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Abstract

Both Paris and the Weimar Republic were fascinated with American jazz in the interwar period. Because of jazz's connection to African American culture, this fascination is linked with the themes of identity and race relations. This work will demonstrate that interwar Parisians were not always receptive of African Americans that played jazz, and that the citizens of the Weimar Republic were more aware of and interested in the African American culture that permeated jazz in the 1920s and 30s.

Keywords

Music, Jazz, Europe, Interwar, Paris, Weimar Republic, African American culture

European Jazz: A Comparative Investigation into the Reception and Impact of Jazz in Interwar Paris and the Weimar Republic

By Douglas A. Kowalewski



The effects of jazz on places other than its American birthplace have been widely studied. More particularly, the European reception of jazz in the period between the world wars has been a common topic of study for both historians and musicologists alike. Typically, scholars have focused on one particular region in their study of jazz's impact on interwar Europe. Interwar Paris – the cultural center of Europe at the time – has had its story intertwined with that of jazz numerous times.¹ The Weimar Republic – the short-lived German democratic experiment – has also had its art-driven history interwoven with that of jazz.² While both of these areas, to some extent, welcomed jazz and the changes that it signified and caused, there is a paucity of research that compares the two. This work will attempt to review the scholarly work pertaining to these two areas and lay the groundwork for a comparative study investigating how interwar Paris and the Weimar Republic both received and were impacted by jazz – America's contribution to worldwide popular music. In reviewing this literature, several issues are raised. First, why did interwar Parisians and Germans embrace jazz? Second, what

¹ For more historical context on jazz in interwar Paris, see Jeffrey H. Jackson, *Making Jazz French: Music And Modern Life In Interwar Paris* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

² For more historical context on jazz in the Weimar Republic, see Jonathan O. Wipplinger, *The Jazz Republic: Music, Race, and American Culture in Weimar Germany* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

factors contributed to how these nations responded to and allowed jazz to impact their cultures?

The reception and impact of jazz on interwar Paris has invited an abundance of scholarly research. In reviewing past literature in this field, several themes emerge. The first of these is a fascination with Americans – and, more particularly, with African Americans – and their cultural products. Nicholas Hewitt argues that the sudden popularity of "black American dance and spectacle" following the First World War led to an increasing recognition of jazz and the musicians that played it in the interwar period.³ Also subscribing to this argument, William Shack presents jazz in Paris as arising from a fascination with everything American following the horrors of the European-based (and caused) Great War.⁴

Echoing Shack's claim, other historians have argued that Parisians of the 1920s and 30s embraced jazz not only because it was American – but simply because it *wasn't* European. According to Thabati Asukile, Parisians adopted jazz because it represented a change in what they saw as a corrupt European culture. In addition, jazz fit in well with the Dadaism and Surrealism that was emerging at around the same time in Paris because of the former's spontaneity, freedom of expression, and its ability to challenge deep-rooted conventions. Jeremy Lane argues that jazz challenged old European ideals and therefore quickly gained traction with the citizens of post-war Paris. In this way, jazz became a dynamic and vital component of interwar Parisian culture.⁵

³ Nicholas Hewitt, "Black Montmartre: American jazz and music hall in Paris in the interwar years," *Journal Of Romance Studies* 5, no. 3 (2005): 25.

⁴ William A. Shack, *Harlem in Montmartre: A Paris Jazz Story between the Great Wars* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 26-27.

⁵ Thabiti Asukile, "J.A. Rogers' "Jazz at Home": Afro-American Jazz in Paris During the Jazz Age," *The Black Scholar* 40, no. 3 (2010): 26-28; Jeremy F. Lane, *Jazz and machine-age imperialism: Music, 'race,' and intellectuals in France, 1918-1945* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 8-20.

