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Jazz and American modernism

Approaching the topic of jazz and modernism, one might begin with the emergence of bebop, which was routinely called “modernist” in the 1940s. While the debate about bop replicated aspects of earlier disputes about literary and artistic modernism, the parochial nature of the debate (largely confined to fans, journalists, and record collectors) insulates it from the more compelling issues associated with modernism. An alternative approach to the topic might enumerate encounters with, and opinions about, jazz by recognized modernists. Ezra Pound, for instance, backed George Antheil’s concert hall amalgamation of jazz with futurism, even as he disparaged the piano as an agent of jazz (confusing it with ragtime). But most of the modernists had little interest in jazz, and to detect fugitive traces of their encounter with it one would have to scrape deep recesses of the biographical barrel (and, in most cases, the evidence would illustrate a larger pattern of Negrophilia or Negrophobia, adding little to the study of jazz). A third approach, adopted here, is to regard jazz as a conspicuous feature of modernity as it was manifested during and after the Great War. In *that* capacity, jazz unquestionably informed modernism as intellectual challenge, sensory provocation, and social texture.

Around World War I, because of widespread uncertainty about what it was – a kind of music, an attitude to life, a mannerism, cheap vulgarity, or a spirited emotional impulse – the social career of jazz was launched with opportunities for interested parties on all sides of the issue to hold forth. “The word ‘jazz,’ in its progress toward respectability, has meant first sex, then dancing, then music. It is associated with a state of nervous stimulation, not unlike that of big cities behind the lines of war.”¹ F. Scott Fitzgerald’s famous pronouncement has served as the decisive link between jazz and modernism for seventy years. Although it is no longer tenable to associate jazz with anything he meant by the term, nonetheless, he pinpoints the controversy that made jazz appear responsible for upending genteel America with its Gilded Age proprieties. The transit of American womanhood from rosy cheeked

Gibson Girl to bobcut flapper was brought about (so it appeared) by the ceaseless incitement to sensual dancing by “jazz” (whatever that was); and moral watchdogs assumed sex was the allegorical gist and practical outcome. In the milieu of 1920 – haunted by the Red Menace, the increasing visibility of blacks in cultural life, and the emancipation of women that combined suffrage with the specter of sexual liberation – jazz was thought to incite licentious abandon. But if jazz was merely distasteful to some – “a low streak in man’s tastes that has not yet come out in civilization’s wash”² – for others its transgressions were a political menace, an “expression of protest against law and order, the bolshevik element of license striving for expression in music.”³ Even fans might speak of a hot solo as “going Bolshevik.” The abandon associated with performative mannerisms (particularly in hokum and novelty acts) could not help but signify lack of dignity. It was also widely assumed that black musicians had no formal training, and improvisation was regarded as the last resort of those who could not read music. Musicians were suspected of improprieties in playing their instruments, just as the very presence of novelty instruments in the “spasm bands” was suggestive of illicit activities, and after Prohibition became law in 1919 jazz and speakeasies were virtually synonymous.

Insofar as jazz was thought to be characteristically American in some approved sense, it could be tolerated and even pinched on its upstart cheek with a twinkle in the parental eye condoning youthful escapades. Incarnating unbuttoned postwar swagger, jazz could appear “very American in its snap, speed, smartness and cosmopolitan character.”⁴ Jazz was the right music for an energetic nation, and in the most positive spirit, it signaled a coming-of-age on the world stage – “a genuine contribution to the gaiety of nations,”⁵ as an English admirer put it, possibly even “the National Anthem of Civilization.”⁶ For Europeans, the Hollywood movies, cars, razor blades, women’s fashions, chewing gum, skyscrapers, and jazz-bands (hyphenated in Europe) were ingredients in the vogue for an Americanism synonymous with modernity. Le Corbusier, the leading exponent of modernism in architecture, declared the New York skyline “hot jazz in stone and steel.”⁷ But others were wary about a music that could be equated with industry. H. L. Mencken pungently called jazz the “sound of riveting”⁸ and Waldo Frank hammered the point home:

Jazz syncopates the lathe-lunge, jazz shatters the piston-thrust, jazz shreds the hum of wheels, jazz is the spark and sudden lilt centrifugal to their incessant pulse. Jazz is a moment’s gaiety, after which the spirit droops, cheated and unnurtured. The song is not an escape from the Machine to limpid depths of the soul. It is the Machine itself! It is the music of a revolt that fails. Its voice is the mimicry of our industrial havoc.⁹

Even proponents of jazz recognized that commercialism was a liability, subjecting positive aspects of the music to ceaseless repetition as well as propagating saccharine varieties more amenable to public consumption. Although the stock market crash reduced record sales in the US from 128 million in 1926 to six million in 1932, by 1934 the complaint of “overproduction” was still being made.

Soon after Dvořák’s observation in 1893 that American music, to be organically original, must be based on Negro folk tunes, cultural nationalists faced a racial quandary, as ragtime became all the rage. Genteel gatekeepers might accord black spirituals some respect, but for white composers to ground themselves in an inherently alien idiom seemed artificial (if not grotesque, given the pervasiveness of minstrelsy on the popular stage). Besides, to what extent could “the folk” consist of a denigrated minority? When ragtime was succeeded by jazz, the problem of folk music persisted, adding the exacerbating element of a commercialism so conspicuous and invasive that one might question whether any “folk” had ever been involved with jazz at all. Could folk music become commercialized without compromising its integrity? Was jazz authentic folk music, or merely accented with folk elements? In many quarters such questions were beside the point, given that Dvořák and many others had singled out the “sorrow songs” as indubitably authentic, and the prestige of spirituals invariably relegated secular music like jazz to inferior status, even for some of its advocates. Furthermore, surveys and collections of black folk music were often at pains to demonstrate the authenticity of rural folkways, implying that jazz was really a commercialized urban music with only a superficial resemblance to its country cousins (including the blues – which had negative class connotations). Although not noted at the time, jazz was the first thoroughly cosmopolitan music of African-Americans. Its diffusion pattern has traditionally been charted from New Orleans to Chicago to New York, with Kansas City later becoming a magnet for the “territory” bands (with Los Angeles grudgingly conceded as another important site). But in terms of initial impact, Paris was also of singular importance – not only as a reminder of the fact that jazz was an international phenomenon, but because so much of the debate about jazz was complicated by traditional Eurocentricism of the American intelligentsia.

