

Keeping Time

Readings
in Jazz
History

Edited by
**Robert
Walser**

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Contents

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Preface vii

Acknowledgments xii

First Accounts 1

1. Sidney Bechet's Musical Philosophy 3
Walter Kingsley 5
2. "Whence Comes Jass?" *New Orleans Times-Picayune 7*
3. The Location of "Jass" *Ernest Ansermet 9*
4. A "Serious" Musician Takes Jazz Seriously *James Reese Europe 12*
5. "A Negro Explains 'Jazz'" *Chicago Defender 15*
6. "Jazzing Away Prejudice" *Jelly Roll Morton 16*
7. The "Inventor of Jazz" *Burnet Hershey 25*

The Twenties 23

8. Jazzing Around the Globe *Anne Shaw Faulkner 32*
9. "Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?" *Nicholas G. J. Ballantia-Taylor 36*
10. Jazz and African Music *Hugh C. Ernst 39*
11. The Man Who Made a Lady out of Jazz (Paul Whiteman)

12. "The Jazz Problem" *The Etude 41*

13. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" *Langston Hughes 55*

14. A Black Journalist Criticizes Jazz *Dave Peyton 57*

15. "The Caucasian Storms Harlem" *Rudolf Fisher 60*

16. The Appeal of Jazz Explained *R. W. S. Mendl 65*

The Thirties 71

17. What Is Swing? *Louis Armstrong 73*

18. Looking Back at "The Jazz Age" *Alain Locke 77*

19. Don Redman: Portrait of a Bandleader *Roi Ottley 80*

20. Defining "Hot Jazz" *Robert Goffin 82*

21. An Experience in Jazz History *John Hammond 86*

22. On the Road with Count Basie *Billie Holiday 96*

23. Jazz at Carnegie Hall *James Dugan and John Hammond 101*

24. Duke Ellington Explains Swing *Down Beat 111*

25. Jazz and Gender During the War Years

The Forties 121

26. "Red Music" *Josef Škvorčák 123*

27. "From Somewhere in France" *Charles Delauney 129*

28. Johnny Otis Remembers Lester Young *132*

29. "A People's Music" *Sidney Finkelstein 135*

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I remembered one place especially where my own crowd used to hold forth; and, hoping to find some old-timers there still, I sought it out one midnight. The old, familiar plunkety-plunk welcomed me from below as I entered. I descended the same old narrow stairs, came into the same smoke-misty basement, and found myself a chair at one of the ancient white-porcelain, mirror-smooth tables. I drew a deep breath and looked about, seeking familiar faces. "What a lot of 'fays!'" I thought, as I noticed the number of white guests. Presently I grew puzzled and began to stare, then I gaped—and gasped. I found myself wondering if this was the right place—if, indeed, this was Harlem at all. I suddenly became aware that, except for the waiters and members of the orchestra, I was the only Negro in the place.

After a while I left it and wandered about in a daze from night-club to night-club. I tried the Nest, Small's, Connie's Inn, the Capitol, Happy's, the Cotton Club. There was no mistake; my discovery was real and was repeatedly confirmed. No wonder my old crowd was not to be found in any of them. The best of Harlem's black cabarets have changed their names and turned white.

Such a discovery renders a moment's recollection irresistible. As irresistible as were the cabarets themselves to me seven or eight years ago. Just out of college in a town where cabarets were something only read about. A year of graduate work ahead. A Summer of rest at hand. Cabarets night after night, and one after another. There was no cover-charge then, and a fifteen-cent bottle of Whistle lasted an hour. It was just after the war—the heroes were home—cabarets were the thing.

How the Lybia prospered in those happy days! It was the gathering place of the swellest Harlem set: if you didn't go to the Lybia, why, my dear, you just didn't belong. The people you saw at church in the morning you met at the Lybia at night. What romance in those war-tinged days and nights! Officers from Camp Upton, with pretty maids from Brooklyn! Gay lieutenants, handsome captains—all whirling the lively onestep. Poor non-coms completely ignored; what sensible girl wanted a corporal or even a sergeant? That white, old-fashioned house, standing alone in 138th street, near the corner of Seventh avenue—doomed to be torn down a few months thence—how it shook with the dancing and laughter of the dark merry crowds!