Other historians have woven the Paris fascination for jazz into the broader narrative of a French crisis of identity following World War I. Generally, scholars disagree as to whether jazz remedied or perpetuated this crisis. Carter O'Brian suggests that jazz – and the dancing that often coincided with it – helped Parisians to forget the pains of the First World War and helped them move on from it. Hewitt, Asukile, and Lane – although they all also argue that the adoption of jazz in Paris led to a positive restructuring of race relations – all argue that the black experience in interwar Paris was far from perfect. The fact that blacks were merely made a spectacle of and were not really integrated into interwar French culture perpetuated the idea that France was not really as color-blind as it claimed to be. According to the aforementioned authors, this occurred because the perceived "primitivism" of African American jazz was resisted by members of the older generations in Paris – that is, the older, landed classes of Parisian culture saw jazz as an uncivilized art form because they also saw African American culture as uncivilized. This further complicated French identity and, while jazz was there as a way to turn away from European ideals, it could not solve all of Paris's problems. Indeed, while Jeffrey Jackson cites jazz's positive impact on French identity as the chief reason why it became such an important component of Parisian nightlife, he also concedes that older Parisians also resisted the modern lifestyle that came along with it.⁶

Generally speaking, then, historians have linked Paris's fondness for jazz in the interwar years to its inhabitants' fascination

⁶ Carter R. O'Brian, "The Fox-Trotters of Vieil-Armand": Jazz and the Practice of Forgetting in Interwar France," *Historical Reflections* 33, no. 3 (2007): 449-51; Hewitt, "Black Montmartre," 25; Asukile, *Jazz At Home*, 26-28; Lane, *Machine-Age Imperialism*, 8-20; Jeffrey H. Jackson, *Making Jazz French: Music And Modern Life In Interwar Paris* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 4-5.

with American and African American culture. In addition, these historians suggest that jazz represented a mode of expression that allowed individuals to think outside of standard, antiquated European norms. Furthermore, these scholars also suggest that Paris's embracing of jazz was linked to remedying, hopefully, the French identity crisis that arose after the First World War – and that jazz could only help to address some of this crisis. While race relations were undoubtedly improved with the advent of jazz in Paris, these historians contend, they were not wholly rectified. The claim that interwar Paris was mostly color-blind, then, is not completely convincing.

The literature on jazz's impact on the Weimar Republic, while still sizeable, does not approach the amount that has been written about interwar Paris. Still, several familiar themes emerge. First, a fascination with all things American (the German idea of *Amerikanismus*, or Americanization) plays a role, albeit in a slightly different way. Unlike the historians that write about Paris and its interactions with jazz, Weimar scholars suggest that Germany's obsession with America had less to do with African American culture and the "primitive blackness" of its cultural products. In contrast, German fascination with America was more broadly based. Cornelius Partsch and Susan Cook argue that basic American uniqueness, irreverence, and the United States' overall position in world hegemony in the interwar period led Germans to take a liking to jazz. Of course, there were opponents to this school of thought, such as those individuals that feared that the worldwide success of jazz would end the German musical hegemony that had been held for centuries. Jonathon Wipplinger argues that jazz came about at a time of great turmoil in the Weimar Republic and, therefore, stood to reform the German way of thinking. So, like

Paris, Germany's affair with jazz was also about German identity – and jazz could only appeal to so many people.⁷

Saying that Germans did not take race into account when they adopted jazz in the interwar years would be very far from the truth, according to these same scholars. Even though their fascination with American culture did not include African American culture, race certainly played a role in how the Weimar Republic reacted to jazz. Indeed, even though Cook argues that jazz was generally embraced by the German people, she also states that German conservatives hated it because of its links to African American primitive culture. Furthermore, Michele Ferm – in studying visual representations of Weimar jazz musicians – argues that the black musicians themselves were often portrayed as stereotypical figures, with their unique appearance and individuality often de-emphasized for the white mainstream audience. Theodore Rippey goes one step further and states that the Weimar reception of jazz was all due to how the white German population thought of primitive blackness and how it sat starkly different from mainstream culture. Even so, Wipplinger states that jazz forced Germans to reconsider the boundaries of what was "German" and "non-German" when it came to race relations.⁸

