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**James Reese Europe and the Infancy  
of Jazz Criticism**

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# JAMES REESE EUROPE AND THE INFANCY OF JAZZ CRITICISM

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During the second decade of the twentieth century, a new syncopated music for popular demand evolved that competed with the public attention to and popularity of ragtime. The music was jazz, and once the term "jazz" became a means to describe this phenomenon, writers used it and "ragtime" freely and interchangeably until they fell into the habit of using the term "jazz" almost exclusively, without being clear about what they meant. Of course, by 1917 the ragtime *craze* was a thing of the past. As one recent ragtime historian suggests, the circumstances had much to do with semantics in that "jazz" replaced "ragtime" in newspapers, magazines, and popular thought because it was a new style and "ragtime" as a term was shopworn.<sup>1</sup>

What must be kept in mind about early criticism and jazz-related commentary is the commonly accepted notion that jazz history formally began in 1917, the year a quintet of New Orleans musicians, billed at Riesenweber's restaurant in New York as the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, recorded. In the entertainment world they were the first band of their kind to *record* as a jazz band, not the first jazz band there ever was as is popularly purported. Being from New Orleans, they reaped honors for that city's supposed exclusive birthplace of jazz sometime at the turn of the century. Hence, a series of problems characterizes the early jazz criticism of the teens. One involves the historiography surrounding the ODJB; another its newness that generated public excitement; and last the fact that there hardly existed a journalism to clarify the kinds of definitions about jazz that are so vital to genuine criticism. Almost as a residue of this problem, no credence was given to early jazz-related music, as

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<sup>1</sup>"Much of the argument seems to be reducible to a matter of semantics" (Berlin 1980, 16).

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jazz, outside of the New Orleans activity until decades later (Kimball 1969; Kunstadt and Charters 1962).

At this time, of course, music criticism in America was largely concerned, as it was in Europe, with classical music. Reportage was the only journalistic style concerned with popular music until, throughout the ragtime era, many writers argued against or for ragtime; often, these writers were not music critics as such nor did they have musical training. Recordings surviving from this era permit some distinctions between what is commonly referred to as ragtime, essentially a piano music, and another new popular dance music, largely ensemble, not known as jazz until 1917. This music went under the name of ragtime or was called modern dance music. It is through newspaper reportage, strange as it might be, that we gain the earliest insight into what I will demonstrate can be justifiably called jazz music and into a substantive germ of genuine jazz criticism.

It is quite true that the extent and nature of jazz activity outside of New Orleans is weak and diffuse. But consider that in his 1930 culture history, *Black Manhattan*, writer-musician-diplomat James Weldon Johnson recalled that in 1905 he heard "the first modern jazz band . . . on a New York stage." He described it as "a singing-dancing orchestra" dominated instrumentally by banjos, guitars, mandolins, a few saxophones, "drums in combination," a violin, two brass instruments, and two basses. "They scored an immediate success" (Johnson 1930, 120–121).

Johnson neglected to name the conductor. Very likely it was James Reese Europe, who had arrived in New York from his native Mobile, Alabama, the previous year ("James Reese Europe" 1973, 58–59). Europe became very active in black New York's musical life for more than the decade following and by 1914 was the subject of articles by the New York newspapers on the subject of Negro dance music. Europe was a composer and conductor who orchestrated an impressive repertory that he recorded; he was a leader of musical organizations like the Clef Club and the National Negro Orchestra (Johnson 1930, 123). His role and place in the development of genuine jazz criticism is important given that he himself was not a writer-journalist. When the newspapers quoted him on Negro dance and symphonic music, his articulate descriptions and reasoning served the new music well by elevating it in the minds of his readers and by establishing a paradigm for later jazz criticism.

James Reese Europe gained widespread public attention as leader of the orchestra that accompanied Vernon and Irene Castle's 1913–1914 popular dance presentations in New York and on their tour of the Midwest. This collaboration ignited a dancing craze in America that included radi-

cal changes in women's fashions (Castle 1919, 60; Castle 1958, 115).<sup>2</sup> Of course, Europe and his orchestras continued to do well by themselves.

Europe's predilection was for a music of symphonic dimensions for the Negro orchestra. But he found himself involved more and more with music for popular dancing. The concerts put on by the Clef Club and the orchestras under Europe's direction were many; it was also under his nominal leadership that small bands of various sizes played for dancing in New York restaurants.

Covering the Negro Symphony Orchestra's concert at Carnegie Hall of March 13, 1914, the *New York Evening Post* referred to Europe as "one of the most remarkable" musicians in America whose organization "practically controls the furnishing of music for the new dances." The anonymous reporter was impressed by Europe's single-handed ability to do what whites felt was impossible, "[to adapt] negro music and musicians to symphonic purposes."

