

Keeping Time

Readings
in Jazz
History

Edited by
**Robert
Walser**

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Contents

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me to form a band. I told him that it would be impossible, as the negro musicians of New York were paid too well to have them give up their jobs to go to war. However, Colonel Hayward raised \$10,000 and told me to get the musicians wherever I could get them. The reed players I got in Porto Rico, the rest from all over the country. I had only one New York negro in the band—my solo cornetist. These are the men who now compose the band, and they are all fighters as well as musicians, for all have seen service in the trenches.

"I believe that the term 'jazz' originated with a band of four pieces which was found about fifteen years ago in New Orleans, and which was known as 'Razz's Band.' This band was of truly extraordinary composition. It consisted of a barytone horn, a trombone, a cornet, and an instrument made out of the china-berry-tree. This instrument is something like a clarinet, and is made by the Southern negroes themselves. Strange to say, it can be used only while the sap is in the wood, and after a few weeks' use has to be thrown away. It produces a beautiful sound and is worthy of inclusion in any band or orchestra. I myself intend to employ it soon in my band. The four musicians of Razz's Band had no idea at all of what they were playing; they improvised as they went along, but such was their innate sense of rhythm that they produced something which was very taking. From the small cafés of New Orleans they graduated to the St. Charles Hotel, and after a time to the Winter Garden in New York, where they appeared, however, only a few days, the individual musicians being grabbed up by various orchestras in the city. Somehow in the passage of time Razz's Band got changed into 'Jazz's Band,' and from this corruption arose the term 'jazz.'

"The negro loves anything that is peculiar in music, and this 'jazzing' appeals to him strongly. It is accomplished in several ways. With the brass instruments we put in mutes and made a whirling motion with the tongue, at the same time blowing full pressure. With wind instruments we pinch the mouthpiece and blow hard. This produces the peculiar sound which you all know. To us it is not discordant, as we play the music as it is written, only that we accent strongly in this manner the notes which originally would be without accent. It is natural for us to do this; it is, indeed, a racial musical characteristic. I have to call a daily rehearsal of my band to prevent the musicians from adding to their music more than I wish them to. Whenever possible they all embroider their parts in order to produce new, peculiar sounds. Some of these effects are excellent and some are not, and I have to be continually on the lookout to cut out the results of my musicians' originality.

"This jazz music made a tremendous sensation in France. I recall one incident in particular. From last February to last August I had been in the trenches, in command of my machine gun squad. I had been through the terrific general attack in Champagne when General Gouraud annihilated the enemy by his strategy and finally put an end to their hopes of victory, and I had been through many a smaller engagement. I can tell you that music was one of the things furthest from my mind when one day, just before the

5 "A Negro Explains 'Jazz,'"

AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSICIANS WERE NOT often invited to participate in public debates over the nature and meaning of early jazz, so this statement by James Reese Europe (1881–1919) is especially significant. A successful band leader and composer, Europe organized in 1910 an association of black musicians known as the Clef Club, and in 1913 his band became the first black group ever to make recordings. He gained great fame through his association with Irene and Vernon Castle, leaders of the social dance craze of the 1910s, who popularized African-American-derived dances among the white middle class. During World War I, Europe became famous for the quality of his military band and for the concerts he conducted in France. In retrospect, his music is usually taken to represent a transitional moment between ragtime and jazz.

Like so many other people, Europe offered a fanciful explanation of the word "jazz" (evidence for the existence of "Razz's Band" is lacking). But his story includes valuable accounts of how his music was received, and he mentions technical details to explain how certain "peculiar" sounds were produced. With great conviction, Europe advocated the cultivation of "negro music" (though where he refers to "racial" qualities we might today be inclined to write of "cultural" ones), invoking the names of prominent African-American musicians of the time in support of his argument against musical assimilation. This article begins with a brief introduction by Grenville Vernon, under whose byline Europe's statement appeared in the *New York Tribune* in 1919.

Just what is "jazz"? Most of us know it when we hear it, but few of us know its derivation, its reason, or the manner in which the veritable "jazz" is produced, for there are "jazzes" which are not veritable. "Jazz" is, of course, negro; somehow or other all musical originality in America seems to be negro. The negro musically is always a worshipper of rhythm; often he is a rhythomaniac, and "jazz" arises from his rhythmic fervor, combined with a peculiar liking for strange sounds. This at least is the opinion of Lieutenant James Reese Europe, late of the Machine Gun Battalion of the old 15th Regiment. Lieutenant Europe has just returned from more than a year's service in France, which he passed partly in the direction of the band he had organized for his regiment, a band which had a stupendous success in France and which is having equally as great success at home.