While jazz was unquestionably American, serious attention to it was European. Dvořák’s earlier validation of black music in general was narrowed to jazz by visiting composers like Milhaud and Ravel, while European conductors and virtuosi residing in America gave further sanction to its musical viability. For cultural nationalists, jazz was tainted not because it was black but because it was embraced by European modernists, many of whom had earlier been enthused about ragtime. Debussy, for instance, had appropriated

rag rhythms, though Americans found his unusual harmonies more disturbing. Before the Great War, modernism was typically associated with forward-looking cultural nationalists like those associated with *Seven Arts* more amenable to a pluralist future. Editor James Oppenheim, observing the prevalence of popular music in American life, bemoaned creeping commercialism while resisting an elitist response, emphasizing instead the need for “prophecy and philosophy and vulgarity in art.”¹⁰ Writing in a *Seven Arts* symposium on ragtime in 1917, Hiram Moderwell detected in the music “something Nietzschean in its implicit philosophy that all the world’s a dance.”¹¹ Ragtime did indeed set the world dancing. Despite condemnation by the American Federation of Musicians in 1901, ragtime had become the primary agent for the domestic boom in piano sales. After 1910, when the Turkey Trot and similar dances swept the country and then the world, ragtime extended its reign from the parlor to the dance hall. From the eighteenth-century minuet to the nineteenth-century waltz, the introduction of new dance forms incited suspicions of libertine opportunism. Ragtime, however, carried the extra weight of race relations. Nonetheless, ragtime established more dignified career opportunities for African-Americans than had previously been available in public life, facilitating professional opportunities on stage and in the touring “syncopated orchestras” for which the transition to jazz was merely a change of label to meet public expectations.

Terminological uncertainty was rampant in the transition from rags to jazz because, in social terms, the distinction was unclear. Between them, ragtime and jazz pioneered the infusion of dominant white culture by African-Americans, particularly leisure activities like social dancing, cabaret and show music. It is important to stress the role of ragtime during the period when Americans were introduced to modernism. The famous Armory Show occurred as the nation was in thrall to Irving Berlin’s hit tunes like “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” and “Everybody’s Doin’ It Now” (Tin Pan Alley homages to ragtime, not rags themselves). That is to say, the thematic aura of popular culture was unavoidably ragtime as the crowds surged through Armory Hall, gazing in bewilderment at the optical assault engineered by French painters (often several decades earlier). Among the numerous American artists transformed under its impact from realists to modernists, Stuart Davis recalled that the Armory Show challenged him with “an objective order in these works which I felt was lacking in my own. It gave me the same kind of excitement I got from the numerical precisions of the Negro piano players in the Negro saloons, and I resolved that I would quite definitely have to become a ‘modern’ artist.”¹²

The perceptual bewilderment occasioned by Armory Show pieces like Marcel Duchamp’s “Nude Descending a Staircase” presaged the response

to jazz at the end of the war, when the public was confronted by what seemed an aural onslaught commensurate with the cognitive dissonance of modern art. What initially seemed the acoustic counterpart to Duchamp's "explosion in a shingle factory"¹³ proved easier to assimilate once the initial novelty wore off and the apparent barrage of noise turned out to adhere to danceable measures. Assimilation of noise being relative, many refused to acknowledge that jazz was anything more than calculated rudeness. In Europe, where the Futurists advocated an "art of noise" and the Dadaists had recently pioneered a repertoire of activities for delivering noise with enviable precision, jazz was understood to be part of an avant-garde continuum. In its homeland, by contrast, jazz was greeted as an unprecedented torrent of commercial licentiousness ravaging the population with the same viral insistence as the influenza epidemic of 1919.

Ishmael Reed shrewdly depicts jazz in *Mumbo Jumbo*, his novel of 1920s Harlem, as the Jes Grew virus, "For if the Jazz Age is year for year the Essences and Symptoms of the times, then Jes Grew is the germ making it rise yeast-like across the American plain."¹⁴ If jazz was a symptom, what was the disease? If it was an essence, what was there to be proud of or inspired by? The choice between symptom and disease mirrored a generational divide rendered conspicuous by war as a historical threshold. Born in 1896, F. Scott Fitzgerald was not so much prescient as in step with his generation by naming his books *Flappers and Philosophers* (1920) and *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922). His literary generation included John Dos Passos (born 1896), Hart Crane and Ernest Hemingway (both 1899), Thomas Wolfe (1900), Langston Hughes and John Steinbeck (1902); while in the music world there were Sidney Bechet and Fletcher Henderson (1897), George Gershwin and Paul Robeson (1898), Duke Ellington and Hoagy Carmichael, (1899), Louis Armstrong, Aaron Copland, George Antheil, and Kurt Weill (1900), Earl Hines and Bix Beiderbecke (1903), Fats Waller and Coleman Hawkins (1904). Except for Jelly Roll Morton and King Oliver, born like Ezra Pound in 1885, this was the generation that made the 1920s musically roar.

For those of songwriter Hoagy Carmichael's generation, jazz and modernism were variants of the same experience; somehow, the music of African-Americans and the European avant-garde were both intuitively accessible. Living in a small Indiana town, Carmichael heard about Dada from a fellow student, and met soldiers "who had been to Europe, and they talked of jazz now, right out in the open, not ashamed of it. They told me about the tremendous popularity of jazz in Europe during the war and what it was doing over there."¹⁵ He and buddy Bix Beiderbecke, the first white jazz icon, excitedly listened to Rimsky-Korsakov and Stravinsky records together. Whether his memories are accurate or not, it is significant that Hoagy Carmichael

portrays a basic reciprocity between jazz and modernism, since both represented for a white Midwesterner the allure of the renegade, the dissident, the upstart.