Similar to the advent of jazz in Paris, the citizens of the Weimar Republic adopted jazz because it represented an American cultural product that they wanted to emulate. However, the German obsession with America did not include a fascination for African American culture. Nevertheless, race relations played a

⁷ Susan C. Cook, "Jazz as Deliverance: The reception and institution of American jazz during the Weimar Republic," *American Music* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 30-33; Cornelius Partsch, "That Weimar Jazz," *New England Review* 23, no. 4 (2002): 179-183; Wipplinger, *The Jazz Republic*, 8-12.

⁸ Cook, "Jazz as Deliverance," 30-33; Michele Ferm, "Revealing representations of jazz in the Weimar Republic," *The Social Science Journal* 45, (January 1, 2008): 242-46; Theodore F. Rippey, "Rationalisation, Race, and the Weimar Response to Jazz," *German Life And Letters* 60, no. 1 (January 2007): 78-81; Wipplinger, *The Jazz Republic*, 11.

large part in how Germans responded to the advent of jazz in the interwar period. While some in the mainstream stereotyped the black musicians that brought jazz to the nation, others began to think of these same musicians as distinctly "German." All of this points back to the fact that the people of the Weimar Republic embraced jazz in order to solve a German identity crisis. While I do subscribe to the idea that the Germans acted generally negatively toward the black musicians that brought them jazz, I do feel that the current literature understates the fact that many individuals embraced jazz in Germany simply because it sounded good and served a specific function – that is, it provided entertainment. Also, considering that the literature on interwar France mentions Parisians' fascination with African American culture so often, I feel that that piece in Weimar scholarship is somehow missing. I do not see how it would be possible to embrace jazz if there were not a greater sense of fascination with – or at least an awareness of – African American culture.

Overall, the literature of jazz's reception and effects on interwar Paris and the Weimar Republic center on three major themes: that of Americanization, crises of identity, and race relations. While I do subscribe to the majority of these authors' claims (most notably the basic notion of a fascination with America and the fact that jazz acted to help heal identity crises in the two regions), it seems that their claims regarding race relations are less convincing and clear – especially if one were to compare the two areas. Keeping this in mind, I intend to compare jazz's reception and impact on interwar Paris and the Weimar Republic through the lens of race relations. Specifically, I will show that interwar Parisians did not act as color-blind toward black jazz musicians as previously thought and that citizens of the Weimar Republic were more interested in African American culture than previous works have claimed.

Before such a comparative study is conducted, however, it is imperative that a brief historical background of jazz's arrival in both interwar Paris and the Weimar Republic be outlined. Emerging from the First World War a victorious, albeit decimated, nation, France – especially Paris – first encountered jazz in the form of American bands that came over during the war to play the music for both soldiers and civilians alike. A number of these bands remained in France following the end of the conflict; their popularity in cities increasing with the demand for both live and recorded music, which came about during the relative economic prosperity of the 1920s. By the end of the decade, jazz had firmly rooted itself in Parisian culture, with nightly or weekly jazz performances taking place in nearly every single one of the city's venues. With its roots in visiting American bands, jazz became synonymous with the glittering, seductive allure of interwar Parisian culture.⁹

The Weimar Republic emerged from the First World War after citizens of a defeated Germany sought to create a system that repudiated the militaristic regime of the German Empire, the vices of which were perceived as the causes of the horrific conflict. Beginning in late 1919, German writers began to speak of jazz music as it came along with the nearly 100,000 occupying American soldiers stationed there following the Allied victory. The Weimar Republic was soon peppered with jazz bands of both American and French origin, of both white and black musicians. However, jazz was not as immediately prominent as in interwar Paris – jazz developed more in patches where Weimar citizens had more contact with Allied soldiers. Ultimately, however, jazz would come to define the short-lived Weimar Republic, with jazz culture centering around Berlin in the mid-to-late 1920s and throughout the early 1930s. Even though its roots can be traced to occupying

⁹ Jackson, *Making Jazz French*, 1-3.