But the first place really popular with my friends was a Chinese restaurant in 136th street, which had been known as Hayne's Café and then became the Oriental. It occupied an entire house of three stories, and had carpeted floors and a quiet, superior air. There was excellent food and incredibly good tea and two unusual entertainers: a Cuban girl, who could so vary popular airs that they sounded like real music, and a slender little "brown" with a voice of silver and a way of singing a song that made you forget your food. One could dance in the Oriental if one liked, but one danced to a piano only, and wound one's way between linen-clad tables over velvety, noiseless floors.

Here we gathered: Fritz Pollard, All-American halfback, selling Negro stock to prosperous Negro physicians; Henry Greamer and Turner Layton, who had written "After You've Gone" and a dozen more songs, and were going to

OUR COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF THE ROARING

Twenties is the Jazz Age of urban cabarets, indulgence, consumption, and scandalous dancing. Yet the national prohibition of alcoholic beverages from 1919 to 1933 destroyed a number of successful cabaret owners who couldn't survive without profits from booze, opening the way for bootleggers and gangsters to take over. The Cotton Club, perhaps the most famous of the Harlem clubs, reopened for a white clientele in 1923, and by 1925, white audiences were going north to Harlem in substantial numbers, attracted by easier access to alcohol and the "exotic" spectacles black entertainers staged for them.¹ These shows preserved many of the stereotypes of minstrelsy: black characters were depicted as uninhibited, uncivilized, inferior but naturally in touch with a *joie de vivre* white patrons felt was missing from their own lives. Yet black women were presented as glamorous and desirable, and the clubs provided steady work for some of the most talented musicians in the country—Duke Ellington's five-year stay at the Cotton Club (from 1927) furnished him with stable personnel and varied challenges that helped him to develop as a composer.

The unexpected transition of Harlem nightclubs from black to white audiences is the subject of this essay by Rudolf Fisher (1897–1934), a black radiologist, writer, and musician. As a writer, Fisher devoted much thought to the position of the displaced southern Negro in Harlem, though he himself was not from the South. This piece was published in 1927, after Fisher had returned to New York from Washington, D.C., where he had completed his M.D. in 1924. It appeared in the *American Mercury*, which one historian has characterized as "the bible of dissident college youths [and] white musicians who adopted black jazz as a religion."² Most of the essay is devoted to Fisher's reminiscences of the summer of 1919: he had just graduated from Brown University and he devoted his summer months to enjoying the Harlem cabarets before the white influx—before anyone had imagined there could ever be one. He closes with some thoughts about just what this cross-cultural attraction might mean and portend.

It might not have been such a jolt had my five years' absence from Harlem been spent otherwise. But the study of medicine includes no course in cabaretting; and, anyway, the Negro cabarets in Washington, where I studied, are all uncompromisingly black. Accordingly I was entirely unprepared for what I found when I returned to Harlem recently.

Source: Rudolf Fisher, "The Caucasian Storms Harlem," *The American Mercury* 11 (1927), pp. 493–98.

¹See Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984 [1981]) and David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989 [1981]).

²Grover Sales, *Jazz: America's Classical Music* (New York: Da Capo, 1992 [1984]), p. 94.

write "Strut, Miss Lizzie"; Paul Robeson, All-American end, on the point of tackling law, quite unaware that the stage would intervene; Preacher Harry Bragg, Harvard Jimmie MacLendon and half a dozen others. Here at a little table, just inside the door, Bert Williams had supper every night, and afterward sometimes joined us upstairs and sang songs with us and lampooned the Actors' Equity Association, which had barred him because of his color. Never did white guests come to the Oriental except as guests of Negroes. But the manager soon was stricken with a psychosis of some sort, became a black Jew, grew himself a bushy, square-cut beard, donned a skull-cap and abandoned the Oriental. And so we were robbed of our favorite resort, and thereafter became mere rounders.