For blacks as well as the legion of immigrant Jews, on the other hand, being an outsider was a given, and in the cultural pluralism of the postwar years it could be an opportunity. Jewish prominence in the consolidation of the Hollywood film studios is well known, as is the revitalization of the Broadway musical by former Tin Pan Alley songwriters like Irving Berlin and George Gershwin. A significant if less noted role was played by Jews finally breaking into the closed world of Yankee publishing like Alfred Knopf, Horace Liveright, and the Boni brothers, whose firms produced the lion's share of literary modernism as well as the Harlem Renaissance. Wanting a journal as an extension of his publishing house, Knopf engaged H. L. Mencken to create *American Mercury*, in which some of the Chicago jazzmen found their musical tastes mirrored in prose. "That *Mercury* really got to be the Austin High Gang's Bible," recalled Mezzrow. "It looked to us like Mencken was yelling the same message in his magazine that we were trying to get across in our music; his words were practically lyrics to our hot jazz."¹⁶

In the sweet/hot dichotomy that was to dominate the early years of jazz, the distinction extended to other terms with more conspicuous values attached: restraint versus abandon, civilized versus primitive, sophisticated versus untutored. White and black dance band leaders alike were concerned with the tawdry image conjured by the term jazz, working hard to counter it with all the accoutrements of professionalism, from band tuxedos to a polished ensemble sound, along with a repertoire of waltzes and "sweet" numbers. For band leaders aspiring to loftier venues, the issue of class was more to the point than race. The public demeanor of the predominantly "cool" dance band capable of a few judiciously timed "hot" breaks reflected the mores of middle-class permissiveness which had an appointed (and strictly delimited) place for sowing wild oats. This middle American dominance of the musical marketplace became even more apparent when "jazz" could be dropped altogether in favor of "swing," a term untainted by association with bordellos and gin mills.

Another issue of lasting importance to jazz was the question of musicianship. American symphony orchestras were dominated by Europeans (particularly Germans) well into the twentieth century, and the need for musical approval from abroad hampered efforts to legitimize serious American composition. Wartime nationalism had the unpremeditated consequence of momentarily tarnishing European cultural authority, and lending a certain credibility to indigenous music. What emerged in the form of jazz was not what the musical establishment expected, but its source in the

African-American minority went unnoticed except by the more righteous moral crusaders. Of greater concern was its lowbrow aspect, and after several years of an uninhibited jazz binge provoked escalating public outcry, its reputation was in need of the ultimate sweetener. Debate about jazz took a serious turn in the wake of Paul Whiteman's famous New York recital, "An Experiment in Modern Music," on February 12, 1924, in which he sought not only to establish jazz in the concert hall but to vindicate his belief that the rough edges of the music represented a passing phase. It helped immeasurably that Whiteman had commissioned a work from Tin Pan Alley veteran George Gershwin. Thus Whiteman's "Experiment" succeeded with the public and the critics, mainly on the strength of *Rhapsody in Blue*, vaulting its composer into national prominence and lending credibility to Whiteman's legislative claim to be the King of Jazz. Jazz historians have invariably chosen the Duke and the Count over the King as authentic jazz royalty, but Whiteman's role, like that of white men in general, is central to the intersection of jazz with modernism. While debate about jazz was rampant in the press from the moment the Original Dixieland Jazz Band recorded its million-seller in 1917, Whiteman's "Experiment" changed the nature of the discourse, first by soliciting highbrow response, and second by placing jazz in a more general debate about *modern* music. These terms readily, but not invariably, abstracted jazz from its black roots. For the next two years the pages of *Vanity Fair* vigorously chronicled not only jazz but the black presence in all the arts, and debate spilled over into *American Mercury*, *The Nation*, *Harper's*, and *The New Republic*, among other highbrow weeklies.

Before going on to assess this debate, it is useful to note certain synchronies with modernism. As jazz became a serious subject, a veritable cascade of significant publications made modernism recognizably American. In 1925 alone the following novels appeared: *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Manhattan Transfer* by John Dos Passos, *Dark Laughter* by Sherwood Anderson, *An American Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser, *The Making of Americans* by Gertrude Stein, and *The Professor's House* by Willa Cather, not to mention Ernest Hemingway's story collection *In Our Time*, followed the next year by *The Sun Also Rises*. It was not all fiction, either. *In the American Grain* by William Carlos Williams also appeared in 1925, along with H. D.'s *Collected Poems*, T. S. Eliot's *Poems 1909–1925* and Ezra Pound's *Draft of XVI Cantos* (both titles, however, were published abroad), e. e. cummings's *♣* and *XLI Poems*, and Robinson Jeffers's *Roan Stallion*. Marianne Moore's *Observations* appeared in 1924. Pound's collected shorter poems, *Personae*, came out in 1926, along with Hart Crane's *White Buildings* and cummings's *Is 5*. Having featured a black lead in *The Emperor Jones* in 1920, Eugene O'Neill boldly paired Paul Robeson with a white actress in *All God's Chillun*

Got Wings in 1924 – both signal events in James Weldon Johnson’s celebration, *Black Manhattan*. In December 1925 Alain Locke’s anthology *The New Negro* was published, preceded by Countee Cullen’s *Color* and James Weldon Johnson’s *Book of American Negro Spirituals*, and a few months before Langston Hughes’s *The Weary Blues* appeared, by which point the Harlem Renaissance was in full throttle.

Paul Whiteman is usually consigned to a negligible place in jazz history, even though his historical significance is unquestionable. Hindsight presumes that only a white man could dominate what passed for jazz in the Jazz Age, which may or may not be true. But for his untimely death, a black band leader may easily have been Whiteman’s rival. In any case, James Reese Europe merits attention as the single most influential agent in the dissemination of jazz before it was jazz. After a sound musical training under the tutelage of Dvořák’s black protégé Harry Burleigh, Europe organized the Clef Club Orchestra, the first black ensemble to play Carnegie Hall (1912). His subsequent association with Vernon and Irene Castle (1913–1915) made Europe famous as the musical impresario behind the prewar international dance craze. Serving in the military, Europe led the Harlem Hell Fighters, whose concerts had a tremendous impact in France. Their return to New York was greeted by a million people, and he promptly signed a record contract as “Jazz King” before his murder at the hands of a band member in 1919. Considering that musicians like Armstrong and Bechet were not recorded until 1923, and in light of his fame, if Europe had lived the entire course of jazz might have been different, not least because its “King” might have been black. By the time Whiteman laid claim to the title, Europe had been dead five years and everything that was known by white people as jazz derived from other whites. Even Whiteman’s name has been ridiculed, so some lexical justice is served by recalling the impact on both sides of the Atlantic of a black pioneer named *Europe*.