American troops, the prominence of jazz in the Weimar Republic long after their departure has led scholars to call the German democratic experiment, with its celebrated focus on progressivism and the arts, Germany's own "Jazz Age."¹⁰

Both Paris and the Weimar Republic were introduced to jazz through American jazz bands that either arrived near the end of or after the First World War. Since jazz is an American art form, this should come as no surprise. But what is more important about how jazz was transmitted to Parisian and Weimar citizens was the aspect of Americans themselves. Not only did jazz music captivate Parisians and Germans, but the American culture that it represented – which was predominantly transmitted through the lens of African American culture – also fascinated them. And as both nations were looking to move past the First World War and define themselves in a postwar world, race relations in France and the Weimar Republic – brought out into the open by the interactions between African American jazz musicians and the rest of the population – became a central component of how each nation defined themselves in the interwar period. While some historians have discussed this at length, I intend to show that Paris was not as color-blind in its treatment of African American jazz musicians as is generally thought of as being true. In addition, I intend to show that Weimar culture was more interested in African American culture than has been previously shown.

In examining interwar Paris's fascination with jazz, a discussion of race relations and its relation to the art form, as aforementioned, is not novel. To understand how Parisians thought of and treated African Americans in the interwar period, it is important to start at the end of the First World War with the interactions between the earliest of American jazz bands and the French populace. Just after the conflict, the Parisian fascination

¹⁰ Wipplinger, *The Jazz Republic*, 11; 24-30.

with jazz was already well underway. In 1919, African American bandleader James Reese Europe described in *The Literary Digest* a curious story concerning a French band attempting to play one of his pieces following his band's 1918 tour through Paris:

The great band played the composition superbly—but...the jazz effects were missing. I took an instrument and showed him [the leader of the French Garde Républicain band] 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.¹¹

While at first glance this story may seem perfectly innocuous, the fact that the French musicians immediately came to the conclusion that the African American band had to be using special instruments in order to make the "jazz effects" that Europe alludes to suggests that the French musicians did not quite understand the African American inflections that had inspired jazz in the first place. Indeed, Europe went on to say in his description that "jazzing" with instruments – that is, playing jazz – was "natural for us...it is, indeed, a racial musical characteristic."¹² This inoffensive anecdote would come to represent one of the central issues in Parisian race relations: the disparity in jazz knowledge and talent between African American and French musicians.

This disparity would come to a head as early as the 1920s, and would have real consequences for African American jazz musicians. In the July 22nd, 1922 issue of the *Chicago Defender*,

¹¹ James Reese Europe, "A Negro Explains 'Jazz,'" *The Literary Digest*, April 26, 1919, 28-29.

¹² *Ibid.*

the issue was raised of African American musicians losing their Parisian gigs to French musicians beginning in October of that year. The lost jobs were due to a new French law that limited the employment of foreigners to only account for 30 percent of the total French workforce. While the measure was undoubtedly an attempt to protect the rights of French workers, it no doubt had other intentions. As the previous story by Europe suggests, French bands could not play jazz like their African American counterparts. It is possible, then, that the new law was passed in order to stop the complete monopolization of Paris's beloved jazz by African American musicians and reopen the entertainment industry for French nationals. Indeed, the *Chicago Defender* estimated that several thousand African American musicians were going to lose their jobs in late 1922. This certainly does not fit in with the traditional narrative that interwar Paris acted color-blind in its treatment of African American jazz musicians.¹³