Such places, those real Negro cabarets that we met in the course of our rounds! There was Edmonds's in Fifth avenue at 130th street. It was a sure-enough honky-tonk, occupying the cellar of a saloon. It was the social center of what was then, and still is, Negro Harlem's kitchen. Here a tall brown-skin girl, unmistakably the one guaranteed in the song to make a preacher lay his Bible down, used to sing and dance her own peculiar numbers, vesting them with her own originality. She was known simply as Ethel, and was a genuine drawing-card. She knew her importance, too. Other girls wore themselves ragged trying to rise above the inattentive din of conversation, and soon, literally, yelled themselves hoarse; eventually they lost whatever music there was in their voices and acquired that throaty roughness which is so frequent among blues singers, and which, though admired as characteristically African, is as a matter of fact nothing but a form of chronic laryngitis. Other girls did these things, but not Ethel. She took it easy. She would stride with great leisure and self-assurance to the center of the floor, stand there with a half-contemptuous nonchalance, and wait. All would become silent at once. Then she'd begin her song, genuine blues, which, for all their humorous lines, emanated tragedy and heartbreak:

Woke up this mawnin'
The day was dawnin'
And I was sad and blue, so blue, Lord—
Didn' have nobody
To tell my troubles to—

It was Ethel who first made popular the song "Tryin' to Teach My Good Man Right from Wrong," in the slow, meditative measure in which she complained:

I'm gettin' sick and tired of my railroad man—
I'm gettin' sick and tired of my railroad man—
Can't get him when I want him—
I get him when I can.

It wasn't long before this song-bird escaped her dingy cage. Her name is a vaudeville attraction now, and she uses it all—Ethel Waters. Is there anyone who hasn't heard her sing "Shake That Thing!"?

A second place was Connor's in 135th street near Lenox avenue. It was livelier, less languidly sensuous, and easier to breathe in than Edmonds's. Like the latter, it was in a basement, reached by the typical narrow, head-long stairway. One of the girls there specialized in the Jelly-Roll song, and mad habitués used to fling petitions of greenbacks at her feet—pretty nimble feet they were, too—when she sang that she loved 'em but she had to turn 'em down. Over in a corner a group of fays would huddle and grin and think they were having a wild time. Slumming. But they were still very few in those days.

And there was the Oriental, which borrowed the name that the former Hayne's Café had abandoned. This was beyond Lenox avenue on the south side of 135th street. An upstairs place, it was nevertheless as dingy as any of the cellars, and the music fairly fought its way through the babble and smoke to one's ears, suffering in transit weird and incredible distortion. The prize pet here was a slim, little lad, unbelievably black beneath his high-brown powder, wearing a Mexican bandit costume with a bright-colored head-dress and sash. I see him now, poor kid, in all his glory, shimmying for enraptured women, who marveled at the perfect control of his voluntary abdominal tremors. He used to let the women reach out and put their hands on his sash to palpate those tremors—for a quarter.

Finally, there was the Garden of Joy, an open-air cabaret between 138th and 139th streets in Seventh avenue, occupying a plateau high above the sidewalk—a large, well-laid, smooth wooden floor with tables and chairs and a tinny orchestra, all covered by a propped-up roof, that resembled an enormous lampshade, directing bright light downward and outward. Not far away the Abyssinian Church used to hold its Summer camp-meetings in a great round circus-tent. Night after night there would arise the mingled strains of blues and spirituals, those peculiarly Negro forms of song, the one secular and the other religious, but both born of wretchedness in travail, both with their roarings of exultation and sinkings of despair. I used to wonder if God, hearing them both, found any real distinction.

There were the Lybia, then, and Hayne's, Connor's, the Oriental, Edmonds's and the Garden of Joy, each distinctive, standing for a type, some living up to their names, others living down to them, but all predominantly black. Regularly I made the rounds among these places and saw only incidental white people. I have seen them occasionally in numbers, but such parties were out on a lark. They weren't in their natural habitat and they often weren't any too comfortable.

³Ethel Waters (1896–1977) grew up around Philadelphia and developed a lighter singing style than southern blues singers such as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey. Her theatrical flair helped her to cross over from vaudeville and the nightclubs to the white-dominated mainstream of popular music and a successful acting career. Her early recordings included sexy blues, but "Stormy Weather" became her signature song.

But what of Barron's, you say? Certainly they were at home there. Yes, I know about Barron's. I have been turned away from Barron's because I was too dark to be welcome. I have been a member of a group that was told, "No more room." when we could see plenty of room. Negroes were never actually wanted in Barron's save to work. Dark skins were always discouraged or barred. In short, the fact about Barron's was this: it simply wasn't a Negro cabaret; it was a cabaret run by Negroes for whites. It wasn't even on the lists of those who lived in Harlem—they'd no more think of going there than of going to the Winter Garden Roof. But these other places were Negro through and through. Negroes supported them, not merely in now-and-then parties, but steadily, night after night.