In 1921 the first musical performed, produced, written, and directed by blacks was a Broadway hit. *Shuffle Along* – written by ragtime composer and pianist Eubie Blake with Noble Sissle, a veteran of Europe’s band – launched the careers of Florence Mills, Paul Robeson, and Josephine Baker. Baker was one of many cast and pit band members who ended up staying in Europe when the show toured there to great acclaim in 1923, becoming resident purveyors of a “jazz” that grew increasingly out of touch with the rapid changes the music was undergoing back in the States. Meanwhile, the American musical establishment, being Eurocentric in outlook, began to take note of the fact that serious composers like Milhaud, Stravinsky, Hindemith, and Ravel were keen on jazz. It was while studying in Paris that Aaron Copland was exposed to jazz as a potential ingredient of American art music.

Europeans approved, while the response of a fellow American is indicative: “but that’s *whorehouse* music!”¹⁷ In an American context saturated with Puritan instincts and the Protestant work ethic, the Storyville origin of jazz – not to mention its gangster patronage in the bootleg era – was inconveniently near at hand. It was one thing to set aside the cork traditions of minstrelsy and acknowledge the thespian skills of a Paul Robeson or the musical integrity of the spirituals, but for a white man to drag “whorehouse music” into the concert hall was another thing altogether. In the circumstance – and as a prelude to Whiteman’s own concert – the most that could be expected was to slip a few “jazz” tunes into a classical song recital, as Eva Gauthier did in 1923, mixing modernist work by Schoenberg, Bartok, and Hindemith with some tunes by Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, and George Gershwin, who accompanied her on piano for these numbers.

Against this background, then, Whiteman’s “Experiment in Modern Music” was a real experiment, and, as with most experiments, the results were not immediately apparent. By early 1925, however, *Vanity Fair* was routinely covering black America as cultural chic. Carl Van Vechten, self-appointed impresario of Harlem for downtown sophisticates, published numerous articles on black music, and introduced Gershwin in “An American Composer Who is Writing Notable Music in the Jazz Idiom.” He also presented Langston Hughes to the public along with four of his poems. Virgil Thomson, presumably on the strength of his musical analysis of jazz for *American Mercury*, also became a frequent contributor to *Vanity Fair*, beginning with “How Modern Music Gets That Way.” Mocking musical establishment pompousness in the May 1925 issue, Thomson recommended jazzing the classics in the spirit of Dada. But by June he was lamenting “The Cult of Jazz” as “just another form of highbrowism, like the worship of discord or the worship of Brahms.”¹⁸ Jazz was indeed becoming fashionable: in *The New Yorker*’s “Talk of the Town” it was noted that, with classical virtuosos Heifetz, Paderewski, and Godowsky among its fans, jazz was no longer a parvenu. Although Thomson was skeptical of jazz as fashion, he respected its roots, wisely predicting that “Probably the best negro music will always come from the negroes themselves” (54). As for the immediate concert season, he not only observed the lapse of the “high-brow jazz” fad, but attributed Whiteman’s ascendancy to a “cult of Victorianism.”¹⁹ In less than six months, then, Thomson had gone from being an advocate of jazzing the classics to lamenting how much “jazzing” the classics were doing, culminating in his dismissal of Whiteman for not doing either the classics or jazz any good.

In his autobiography, Virgil Thomson appreciatively recalled *Vanity Fair* as having “proved that an organ for advertising luxury products is a good

place to show far-out culture.”²⁰ A case in point is the May 1925 issue in which Thomson advocated musical Dada. Also in this issue were “Women in the Arts” by Dorothy Richardson, “What, Exactly, is Modern?” by Aldous Huxley, poems by e. e. cummings, and “Is the Realistic Theater Obsolete?” by John Dos Passos – the occasion being the success of John Howard Lawson’s *Processional: A Jazz Symphony of American Life*, unflatteringly characterized by George Jean Nathan as “an indifferent work in what may be called hoochie-coochie form.”²¹ Premiering in January at the Theatre Guild, Lawson’s play had not only been a success but also a public event, drawing a crowd of over 700 to a public debate on its merits – and, by extension, on the merits of jazz. It received coverage in several issues of *Vanity Fair*, including a full-page photo of its star with a white saxophonist and a black guitarist. “In the picture above,” the caption proposed, “you see Miss Walker with a part of the jazz band which functions in the theatre of Mr. Lawson in the same way as did the chorus in the theatre of Sophocles.”²² In Dos Passos’s portentous conclusion, “*Processional* is the Uncle Tom’s Cabin of the new American Theatre.”²³ *Vanity Fair* implicitly rendered fashionable everything it touched, and it was not only Van Vechten who led the fashion parade of Negrophilia. Mexican stylist Covarrubia sprinkled its pages with the caricatures that have since become enduring images of the Harlem Renaissance.

In its support of the Harlem vogue, *Vanity Fair* mixed fashion with serious reflection. Coverage of the Jazz Age in Mencken’s *American Mercury* was less partisan, more sober, but also more divided inasmuch as it consisted largely of shadow combat between Daniel Gregory Mason and Henry O. Osgood (a Whiteman booster and author of the first American book devoted to jazz). Mason was the starched collar of Yankee establishment insularity, waging a lifelong battle against declining musical tastes, for which both jazz and modernism were to blame. “Stravinsky as Symptom,” published in the April 1925 issue of *American Mercury*, epitomizes Mason’s resentment. Jazz, “the doggerel of music,” is merely “a monotonous repetition of short stereotyped figures. For this reason it is popular with listless, easily distracted people.”²⁴ Mason recognized these short, stereotyped figures from elsewhere: namely, “the so-called ultra-modernist composers, headed by Stravinsky” (466). Many in the American music establishment shared Mason’s concern that classical composers might abandon traditional craft in an opportunistic bid for immediate popularity. In Europe, by contrast, the jazz influence was welcomed as a necessary phase in the revitalization of serious music, and the younger American composers who lived abroad adopted this perspective.