Another issue permeating interwar Parisian race relations was that of the racism of white Americans who were either living or vacationing in Paris throughout the period and the influence they had on the city. The *Chicago Defender* reported on a particular story that occurred in the same month as the new French labor law that took the jobs of many African American musicians living in France. Following the stunning victory of French-Senegalese boxer Battling Siki over his white opponent, numerous white Americans traveling through Paris picked fights with African Americans in what the *Defender* had as the title of its report: a protest of equality. An investigation into white American racism does not belong here, but it is important to note that white Americans had no quarrels with discriminating against Frenchmen

¹³ "Jazz Players To Lose Paris Jobs," *Chicago Defender*, July 22, 1922.

of African descent either, as the *Defender* reported on in mid-1923.¹⁴

It did not take long for the racism of white Americans to permeate Parisian culture. In March of 1925, Parisian writer Albert Guérard described situations during which jazz clubs throughout the Montmartre district of Paris would have to refuse patrons of African descent "...in order not to displease its American clientele...."¹⁵ While this type of interaction was undoubtedly not universal in interwar Paris, it illustrates that white American racism toward blacks in Paris led to increased institutional racism, at least among several Parisian jazz clubs and venues. This – like the measures taken to stop the African American domination of the Parisian jazz scene – does not fit in with the traditional narrative that interwar Parisians were color-blind in their treatment of African American jazz musicians. Through a combination of the disparity in jazz knowledge and ability between African Americans and Parisians and the influence of white American racism, African American jazz musicians could expect to feel the effects of racism even in interwar Paris.

As we have seen, jazz did not immediately reach widespread popularity in the Weimar Republic until after the end of the First World War. And while we have seen that Germans were fascinated by the American culture that jazz represented, their interest in African American culture is a much less discussed topic. In 1922, Alice Gerstel wrote in the German magazine *Die Aktion* concerning the coming of jazz bands to the Republic. According to Gerstel the jazz band symbolized, with its "Negro" musicians and strange dances, the "dying era of the bourgeoisie."¹⁶ To Gerstel,

¹⁴ "Americans Take Hate to Paris," *Chicago Defender*, August 11, 1923.

¹⁵ Albert Guérard, "The Black Army of France," *Scribner's Magazine*, March 1925, 238-39.

¹⁶ Alice Gerstel, "Jazz Band," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 554.

the coming of Negro jazz bands to Germany represented the last sliver of "creative force" left in Europe, at least in regards to Europe's music-making prowess.¹⁷ Gerstel suggests that African American jazz, then, was a part of the European music-making tradition that continued on past the First World War. While this viewpoint is most certainly one of appropriation of African American jazz, it also illustrates the general idea that was surfacing in the Weimar Republic of an African American takeover of German musical culture. This is especially important because it demonstrates that it was the African American culture, and not the entirety of American culture, that was seen as the forerunner of this new musical type and the culture that surrounded it.

This focus on African American culture grew as jazz's popularity soared in the Weimar Republic. In 1926, two writers focused on theatre and music – Frank Warschauer and Kurt Weill – wrote their thoughts on the origins of the jazz that was sweeping the nation. In a piece mainly concerning the Berlin concerts of white American jazz musician Paul Whiteman, Warschauer explicitly conceded that African American talent and experimentation with rhythm and melody was "primarily responsible for both the origins of jazz and the boldest departures within it."¹⁸ Indeed, Warschauer went on to comment that many jazz musicians, including Whiteman himself, see jazz as symbolic of the entirety of American culture. However, it is clear in the piece that Warschauer believed that jazz was imbued with "the youthful energy of America," but still had most of its roots within the confines of a purely African American culture.¹⁹ Weill (who was himself an accomplished musician who blended elements of

¹⁷ Ibid., 555.

¹⁸ Frank Warschauer, "Jazz: On Whiteman's Berlin Concerts.," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 571.

¹⁹ Ibid., 572.

art music and jazz in his compositions) wrote in his piece something that echoes the sentiment of music writers in Paris at the time – that African Americans were the best at jazz and were, as a result, the most representative of the new art form.²⁰ Together, Warschauer and Weill's writings of the mid-1920s show us that the Weimar Republic was impressed with the African American roots of jazz, and more readily associated African American culture in particular to the art form than has been suggested by prior research.