Now, however, the situation is reversed. It is I who occasionally and white people who go night after night. Time and again, since I've returned to live in Harlem, I've been one of a party of four Negroes who went to this or that Harlem cabaret, and on each occasion we've been the only Negro guests in the place. The managers don't hesitate to say that it is upon these predominant white patrons that they depend for success. These places therefore are no longer mine but theirs. Not that I'm barred, any more than they were seven or eight years ago. Once known, I'm even welcome, just as some of them used to be. But the complexion of the place is theirs, not mine. I? Why, I am actually stared at, I frequently feel uncomfortable and out of place, and when I go out on the floor to dance I am lost in a sea of white faces. As another observer has put it to me since, time was when white people went to Negro cabarets to see how Negroes acted; now Negroes go to these same cabarets to see how white people act.



Some think it's just a fad. White people have always more or less sought Negro entertainment as diversion. . . . But suppose it is a fad—to say that explains nothing. How came the fad? What occasions the focusing of attention on this particular thing—rounds up and gathers these seasonal whims, and centers them about the Negro? Cabarets are peculiar, mind you. They're not like theatres and concert halls. You don't just go to a cabaret and sit back and wait to be entertained. You get out on the floor and join the pow-wow and help entertain yourself. Granted that white people have long enjoyed the Negro entertainment as a diversion, is it not something different, something more, when they bodily throw themselves into Negro entertainment in cabarets? "Now Negroes go to their own cabarets to see how white people act."

And what do we see? Why, we see them actually playing Negro games. I watch them in that epidemic Negroism, the Charleston. I look on and envy them. They camel and fish-tail and turkey, they geche and black-bottom and scronch, they skate and buzzard and mess-around—and they do them all better than I! This interest in the Negro is an active and participating interest. It is almost as if a traveler from the North stood watching an African tribe-dance, then suddenly found himself swept wildly into it, caught in its tidal rhythm.

Willingly would I be an outsider in this if I could know that I read it aright—that out of this change in the old familiar ways some finer-thing may come. Is this interest akin to that of the Virginians on the veranda of a plantation's big-house—sitting genuinely spellbound as they hear the lugubrious strains floating up from the Negro quarters? Is it akin to that of the African explorer, Stanley, leaving a village far behind, but halting in spite of himself to catch the boom of its distant drum? Is it significant of basic human responses, the effect of which, once admitted, will extend far beyond cabarets? Maybe these Nordics at last have tuned in on our wave-length. Maybe they are at last learning to speak our language.

IN THE FIRST BOOK ABOUT JAZZ PUBLISHED in Great Britain (in 1927), R. W. S. Mendl attempted to account for the immense and sudden popularity of jazz. Unlike so many musical journalists of the time, Mendl believed that a responsible critic could not simply dismiss a form of music that so many people cared about: it was imperative to understand the music's appeal. Mendl was amazed that jazz had crossed so many national, racial, and class boundaries, but instead of simply proclaiming it "universal," he tried to analyze how jazz was able to produce different meanings for different audiences. While he flirted with "novelty" and "instinct" as contradictory explanations for jazz's success, his primary interest was in locating meanings historically and socially, which led him to reject the highbrow/lowbrow split that many people considered natural.

16 The Appeal of Jazz Explained

Jazz has secured and still retains a more widespread vogue among its contemporary listeners than any other form of music ever known. Its general currency among the black people of the American continent, from which it sprang, would alone account for a vast number of jazz lovers. But the interesting feature of its popularity is the way in which it has attracted the white folk of the United States, the masses of the British Isles, the peoples of practically every country in Europe, of Canada, of Australia, of New Zealand and South America. In every quarter of the globe where white races dwell, jazz has obtained a footing: only among more distant Orientals—over whom no Western music can be expected to exert a spell—has it failed to make its mark. But it has penetrated to Turkey, and is now much favored in Constantinople. This syncopated dance music of to-day strikes

Source: R. W. S. Mendl, *The Appeal of Jazz* (London: Philip Allan & Co. Ltd., 1927), pp. 80–85, 92–108, 186–87.