In November, 1925, Aaron Copland's *Music for Theatre* premiered, and his highly successful career was inaugurated with a patently jazz-based composition. Cultural credentials were abundant in Copland's case, having studied in France during the heyday of Parisian enthusiasm for jazz. For Daniel Gregory Mason and Henry Ford, people like Copland and Gershwin were evidence of a Jewish conspiracy to "Negrotize" American culture. But for others, Copland was just what the world of serious music had been waiting for: the truly modernized native son for whom jazz was an available idiom to be sampled without exaggerated claims. The jazz elements persisted in Copland's *Piano Concerto*, premiering in January 1927. Then, after a brief dalliance with modernist dissonance, Copland went on to forge the idiomatic populism of *Appalachian Spring*, and his jazz modernism receded. The most explosive intersection of modernist dissonance with jazz in 1925 was being undertaken in Paris by expatriate George Antheil – the last of Ezra Pound's many "discoveries" – with his *Ballet mécanique* and *Jazz Symphony*. Antheil was lionized in Paris for being the "bad boy of music" (as he later titled his autobiography). Originally called "Message to Mars," the composer settled for *Ballet mécanique* because it sounded "brutal, contemporary, hard-boiled, symbolic of the spiritual exhaustion, the superathletic, non-sentimental period commencing 'The Long Armistice'."²⁵ When the work was performed (along with his *Jazz Symphony*) at Carnegie Hall in 1927, the *enfant terrible* was maligned as merely terrible. Antheil blamed the indignity on a huge and "rather tasteless" curtain, "representing a 1927 jazz-mad America," which the producers hung on stage (193). The fiasco also served notice that symphonic jazz was now defunct – proof, if any was needed, of Paul Rosenfeld's gratified obituary: "round us, the Jazz Age writhes in pain and dies away among belated worshippers; and with it fly perverse idealism and counterfeit energy."²⁶

The Jazz Age meant many things in the end, but for the period of *Vanity Fair*'s spotlight it had meant the obligation of American composers to sit up and take notice of the native grain. It was only a phenomenon – that is, a flash in the pan – in the popular press, but among certain literati jazz provided one more facet in an increasingly mesmerized encounter with African-American culture. While the upper crust patronage of blacks persisted (Charlotte Mason's stipends to Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston would not begin until the end of 1927), the phenomenon of the New Negro was increasingly evident, and much of the evidence suggested a vibrant autonomy in black cultural affairs. Journals like *The Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and *The Messenger* were filled with profiles of race progress, and even in the white press the publication of Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial

Mountain” in *The Nation* in June 1926 reiterated the Emersonian virtue of self-reliance, newly configured as an appeal to race pride. The burden of patronage apparently being lifted from their shoulders, white enthusiasts could let jazz subside into diversionary entertainment. By the end of 1927, in the whites-only Cotton Club up in Harlem, they could take in the blatantly primitivist floor shows accompanied by a dapper young leader who had given his band, The Washingtonians, a new name, The Jungle Orchestra, to match their new surroundings.

The timing is so precise as to seem contrived, yet that is how it happened. The entire public furor over jazz, along with any sense that jazz and modernism were overlapping phenomena, evaporated just as Duke Ellington’s career was getting started. Within a few years – and ever since – Ellington and jazz would be indelibly associated, so that to look back at the Jazz Age is to confront a bewildering anomaly: the Jazz Age was almost entirely lacking in most of what would make jazz a vital part of American life long after its Age had passed. The irony is delicious, and maybe only someone situated at the heart of it could appreciate the irony at the time. The black journals of the period resisted joining in the jazz debate and rarely mentioned the music at all. But in the May 1925 issue of *Opportunity* Charles S. Johnson wrote an editorial on this “new international word” that, in its homeland, “describes not merely music and dancing but a national mood, or, better still, a jumble of moods.”²⁷ Reflecting the white domination of published commentary, Johnson cites Lawson’s *Processional* and adds, for technical support, Van Vechten and Seldes. But when it comes to recognizing the intrinsic irony of the situation he speaks without deference to any authority but his own: “The amusing and yet profoundly significant paradox of the whole situation is the fact that it is the Negroes, who not only can best express the spirit of American life, but who have created the very forms of expression” (133).

For Johnson as for many others of the black intelligentsia, jazz was not especially welcome among those forms of expression. A source of casual entertainment to be sure, jazz hardly seemed a candidate for uplifting the race. William Grant Still, composer of *Afro-American Symphony*, resented the expectation that he incarnate the black experience to the exclusion of anything else. Having studied with the French expatriate innovator Edgar Varèse as well as producing arrangements of sweet jazz for Paul Whiteman, Still was equally at ease with modernism and jazz and did not want to be typecast. Even Duke Ellington, who was identified with jazz his entire career, resisted the term from the outset. “I am not playing jazz. I am trying to play the natural feelings of a people,” he insisted in a 1930 interview.²⁸ Adopting Whitmanian rhetoric in his first published article in 1931, Ellington clarified

his aspiration “that an authentic record of my race *written by a member of it* shall be placed on record.”²⁹ The repetition of *record* may slyly attest to the medium in which he worked, but Ellington clearly had the written record in mind as well: “what is being done by Countee Cullen and others in literature is overdue in our music” (50). When, the following year, R. D. Darrell published the most sustained attention yet paid to a jazz figure, the benchmark of his praise was by way of modernism: “Ellington to me is one of Proust’s great artists.”³⁰