What Europe had to say proved timely and assumes great importance to future jazz criticism for the value of its details and explanation of what the music sought to achieve.

You see, we colored people have our own music that is part of us. . . . [I]t's the product of our souls; it's been created by the sufferings and miseries of our race. Some of the old melodies we played . . . were made up by slaves of the old days, and others were handed down before we left Africa. Our symphony orchestra never tries to play white folks music. We should be foolish to attempt such a thing. We are no more fitted for that than a white orchestra is fitted to play our music. Whatever success I have had has come from a realization of the advantages of sticking to the music of my own people ("Negro's Place in Music" 1973, 61).

For its time, 1914, there is a surprisingly frank race consciousness here of the kind that would appear in jazz journalism and jazz criticism well after 1940. In broader perspective Europe establishes a racial context for his symphonic music. He goes on:

Walter Damrosch . . . or any white leader of a symphony orchestra would doubtless laugh heartily at [how we are] organized, at the distribution of the pieces and our methods of orchestration.

For instance, although we have first violins, the place of the second violins with us is taken by mandolins and banjos. This gives that peculiar steady strumming accompaniment to our music which all people comment

<sup>2</sup>"In the summer of 1913 my Castle Frock became the vogue." Simple flowing gowns left the legs free (Castle 1958, 115).

on, and which is something like that of the Russian Balalaika Orchestra, I believe. Then for background, we employ ten pianos. . . . The result . . . is a background of chords which are essentially typical of negro harmony ("Negro's Place in Music" 1973, 61).

It is interesting that Europe would compare the resulting sound of his orchestra to the Balalaika Orchestra, for even the dance tunes he orchestrated and recorded in 1913–1914 bear this strumming effect. Indeed, the Balalaika association he innocently makes offers a non-American tinge. His preference for mandolins and banjos reinforces the significance of plantation music as "negro harmony's" influence on the modern black composer. Yet, Europe was aware of other problems in the presentation and perpetuation of this music.

As yet we have scarcely begun to think of supporting ourselves by symphonic playing. The members of the orchestra are all members of my staff of dance musicians who play at most of the principal hotels and private dances. . . .

Our people have a monopoly of this kind of work, for the simple reason that the negro has an inimitable ear for time in dancing. As a matter of fact, this instinct for dancing time in our race is an awkward virtue when it comes to training a symphonic orchestra. You would laugh at some of our rehearsals when, in a moment of inadvertence, the players *begin to transpose their parts into ragtime*. We get some undesignedly funny effects that way [my emphasis] ("Negro's Place in Music" 1973, 61).

In addition, Europe explained that his orchestra used clarinets instead of oboes and baritone horns in place of the French horn because of the lack of blacks being trained on oboes and French horns and because "some instruments are not exactly suited for our music" ("Negro's Place in Music" 1973, 61).

Europe's comments were decidedly pro-Negro. As a published account they had no parallel or rival up to that time. The recordings Europe's orchestra made were of dance compositions, so one can only speculate about the nature and texture of the music he considered more formal; yet the resultant "funny effects" akin to ragtime suggest a description of this "symphonic" music. Appearing in a widely read New York newspaper as they did, his comments offered a deeper appreciation for the musical rage of the day.

Paul Whiteman attained spokesman status for jazz in the twenties by the same route of being quoted by newspapers, and Duke Ellington in the thirties would "author" occasional critical commentary. But in the thirties, by and large, jazz could not boast of big bandleader-spokesmen like orchestra leaders Chick Webb or Benny Goodman offering the consistently sharp insights of James Reese Europe.

Late in 1914 Europe amplified his remarks in the *New York Tribune*.

The negro, while not generally equal to the demands of the more sophisticated forms of music, is peculiarly fitted for the modern dances. I don't think it too much to say that he plays this music better than the white man simply because all this music is indigenous with him. . . . There is much interest in the growth of the modern dances in the fact that they were all danced and played by us negroes long before the whites took them up ("Negro Composer on the Race's Music" 1914, 7).

Here Europe addresses two jazz-related issues. He is aware of the longevity of the Negro's musical heritage, but he is saying also that the black musician needed more discipline in formal music—the careless exercising of discipline resulting in his previously acknowledged “funny effects.” Indeed, prevailing critical beliefs in the twenties and thirties had it that white orchestrators like Ferdie Grofé with the Paul Whiteman orchestra could best utilize the “negro harmony” and melody about which Europe spoke to produce a refined and therefore classical or symphonic jazz. The critical reception of Duke Ellington's orchestrations make Europe's closing comments prophetic:

I firmly believe that there is a big field for the development of negro music in America. We already have a number of composers of great ability, two of the foremost being Harry Burleigh and Will Marion Cook. . . . I believe it is in the creation of an entirely new school of music, a school developed from the basic negro rhythm and melodies. The negro is essentially a melodist, and his creation must be in the beautifying and enriching of the melodies which have become his.