"When war broke out I enlisted as a private in Colonel Hayward's regiment, and I had just passed my officer's examination when the Colonel asked

Source: Grenville Vernon, "That Mysterious Jazz," *New York Tribune*, March 30, 1919, Section 4, p. 5. Subsequently reprinted with slight changes as "A Negro Explains Jazz," *The Literary Digest*, April 26, 1919, pp. 28–29.

Allied conference in Paris on August 18, Colonel Hayward came to me and said:

"Lieutenant Europe, I want you to go back to your band and give a single concert in Paris."

"I protested, telling him that I hadn't led the band since February, but he insisted. Well, I went back to my band, and with it I went to Paris. What was to be our only concert was in the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. Before we had played two numbers the audience went wild. We had conquered Paris. General Bliss and French high officers who had heard us insisted that we should stay in Paris, and there we stayed for eight weeks. Everywhere we gave a concert it was a riot, but the supreme moment came in the Tuileries Gardens when we gave a concert in conjunction with the greatest bands in the world—the British Grenadiers' Band, the Band of the Garde Républicain, and the Royal Italian Band. My band, of course, could not compare with any of these, yet the crowd, and it was such a crowd as I never saw anywhere else in the world, deserted them for us. We played to 50,000 people at least, and, had we wished it, we might be playing yet.

"After the concert was over the leader of the band of the Garde Républicain came over and asked me for the score of one 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 see 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 had played the composition superbly—but he was right: the jazz effects were missing. I took an instrument and showed him how it could be done, and he told me that his own musicians felt sure that my band had used special instruments. Indeed, some of them, afterward attending one of my rehearsals, did not believe what I had said until after they had examined the instruments used by my men.

"I have come back from France more firmly convinced than ever that negroes should write negro music. We have our own racial feeling and if we try to copy whites we will make bad copies. I noticed that the Morocco negro bands played music which had an affinity to ours. One piece, 'In Zanzibar,' I took for my band, and though white audiences seem to find it too discordant, I found it most sympathetic. We won France by playing music which was ours and not a pale imitation of others, and if we are to develop in America we must develop along our own lines. Our musicians do their best work when using negro material. Will Marion Cook, William Tires, even Harry Burleigh and Coleridge-Taylor are not truly themselves [except] in the music which expresses their race. Mr. Tires, for instance, writes charming waltzes, but the best of these have in them negro influences. The music of our race springs from the soil, and this is true today of no other race, except possibly the Russians, and it is because of this that I and all my musicians have come to love Russian music. Indeed, as far as I am concerned, it is the only music I care for outside of negro."

ALTHOUGH MUSIC IS OFTEN DISMISSED AS mere entertainment, this 1919 editorial argues that musical performances can have profound political effects. It appeared in the *Chicago Defender*, one of the country's leading black newspapers, in response to a concert by James Reese Europe and his band.

6 “Jazzing Away Prejudice”

With the ringing down of the curtain at the Auditorium last Saturday night there closed a remarkable period of band concerts. If you were not fortunate enough to attend you missed a rare treat. This band had made a wonderful record with the American expeditionary forces in France and with its jazz music had proved a source of great entertainment wherever it went. When it returned to the United States it was given a great ovation by the people of New York City, and Chicago found it equal to advance notice. It has all the artistic finish of any band that has invaded these parts in many years. We doubt seriously that Creator at his best could have furnished a better entertainment.¹ The audiences were highly responsive and rewarded each number with the most spirited applause. The closing number of the program, “In No Man’s Land,” in which the house was thrown into darkness and all the noises of the battlefield reproduced, furnished a thriller that was a fitting finale to a splendid evening’s entertainment.

We hope the swing of Europe and his band around the country will be nation wide. The most prejudiced enemy of our Race could not sit through an evening with Europe without coming away with a changed viewpoint. For he is compelled in spite of himself to see us in a new light. It is a well-known fact that the white people view us largely from the standpoint of the cook, porter, and waiter, and his limited opportunities are responsible for much of the distorted opinion held concerning us. Europe and his band are worth more to our Race than a thousand speeches from so-called Race orators and uplifters. Mere wind-jamming has never given any race material help. It may be entertaining in a way to recite to audiences of our own people in a flamboyant style the doings of the Race, but the spellbinder’s efforts, being confined almost exclusively to audiences of our own people, is of as much help in properly presenting our cause to those whom we desire most to reach as a man trying to lift himself by pulling at his own bootstraps. Experience has shown that most of our spellbinders are in it for what there is in it. The good they do is nil.

Europe and his band are demonstrating what our people can do in a field where the results are bound to be of the greatest benefit. He has the

Source: “Jazzing Away Prejudice,” *Chicago Defender*, May 10, 1919, p. 20.

¹Giuseppe Creatore (1871–1952) was a successful conductor, impresario, composer, and band leader.