“What contributions has jazz made to modernistic music?” asked Alain Locke in one of many discussion questions in *The Negro and His Music*, published by The Associates in Negro Folk Education in 1936.³¹ Of the same generation as Pound and Eliot, Locke was nearly forty when his anthology *The New Negro* focused the Harlem Renaissance; and although he had respect for spirituals, his attitude to music was decidedly highbrow and Eurocentric. For him, the best that could be said of jazz was that it “ushered in the first wave of the new modernistic harmony” (81). Consequently, “European musicians, on the look-out for a new modernistic style in music, seized eagerly upon [early jazz]” (85). As with white boosters, Locke was interested mainly in what jazz could offer serious music composition. But, unlike them, he was well informed about African-American music in general. So when it came to the nagging issue of the Jazz Age, Locke could offer a unique perspective: “The Negro, strictly speaking, never had a jazz age; he was born that way” (87). As for the music itself, Locke took a sociological view: “instead of blaming it on jazz, the vogue of jazz should be regarded as the symptom of a profound cultural unrest and change, first a reaction from Puritan repressions and then an escape from the tensions and monotonies of a machine-ridden, extroverted form of civilization” (88). Locke’s diagnostic stance involves little concern with the commercialization of African-American folkways by white entrepreneurs. Instead, he prudently remarks that without white participation there would be no “jazz age” (presumably there would be instead “the Negro condition,” uninflected by reference to music), and the Jazz Age means modernism: “In some important way,” he suggests, “jazz has become diluted and tintured with modernism. Otherwise, as purely a Negro dialect of emotion, it could not have become the dominant recreational vogue of our time, even to date, the most prolonged fad on record” (90).

In its earliest appearance, in fact, jazz (or any African-derived music) was often clarified with reference to modernism or modernity. “The laws that govern jazz rule in the rhythms of great original prose, verse that sings itself, and opera of ultra modernity. Imagine Walter Pater, Swinburne, and Borodin swaying to the same pulses that rule the moonlit music on the banks of

African rivers.”³² For the 1918 Carnegie Hall premiere of John Powell’s *Rhapsodie nègre*, a program note dedicated the work to Joseph Conrad in appreciation of *Heart of Darkness*. In 1919, Louis Untermeyer’s *The New Era in American Poetry* proclaimed the virtues of a rediscovered vernacular (“our poets are coming back to the oldest and most stirring tongue,” he wrote, rediscovering “the beauty, the dignity, I might almost say the divine core, of the casual and commonplace”³³). “We can hear its counterpart already in the performance of any Jazz band,” a reviewer contemptuously remarked. *The New York Times* chimed in: “Jazz is to real music exactly what most of the ‘new poetry,’ so-called, is to real poetry,” and both were the work “not of innovators, but of incompetents.”³⁴ In an infamous 1921 article, “Plus de Jazz,” Clive Bell took “jazz” to be the stylistic affectation of modernism in all the arts (confusing readers in the process, as he used the verbs “jazzing” and “ragging” interchangeably). With his “black and grinning muse,” Bell wrote, “Mr. Eliot is about the best of our living poets, and, like Stravinsky, he is as much a product of the Jazz movement as so good an artist can be of any.”³⁵ Bell was hardly alone in thinking of jazz and modernism as labels for any deliberate distortion of the conventional. In its contemporaneity with the disfigurations of *The Waste Land* and *Manhattan Transfer*, early jazz seemed to incarnate skyscraper primitivism, affirming machine-age progress driven by atavistic sources of revitalizing energy. As Macdonald Moore judiciously explains, jazz was one more key to “the secret of modernism”: “like a guide to the perplexed, ‘jazz’ lent perceptual coherence to phenomena as discrete as European musical avant-gardism, bureaucratic and scientific rationalization, even contemporary faddism.”³⁶ To talk about jazz or modernism was to talk about novelty (and whatever is novel is always presumed to have a brief shelf life), even if novelty proved symptomatic of substantive change.

A vivid case of the discomfort imposed by jazz as agent of change may be found in the case of Vachel Lindsay, acclaimed the “jazz poet” of the Jazz Age. His 1926 “A Curse for the Saxophone” culminates in a vision of Lincoln’s assassin in the afterlife:

“John Wilkes Booth, you are welcome to Hell,”
 And they played it on the saxophone, and played it well.
 And he picked up a saxophone, grunting and rasping,
 The red-hot horn in his hot hands clasping,
 And he played a typical radio jazz,
 He started an earthquake, he knew what for,
 And at last he started the late World War.
 Our nerves all razzed, and our thoughts all jazzed,
 Booth and his saxophone started the war!³⁷

The flamboyant anachronism, coupled with the fantasy of jazz setting America on the warpath, is not quite poetic whimsy like his 1918 poem depicting the Kaiser being vanquished by “the Jazz-bird.”³⁸ By the time *Going-to-the-Stars* was published in 1926, Lindsay had suffered what to him was a deplorable fate: previously known as America’s wandering troubador he had unwittingly become its “jazz poet.” His affinity for black rhythms, most famously on display in “Congo,” along with his oratorical delivery, had long been evident. It was not the racial affiliation but the jazz label that irked him. The poem “The Daniel Jazz”³⁹ had been his downfall, having been chosen without Lindsay’s approval by his English publisher as the title of a collection. Arriving in London in October 1920, he found himself expected to play the role of jazz poet – an agony compounded by his increasing distaste for public recitals – and found himself “cartooned as turning handsprings, and described as whistling and snapping my fingers while I recited.”⁴⁰ Two years later he was still festering, writing to Harriet Monroe: “I have very much resented being called a ‘Jazz’ poet, especially by the British Papers, because it was used to mean something synonymous with hysteria, shrieking and fidgets. I abhor the kind of Ball-Room dancing that goes with Jazz, and I abhor the blasphemy that Jazz has made of the beautiful slow whispered Negro Spirituals.” Lindsay says he would prefer being called “‘The College Yell’ poet,” whereas jazz “has the leer of the bad-lands in it . . . It is full of the dust of the dirty dance. The Saxophone, its chief instrument is the most diseased instrument in all modern music. It absolutely smells of the hospital” (255). Lindsay was incensed by ulterior expectations he felt being imposed on him by the jazz epithet. In some sense, he never got over it. In 1930 he sullenly accepted \$250 to compose a poem on “The Jazz Age,” its repeated refrain “Good-bye, Jazz Age. I’m going Home” ominously foreshadowing his suicide the next year.⁴¹

It is important to note that Lindsay did not at all disavow association with black oratorical rhythms, from which he drew extensively and appreciatively in much of his work. The most striking evidence for Lindsay’s assumption that “jazz” had no real connection with African-Americans is brought to light in his encounter with Langston Hughes in a hotel where Hughes was working as a waiter. Hughes slipped copies of several poems to Lindsay at a public dinner (“The Weary Blues,” “Jazzonia,” and “Negro Dancers,” the opening poems of *The Weary Blues*), who read them to the audience during his own recital. The accompanying publicity (which included Carl Van Vechten’s prompt report in *Vanity Fair*) was decisive for Hughes’s career. If anyone deserved the epithet “jazz poet” it was Hughes, but this episode makes it clear how inexorably the jazz label would adhere to whites, in literature as in music, for in the culture at large black people were rarely

accorded the respect of being discussed as individuals. For Lindsay, of course, the label was disrespectful because it implied he was not a bard but an entertainer.

