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ENG 275

The Jazz Age

The years leading up to the 1920s were trying times for many Americans, with World War I having just ended and many people emotionally and spiritually exhausted from the worldwide conflict. People wanted to get their minds off of war and the deaths of American soldiers, so new mediums of entertainment such as film, radio, and even nightclubs, became very appealing. Meanwhile, the Great Migration of southern African Americans moving into northern cities from 1910 to the 1930s saw the introduction of their distinct and unique culture to northern white Americans in large cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and especially New York, resulting in specific African American neighborhoods such as Harlem. The southern African Americans had formed a culture that grew out of their oppression during and after the Civil War out of their need for self-expression. One of their most prolific forms of expression was song and dance, drawing heavily on native African elements as well as religion. These factors brought about the Harlem Renaissance and, consequently, the Jazz Age.

As mentioned above, jazz originates from the African American culture that preceded the twentieth century. On page 11 of Alain Locke's text The Negro and His Music, the following chart depicts seven periods of music:

1. Before 1830- *The Age of Plantation Shout and "Breakdown"*
 - a. Dominated by African Reminiscences and Survivals.
2. 1830-1850- *The Age of the Sorrow Songs: The Classic Folk Period*

- a. The Great Spirituals and the Folk Ballads
- 3. 1850-1875- *The First Age of Minstrelsy*
 - a. Stephen Foster and the Sentimental Ballad.
- 4. 1875-1895- *The Second Age of Minstrelsy*
 - a. Farce and Buffoonery- the “Buck and Wing,” the “Coon Song,” the “Folk Blues”
- 5. 1895-1918- *The Age of Ragtime*
 - a. Vaudeville and Musical Comedy
- 6. 1918-1926- *The Jazz Age*
 - a. The Stomp, The Artificial Blues and Dance Comedy
- 7. 1926 to date- *The Age of Classical Jazz*
 - a. Classical Negro Music

Locke’s text dissected each period and related the historical context of the time to the effect of the music produced. It is evident that the music of the African American is in harmony with their literature: both are outpourings of their experience in different mediums, yet both reflect the personal and historical context.

In New York, Harlem became the African American Mecca, so to speak, because it was primarily out of this African American community that many important evolutions in African American art, music, and philosophy took place. Jazz became almost synonymous with Harlem, which is largely credited as being the birthplace of jazz. With its sprawling skylines and thriving nightlife, writers and artists found Harlem and New York City a perfect center of creativity. John Kouwenhoven, an eminent cultural critic, has pointed out that “[t]he physical layout of New York’s famous skyline has been offered as a metaphor for both American culture in general and for jazz specifically”

(New York: America's Jazz Capitol). Jazz became enormously popular, even among the white populations in northern cities; the sounds of jazz spread like wildfire. White musicians played jazz, black musicians such as Louis Armstrong attained fame in nightclubs, and blues aficionados like Robert Johnson were given record deals. Jazz even influenced the flapper movement in the 1920s.

Jazz was not universally loved, however. There were those who viewed jazz, with its improvisational style and risqué dances, as evil and morally outrageous. In her article in the *Ladies Home Journal* of 1921, Anne Shaw Faulkner clearly stated her idea that jazz was evil. She believed that the dances and rhythms of jazz influenced the youth of that era into sinful, evil acts. She and others like her, including the National Dancing Master's Association, viewed jazz and its dances as immoral, vulgar, and cheap. She contends that country clubs also believe that jazz is evil, and argues that dance halls and nightclubs that have spoken out against jazz and banned it were the most popular ones in town. Whether this is true is difficult to say. She even connects jazz to voodoo and the evil, barbaric people who practiced that religion, namely African Americans. Faulkner seems to be part of a crusade led primarily by women who argue that jazz, and evil of society, should be replaced by "good music," though she does not give an adequate explanation of what "good music" is. Her beliefs and those of others like her did not influence the American people enough, however, because jazz flourished throughout America in the decades since its creation (Faulkner, 1921).

Jazz has stood the test of time, evolving and branching off into other tangents recognized today as completely different genres of music, such as the blues, and even rock and roll. Obviously, there was something about jazz that appealed to people; for

African Americans, it was the ideal of freedom, a way to express the freedom they and their ancestors had longed for generations. White Americans clung to it also, enjoying a thoroughly different style of music and a level of emotional, perhaps even carnal freedom in song and dance, a freedom that traditional music had held back for centuries.

Nightclubs and radio spread jazz across the country: it was listened to from New York all the way to New Orleans. Jazz heavily influenced American culture in the 1920s, playing a part in defining the decade known as the Harlem Renaissance, the Jazz Age, and the Roaring Twenties. Jazz became one of the hallmarks of America during the first half of the twentieth century, standing brightly as one of the uniquely American creations that spread across the world. Many cannot think of America today without thinking of jazz and its origins in New York and specifically in Harlem. While America has suffered through two World Wars, a cold war, and many other costly military engagements that took a heavy toll on the lives of citizens in America, its people have held strongly to their freedom of expression. Entertainment, in its various forms, was an outlet for the emotional and spiritual heartache that Americans felt off and on throughout the twentieth century, and jazz played a vital role in boosting the spirits of the American people, taking them in new directions and venues that were never before considered possible in the areas of music, dance, literature, poetry, and film. The success of jazz and its break from tradition gave many Americans the confidence to stretch the boundaries of other areas of the arts. It is safe to say that without the Jazz Age, many forms of music, dance, and film would not be present in today's society--at least not the way they are now.

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