The negro's songs . . . are the only folk music America possesses, and, folk music being the basis of so much that is most beautiful in the world, there is indeed hope for the art product of our race ("Negro Composer on the Race's Music" 1914, 7).

With that final remark Europe added to the sensitive musical and philosophical issue that visiting Czech composer Anton Dvořák raised in 1893 about the value of plantation melodies ("Real Value" 1893, 28). Europe's knowledge is not under scrutiny here. To some degree, this idea and his impression of the dance “craze” indicate that he took for granted dancing and dance music, electing to concentrate his energies on building a symphony orchestra. Indeed, the composers he cited were trained musicians who could compose formal works, although only Cook had experience in entertainment circles.

James Reese Europe's last published interview, given to the *New York Tribune* in March, 1919, and reprinted in *Literary Digest* shortly afterwards as “A Negro Explains Jazz,” clarified the techniques and other properties of jazz, for due to Europe's success as leader and orchestrator of the

"Hellfighters" orchestra of the black 369th Regiment, a highly decorated World War I outfit, James Reese Europe was now known as a jazz musician. The interview is in fact the first published discussion of a music called "jazz" by a practicing black musician. While not professing to be a "jazz" personality, he evidently had little or no control over the advertisement for his recent Pathé company recordings, for the company billed him as "The Jazz King" ("Pathé Advertisement" 1919; Fletcher 1954, 263). Europe did understand the methods of jazz and how much it seemed to be second nature for black musicians. A recount of his "explanation" finds similarities with his remarks of five years before. He began by defining jazz as a music whose name was a corruption of a quartet in New Orleans "about 15 years ago . . . known as 'Razz's Band.'" "These musicians

had no idea at all what they were playing; they improvised as they went along, but such was their innate sense of rhythm that they produced something that was very taking.

The negro loves anything that is peculiar in music, and this "jazzing" appeals to him strongly. It is accomplished in several ways. With the brass instruments we put in mutes and make a whirling motion with the tongue, at the same time blowing full pressure. With wind instruments we pinch the mouthpiece and blow hard. This produces the peculiar sound. . . . To us it is not discordant, as we play music as it is written, only that we accent strongly in this manner the notes which originally would be without accent. It is natural for us to do this. . . . I have to call a daily rehearsal of my band to prevent the musicians from adding to their music more than I wish them to. Whenever possible they will embroider their parts in order to produce new, peculiar sounds. Some of these effects are excellent and some are not, and I have to be continually on the lookout to cut out the results of my musicians' originality ("A Negro Explains Jazz" 1919, 28).

He concluded with a recapitulation of his 1914 insistence that blacks should develop their own music ("A Negro Explains Jazz" 1919, 29).

Taken as a whole, James Reese Europe's remarks describe what turns out to be the fundamental processes his musicians used while playing. The outstanding recurring effects are the rhythmic and the "peculiar sounds" that result. Instrumental choice and embouchure contribute to that peculiarity. By the tone of his comments, Europe appeared to be an orchestra leader of conservative inclination in musicianship and form who wrestled with his own tolerance of his musicians' expressions of freedom. Their embroidery of a written melody is a technique parallel to "Mr. Razz's Band's improvisation," a significant descriptive term that Europe introduced to the literary-journalistic analysis of jazz. Europe himself must have felt this "freedom of expression" threatening to good music, since he reiterated how he felt compelled to eradicate "embroidery."

Europe displayed analytical ability, scrutiny, and articulateness in these comments—as an interviewee, not as a journalist. Nevertheless, by quoting him the newspapers permitted his discourses to inform the curious and define his music activity.

With regard to James Reese Europe and genuine jazz criticism, two matters should be kept in mind. First, the novelty of the musical form in which Europe and his musicians were working possessed the trappings of the slightly older ragtime, yet it was not ragtime. It was a music Europe hoped would evolve into a great Negro music of symphonic proportions, but it contained melodic embroideries that both amused and annoyed him. He thus offered description, explanation, and vocabulary to a musical phenomenon he had encouraged. Second, Europe's verbal manner as conveyed by the newspapers suggests that he did not take seriously the analytical process of criticism even as he engaged in it. The music was new to the public at large, but as he also said, it was "natural" to the black musician. However, what seems to distinguish the jazz musician and bandleader, black or white, from his counterparts in classical music is an impatience with the practice of criticism. In jazz criticism this impatience is everywhere apparent, beginning with James Reese Europe and continuing through Paul Whiteman in the twenties.