The stigma of entertainment stuck with jazz until bebop, at which point Louis Armstrong began to be viewed with suspicion for being so entertaining. What are the implications, then, behind a 1927 advertisement placard proclaiming Armstrong not only “King of the Trumpet” but also “Master of Modernism”? Did some ad man recognize that Satchmo’s versatile scatting was of a piece with Dada sound poems? Was it a furtive acknowledgment that “To call Armstrong, Waller, et al., ‘modernists’ is to appreciate their procedures as alchemists of the vernacular who have ‘jazzed’ the ordinary and given it new life”?⁴² In any event, when the bebop revolution shook up the jazz world and figures like Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk were called modernists, some precedent was clearly being followed. Bop challenged jazz orthodoxy in the 1940s with the same reckless intensity as *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* had imposed on literature in 1922. Bebop “was one of the great modernisms,”⁴³ says Eric Lott, who emphasizes its cavalier treatment of elements from pop culture, its tendency to make a virtue of defiant isolation, its assertion of aesthetic autonomy as political value, and its exploratory rigor mistaken by outsiders as ugliness. Bebop merited the “modernist” label insofar as it shared many of the formal traits associated with literary and artistic modernism several decades earlier. Self-assured in its resistance to accessibility, bop had all the hallmarks of determined formal experimentation which, coupled with a creative exuberance very different from the crowd pleasing high spirits of earlier jazz, made the music seem the embodiment of the esoteric. Although bop quickly became fashionable, in the romance of its first incarnation as after hours workshop, it also served as a crucible for Parker, Monk, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell, and Kenny Clarke, who incarnated a sort of musical Montmartre with their seemingly effortless avant-gardism (the quality of “cool” that proved addictive, in more ways than one, to rapt fans and fellow musicians alike).

It is all the more poignant, then, that the *literary* fulfillment of jazz modernism dates from the heyday of bebop, but by an author for whom the new music was a deplorable repudiation of jazz as a life affirming force. Ralph Ellison was indebted to the blues based southwest territory jazz of his Oklahoma childhood, which most famously culminated in the Count Basie sound, as well as the literary high modernism to which he was exposed as a student at Tuskegee. For Ellison, *The Waste Land* and “West End Blues” spoke the same language; and “all of these references of Eliot’s, all of this snatching of phrases from the German, French, Sanskrit, and so on, were attuned to that type of American cultural expressiveness which one got in

jazz.”⁴⁴ Much the same could be said about *Invisible Man*, a novel deeply infused with jazz cadences while paying intricate thematic homage to modernism. In countless anecdotes and testimonials, Ellison sought to demonstrate how blues-based jazz enabled him to recognize tools for survival in modernist writing and vice versa. “I use folklore in my work not because I am a Negro, but because writers like Eliot and Joyce made me conscious of the literary value of my folk inheritance” (111–112). Like his friend Albert Murray, who never tired of applying to jazz Kenneth Burke’s principle of discourse as the dancing of attitudes, Ellison’s work was a series of elaborate variations on the basic theme (endemic to both high modernism and the African-American experience) of survival and the attainment of poise in the face of adversity.

Ellison and other “alchemists of the vernacular” offer a practical image of jazz (*as/and*) modernism as a deliberate response to modernity as lived experience. Modernity is functionally different from nostalgic distinctions between now and then, in part because its constitutive features are so vast that they imposed themselves over centuries: Bit by bit, the incremental shocks of modernity have been registered as measurable incitements to complaint as well as enthusiasm; and, each time, the specificity of the provocation (Armory Show or “Experiment in Modern Music”) seemed sufficient in itself for the response it provoked. But at some datable threshold (not necessarily Virginia Woolf’s “December, 1910”), the cumulative acceleration of historical factors (Protestantism, America, Enlightenment, Democracy, Capitalism, and Industrialism) coalesced into an imperious portent of something weakly named by terms like “modernity” or “modern times.” For the first time, a world historical threshold had a *soundtrack*.

Jazz and modernism alike were “post-war”: a combination of “cynicism and hedonism that came out of it like a cloud of gas they can’t issue masks for.”⁴⁵ But jazz was also historically timed so as to accompany two decisive technological phenomena: records and radio. It is this conjunction of new media with artistic novelty that made jazz the pre-eminent bearer of cultural modernity in the 1920s. In its initial impact, jazz performed three concurrent roles: as soundtrack for a new social energy largely associated with dancing; as signifier of cultural potential, with connotations ranging from regression to regeneration; and as agent provocateur of modernity, the social consequences of which were viewed as positive, but which exacted certain cultural growing pains in the process. Jazz was hardly yet the incontestable enrichment of American culture it has become, and it had little chance of being recognized as a distinct African-American musical practice. African-Americans were only vaguely associated with jazz, even “jazz was not jazz in the twenties; it was everything else,” which meant “the tinkly

distillations of toothpaste troubadors”⁴⁶ instead of what is now accredited with being jazz. Owing to the discrepancy between early commentary and subsequent developments in the music itself, historians have been inclined to scoff at all the misdirected remarks about jazz as incitement to primitivism, degeneracy, obstacle to cultural progress or refinement, and so forth (a 1921 *Ladies Home Journal* bearing the punchy title “Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?” being a favorite target). That such remarks miss the point where the music is concerned is, however, exactly the point about modernity, which was a continuous provocation to *missing the point*. Homeric epic? – how about a day in Dublin; Grail quest? – listen to the gramophone sob in the haunt of the Fisher King. Stravinsky, too, missed the point, calling Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* “the solar plexus as well as the mind of early-twentieth-century music.”⁴⁷: the real solar plexus hailed from New Orleans, of course, not Vienna.