One Weimar-era publication produced in 1926 most explicitly outlines the above argument. In a piece entitled "The Negroes Are Conquering Europe," writer Ivan Goll outlined his viewpoint: African American music and dance were taking Europe by storm, and that was most certainly a positive development.

And yet, why complain? The Negroes are here. All of Europe is dancing to their banjo. It cannot help itself. Some say it is the rhythm of Sodom and Gomorrah...Why should it not be from paradise? In this case, rise and fall are one...This is the dance of the Negroes. One can only envy them...Their revue is an unmitigated challenge to moral Europe.²¹

Goll makes it clear that African American music and dance, of which jazz is a part, was something that should be celebrated throughout Europe as a potent confrontation of old ideals. Carrying his argument further, Goll links African American cultural products to the culture itself and puts forth his idea that with music

²⁰ Kurt Weill, "Dance Music," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 597.

²¹ Ivan Goll, "The Negroes Are Conquering Europe," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 559-60.

like jazz "Negro blood" is "slowly falling over Europe, a long-since dried-up land that can scarcely breathe."²² He ends with a question that brings his entire claim into sharp focus: "Do the Negroes need us? Or are we not sooner in need of them?"²³ Taken together, the components of Goll's argument suggest that there was sentiment in the Weimar Republic that celebrated jazz as purely African American, and that African American culture – with its novel and dynamic products such as jazz – was needed to revitalize a Europe still faltering following the First World War. This argument stands in sharp contrast to the idea that citizens of the Weimar Republic were only concerned with jazz's connections to American culture as a whole and that they mostly ignored the influence of African American culture on the new art form.

Following the major crisis that was the First World War, Europe entered into a period of relative stability that saw the rise in popularity of American cultural products throughout the entire continent. The populations of two areas in particular – interwar Paris and the Weimar Republic – quickly became fascinated with the introduction of jazz into their daily lives. Historians of this period have focused on several themes in engaging with writings and scholarly thought on the topic. The most prominent theme is that of jazz's impact on race relations in the two areas and how those race relations were linked with how both areas defined their identities in the interwar period. With the writings in the columns of the *Chicago Defender*, as well as testimony by African American bandleader James Reese Europe and French writer Albert Guérard, we have seen how the usual picture of Parisian color-blindness toward African American jazz musicians was anything but widespread. The disparity in jazz talent and knowledge between African American and French musicians – as well as the influence of white American racism – created a sort of

²² Ibid., 560.

²³ Ibid.

institutional racism in the form of labor laws that limited the number of African Americans who could earn money while playing jazz in France and also limited their access to Paris jazz clubs. In the writings of several Weimar scholars – including Alice Gerstel and Kurt Weill – we found that Germans saw African Americans, but not Americans in general, as the most representative artists associated with jazz. And in the work of Ivan Goll, it was discovered that a general feeling existed in the Weimar Republic in which African American jazz was a blessing to the nation and that African American culture and cultural products – which included jazz – was exactly what Europe needed to fully rejuvenate its cultures following the First World War.

Therefore, it can be said that the interwar Parisian citizens were not as color-blind in their attitudes and actions toward African American jazz musicians as has been previously stated, and that the people of the Weimar Republic were more interested in African American culture than scholars have previously posited. Knowing this, one can be confident that African American culture played a major role in how Europeans received and responded to the advent of jazz on their continent in the interwar period; however, the response to African American culture differed from country to country. While African American culture was praised in interwar Paris for its spontaneity and its novelty, discrimination toward African Americans was certainly not absent; at the same time, citizens of the Weimar Republic found youthful hope in African American cultural products, not just in the vague ideal of American culture. Jazz had come to Paris and Weimar at the end of the First World War – they celebrated and, at times, wrestled with it and the African American culture that accompanied it throughout the interwar period.

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