It is remarkably coincidental that Whiteman began to emerge as a dance-band leader in 1919, the year Europe was killed in an argument by one of his recalcitrant musicians during the intermission of a performance ("Death of Lieu. James R. Europe" 1919, 154). Europe and Whiteman bear similarities that can be described briefly. Foremost is that both were conductor-orchestra leaders; both were essentially inclined toward classical music on their own terms; and as nonliterary musicians their critical assessments and self-appraisals were obtained through interviewers. Whiteman believed that jazz was a mood or temperament not confined to a type of music, but anything that expressed the bustle and vigor of American life. In 1924 he said that jazz was a method—an application of syncopation and tonal effects to music (Sexton 1924, 74). Shortly after this, a young journalist named Mary Margaret McBride was assigned to follow Whiteman about to record his random thoughts (he had gained a public image as a jazz figure that could best be described as avuncular) (McBride 1959, 177–179; Turner 1926, 13; Sexton 1924, 74–75). The result of their association was *Jazz*, published in 1926, making Whiteman the first recognized jazz figure to co-author a book containing history, autobiography, and a rationale for the character and function of jazz. Most of all, Whiteman expressed a greater interest in satisfying his public than defining his music (Whiteman and McBride 1926, 125). As he put it in the *New York Times Magazine* in March, 1927, "I don't know whether jazz is the founda-

tion of a new school of music or whether it represents the growth of new manners and new forms of instrumentation, new rhythms and colors" (Whiteman 1927, 22).

For Europe this music was "natural," as unformed as it was in the teens. For Whiteman it largely had to do with technique. These are perhaps two sides of the same issue; but for jazz criticism they were ways to spell out the parameters of a new musical force with which something else could be done—in the case of Paul Whiteman, for example, the presentation of *Rhapsody in Blue* at New York's Aeolian Hall in 1924.

The connection between James Reese Europe's and Paul Whiteman's involvement with and contributions to jazz criticism does not rest here. In jazz historiography each makes some impact on pre-1917 jazz (Europe more so), thus this provocative issue in jazz criticism and its early development. Europe's orchestral successes of 1913–1914, the Castle's dancing notwithstanding, are overshadowed by the rise of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band in New York at the close of 1916 and early 1917.<sup>3</sup> The musicians of this outfit were white with Italian, English, and Spanish surnames. The ODJB was an immediate sensation, and their eclipse of Europe's endeavors was likely the result of advertising. The ODJB represented what promoters, entrepreneurs, patrons, and music lovers viewed as something new—but new and presented by a white band. The fuller social and historical possibilities regarding how one interprets jazz historical development and its acceptance cannot be entertained here. It is worth stating, however, that nowhere in the daily or music trade press were Europe's orchestrations and dance music achievements acknowledged—at least specifically—between 1915 and early 1919. No writer attempted to link Europe's successes of a few years before to the generally favorable reception of any small bands of colored or white musicians from New Orleans or from (or by way of) Chicago who played in New York in the interim.

Consider Europe's erudition and compare it with the rather lackadaisical and matter-of-fact description of jazz that ODJB trombonist Edward "Gus" Edwards gave the *New York Globe* in 1917. Edward's comments bear importance because he proclaimed himself to be a "jazz" musician. He described and defined jazz according to its instruments; then he said: "None of us know music." One played lead and the rest "do as they pleased." This may contrast sharply with what Europe said about his musicians and what they were instructed to do, but it prefigures Europe's description of "Razz's Band" two years later. Edwards could not explain much about the process of making jazz except to say that the musicians created noise effects deliberately or "just play. I can't tell you how" (Ram-

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Blesh (1946) and other major jazz histories.

say 1964). Obviously lacking in these brief remarks is James Reese Europe's sense of methodology of the music he played. On the other hand Edwards makes some justification for the implied cacophony of collective playing that marks the New Orleans jazz style. This now was "jazz," without any erudite explanation or appeal by the interviewee, a practicing jazz trombonist. As it turns out, the implications of the contrast between Europe's and Edwards's remarks were never taken up by those who wrote about jazz until the mid-twenties, and by then Paul Whiteman's attempts to "make a lady out of jazz" had captured the public's and the classical musicians' interest. Both Europe himself and what he said about orchestrated music in the Afro-American idiom in the previous decade were essentially forgotten, even after the "explanation" of 1919.

The comments and descriptions of James Reese Europe, Paul Whiteman, and "Gus" Edwards, taken together, constitute a necessary first stage in the development of a critical methodology for jazz, and they represent differing stylistic approaches to the subject. Their contributions demonstrate how new cultural leaders had come to the fore or were singled out to explain the basic motivations and properties of the new form. Thus, this early ephemeral jazz criticism defines its music before it can move on to any subsequent developments in vocabulary and perspective. The range and depth of these remarks in no way diminishes their significance during a period when most writers about jazz seemed concerned either with its effects on modern living or with the future of jazz once it could be placed into a European classical music setting.

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