Everything had a manifesto in the heyday of the avant-garde, but there was no manifesto for jazz – unless, as I think, it was “Portraits and Repetition” by Gertrude Stein. “As I say what one repeats is the scene in which one is acting, the days in which one is living, the coming and going which one is doing, anything one is remembering is a repetition, but existing as a human being, that is being listening and hearing is never repetition. It is not repetition if it is that which you are actually doing because naturally each time the emphasis is different just as the cinema has each time a slightly different thing to make it all be moving.”⁴⁸ When Stein specifies the value of “keeping two times going at once” and enthuses over the bifocal act of “talk[ing] and listen[ing] all at once, I wondered is there any way of making what I know come out as I know it, come out not as remembering. I found this very exciting,” she adds (180, 181). And so did multitudes, except they called it jazz.

NOTES

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3. Anne Shaw Faulkner, “Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation,” *Ladies Home Journal* (August 1921), quoted in Robert Walser, ed., *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 35.
4. Clay Smith, “Where is Jazz Leading America?,” *The Etude* (August-September 1924), quoted in Walser, *Keeping Time*, 54.
5. R. W. S. Mendl, *The Appeal of Jazz* (London: Philip Allan, 1927), 88.
6. J. Hartley Manners, *The National Anthem*, in Macdonald Smith Moore, *Yankee Blues: Musical Culture and American Identity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 86.

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9. Waldo Frank, *In the American Jungle [1925–1936]* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1937), 118–119.
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11. Hiram Moderwell, "A Modest Proposal," *Seven Arts* 2: 2 (July 1917), 370.
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13. Martin Green, *New York 1913: The Armory Show and the Paterson Strike Pageant* (New York: Scribner's, 1988), 181.
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16. Mezz Mezzrow and Bernard Wolfe, *Really the Blues* (New York: Anchor, 1972), 94.
17. Phillip Ramey, booklet notes, *The Copland Collection: Early Orchestral Works 1922–1935* (Sony, 1991, CD #SM2K 47232), 6.
18. Virgil Thomson, "The Cult of Jazz," *Vanity Fair* 24: 4 (June 1925), 54.
19. Virgil Thomson, "Enter American Music: Why we Must Play More than a Saxophone in the Concert of Nations," *Vanity Fair* 25: 2 (October 1925), 124.
20. Virgil Thomson, *Virgil Thomson* (New York: Knopf, 1966), 70.
21. George Jean Nathan, "The Theater," *American Mercury* 4: 15 (March 1925), 372.
22. [Untitled caption], *Vanity Fair* 24: 2 (April 1925), 43.
23. John Dos Passos, "Is the Realistic Theater Obsolete?" *Vanity Fair* 24: 3 (May 1925), 114.
24. Daniel Gregory Mason, "Stravinsky as Symptom," *American Mercury* 4: 16 (April 1925), 465–466.
25. George Antheil, *Bad Boy of Music* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1945), 139.
26. Paul Rosenfeld, "Musical Chronicle," *The Dial* 80 (May 1926), 440.
27. Charles S. Johnson, "Jazz," *Opportunity* 3: 29 (May 1925), 132.
28. Florence Zunser, "'Opera Must Die,' Says Galli-Curci! Long Live the Blues!" in *The Duke Ellington Reader*, ed. Mark Tucker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 45.
29. Duke Ellington, "The Duke Steps Out" in *Duke Ellington Reader*, ed. Tucker, 49.
30. R. D. Darrell, "Black Beauty" in *Duke Ellington Reader*, ed. Tucker, 64.
31. Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (Washington, DC: The Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936), 103.
32. Walter Kingsley, "Whence Comes Jazz?" in *Keeping Time*, ed. Walser, 7.
33. Louis Untermeyer, *The New Era in American Poetry* (New York: Henry Holt, 1919), 11.
34. Morroe Berger, "Jazz: Resistance to the Diffusion of a Culture-Pattern," *Journal of Negro History* 32: 3 (July 1947), 467–468.
35. Clive Bell, "Plus de Jazz," *The New Republic* 28 (September 21, 1921), 94.
36. Moore, *Yankee Blues*, 119.

37. Vachel Lindsay, *Going-to-the-Stars* (New York: Appleton, 1926), 51–52.
38. Vachel Lindsay, *The Poetry of Vachel Lindsay*, vol. 1, ed. Dennis Camp (Peoria, IL: Spoon River Poetry Press, 1984), 394.
39. “The Daniel Jazz” perpetuated Lindsay’s reputation in another medium in 1925, in the form of a solo cantata by Louis Gruenberg, who set several other poems by Lindsay to music as well. Gruenberg (like Kurt Weill, a student of Busoni) conducted the American premiere of Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* in 1923, going on to achieve some notoriety in the 1920s for his own compositions, including *The Creation* (based on James Weldon Johnson’s poem), *Jazzberries* and *Jazz-Masks* for piano, *Jazz Suite* for orchestra, and *The Emperor Jones*, an operatic version of O’Neill’s play, premiering at The Met in 1933. Gruenberg also spent time in Germany, where he was instrumental in exposing educators and musicians to principles of jazz performance (albeit from a classical perspective).
40. Vachel Lindsay, *The Letters of Vachel Lindsay*, ed. Marc Chénétier (New York: Burt Franklin & Co., 1979), 283.
41. Lindsay, *Poetry of Vachel Lindsay*, vol. III, 770–771.
42. Alfred Appel, Jr., *Jazz Modernism: From Ellington and Armstrong to Matisse and Joyce* (New York: Knopf, 2002), 13.
43. Eric Lott, “Double V, Double-Time: Bebop’s Politics of Style,” in *Jazz Cadence*, ed. O’Meally, 462.
44. Ralph Ellison, *Collected Essays*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 520.
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46. Barry Ulanov, *A History of Jazz in America* (New York: Viking, 1952), 115.
47. Igor Stravinsky, quoted in Michael Chanan, *From Handel to Hendrix: The Composer in the Public Sphere* (New York: Verso, 1999), 223.
48. Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (New York: Random House, 1935), 179.