look back in time and describe the racism of other eras. Jazz music had also become popular again in the 1960s, and many historians were attracted to the topic of racism in early jazz. Interested in racial integrity and potent, radical styles, these historians condemned Negro jazz musicians for discarding their original style. Their attitudes kept their histories from being objective; they also keep my history from being accurate.

The accuracy of my history is further limited by the fact that I could only use a finite number of sources. It would be impossible for me to use every document that exists on my subject; my history would be long and the research would be out of hand. It would also be impossible for me to find *every* source: I only have access to books shelved in college libraries inside the state of Illinois. Although I did have access to the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Defender*, the *Tribune* rarely published information on African-Americans. The *Defender's* “coverage of jazz in Chicago is inadequate throughout the twenties” because its staff did not support the “hot” Negro jazz style.³⁸ According to Chadwick Hansen of Pennsylvania State University, “A historian who wanted to trace the careers of jazz men would find more information in the advertisements of night clubs, theaters, and phonograph record companies than in the news columns.”³⁹ Unfortunately, these advertisements are nearly impossible to find, and without them, my history is incomplete.

To make an argument about racism and jazz, I had to then select evidence that would prove my point—that racism caused a change in the style of jazz music. There is no such thing as an objective view of history; a history cannot include all viewpoints and still make sense. So, I had to “develop a self-

consciously held (and acknowledged) position.”⁴⁰ I had to write a thesis, based on the trends I saw in my evidence, then connect facts together in a pattern of meaning. To do this, of course, I had to omit contradictory evidence. For example, I did not mention in my history that Negroes took “such fierce pride in the fact that at least jazz is theirs, that it began as Afro-American music,” an idea which contradicts my statement that Negroes wanted to abandon their own styles, which they saw as culturally inferior.⁴¹ It was this pride that led Freddie Keppard, a Negro trumpeter from New Orleans, to refuse “an invitation to make the first of all jazz phonograph records.” Keppard did not take the opportunity “because he was afraid that his music would be easier to steal” if it were on record.⁴² As a result, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, a white group, was the first to record. I did not cite this in my paper because it contradicted other statements and erased racist implications.

I also omitted evidence discussing the small amount of interracial collaboration that existed in the 1920s. There were integrated jazz bands and white musicians who said Negro jazz “poured into [them] like daylight down a dark hole.”⁴³ Historian Alain Locke wrote that “jazz...became one great interracial collaboration in which the important matter is the artistic quality of the product and neither the quantity of the distribution nor the color of the artist.”⁴⁴ Jazz musicians, of both colors, often revered and respected members of the opposite race, even though the general population felt differently. I did not include comments to this effect, even though they were actually said by members of the minority, because they would have weakened my point and blurred my emphasis on racism. Because I “selected” my evidence, leaving facts out to create a clearer point, I made my history biased and inaccurate.

My history on racism in jazz music, like all histories, is biased and incomplete; it does not reproduce the past accurately. I accept that. I know my history cannot be complete or accurate. I realize that I have not unearthed the whole truth about anything. But I hope that I have captured some truth in my history. I hope that I have “[made] visible aspects of the past that have previously been hidden or secreted away; that have been previously overlooked or sidelined, thereby producing fresh insights that can actually make emancipatory, material differences to and within the present—which is where all history starts from and returns to.”⁴⁵

Endnotes

¹A broad-brimmed, high-crowned felt hat.

²Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1936), 73.

³Leroy Ostransky, *Jazz City* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), 59.

⁴*Ibid.*, 105.

⁵*Chicago Defender*, 17 May 1924, 6.

⁶Neil Leonard, *Jazz and the White Americans: The Acceptance of a New Art Form* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 36.

⁷J.A. Rogers, "Jazz at Home," *Survey* 1 March 1925: 665, quoted in George E. Mowry, ed., *The Twenties: Fords, Flappers, and Fanatics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), 67.

⁸Anne Shaw Faulkner (Mrs. Marx Obendorfer), "Does Jazz Put the Sin into Sincopation?" *Ladies Home Journal*, XXXVIII (August, 1921), 34; quoted in Leonard, 39.

⁹Paul Whiteman and Mary Margaret McBride, *Jazz* (New York: n.p., 1926), 5-6; quoted in Leonard, 39.

¹⁰Rogers, 68.

¹¹Leonard, 76.

¹²Locke, 72.

¹³Leonard, 33.

¹⁴Briggy, "Wonder What A Jazz Band Player Thinks About," *Chicago Tribune*, 6 June 1922, 19.

¹⁵Jack V. Buerkle and Danny Barker, *Bourbon Street Black- The New Orleans Black Jazzman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 103.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷Locke, 82.

¹⁸Buerkle, 104.

¹⁹Leonard, 77.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 75.

²¹*Ibid.*, 89.

²²Chadwick Hansen, "Social Influences on Jazz Style: Chicago, 1920-30," *American Quarterly* 12 (1960): 497.

²³*Ibid.*, 493.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵*Ibid.*, 496.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 502.

²⁷Dave Peyton, *Chicago Defender*, 7 April 1928, n.p.; quoted in Hansen, 498.

²⁸"General Grant Had Good 'Jazz' Ear," 18 March 1922, 20.

²⁹Hansen, 500.

³⁰"Records Racial Melodies as Sung by Members of the Race," *Chicago Defender*, 4 June 1921, 6.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²Hansen, 503.

³³Locke, 87.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 73.

³⁵Hansen, 507.

³⁶Keith Jenkins, *Reconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 1991), 16.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 12.

³⁸Hansen, 499.

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰Jenkins, 69.

⁴¹Nat Hentoff, "Race prejudice in Jazz: It Works Both Ways," *Harpers Magazine* 218 (June 1959): 74.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 73.

⁴³Leonard, 58.

⁴⁴Locke, 82.

⁴⁵Jenkins, 68.