

INTRODUCTION (1)

Rediscovering Jazz

When it comes to the study of jazz and some of the things that have been said about the music, it's tempting, but not really fair, to say that everyone is wrong. Sometimes they're wrong by omission and sometimes by commission, by not only what they say and what they claim, but by what they leave out, what they don't know about or what they think they do know. So when Wynton Marsalis declares, about jazz, in an issue of the magazine of *Jazz* that "the music was always based around melody. Solos didn't come into fashion until Louis Armstrong," one has to wonder where he got his information. The exact origins of jazz are obscure and the original sounds of jazz or jazz-like playing are unknown. Certainly early jazz was about much more than melody, it was about rhythm and sonority, texture and invention; and the truth is, many of the earliest jazz performances contain solos. And we can guess about other aspects of the music's origins, but we have to understand and acknowledge that we are *guessing*, even if we do so with knowledge and research.

Marsalis is not alone in his assumptions, and his statements are symptomatic of a much greater problem. This problem is common to the jazz world, which has a particular and turtle-like tendency to withdraw from other types of music, to make little attempt to understand forms which are, at least on the surface, less technically sophisticated than jazz. This has the effect of cutting much of the jazz world off from the sources of American music, from the roots of performance and the hybrid, bastardized origins of so much American vernacular song. Thus, Richard Sudhalter, in his examination of white jazz, the book *Lost Chords: White Musicians and Their Contributions to Jazz, 1915-1945* can write, dismissively, about "the belief, widely held but thinly documented, that the true roots of jazz lie in Africa," and later add there is a point in the nineteenth century at which American syncopation diverges from a European model, but it's a "gray area, a phenomenon that has yet to be seriously explored by jazz researchers." His naiveté is somewhat shocking for a music historian; in the first place, an understanding of the African origins of jazz requires an understanding of the African origins of nearly all of America's native music, a perspective that encompasses the many types of music whose development runs in parallel to the development of jazz. Africa's connection to American music is not, as Sudhalter seems to require, simply a matter of direct transference and translation of foreign elements. It is a matter of a complex series of adaptations and changes, cultural retentions that involve rhythm and musical syntax, of odd patterns of time and custom, of what anthropologists call syncretism, or the adaptation to one culture by another.

And one can't look simply to Africa for a direct influence on jazz, because the centuries-old American

connections with Africa involve regional and tribal displacement and a complex series of cultural exchanges. But the connections are there, and they've been documented a thousand ways by intelligent and reasonable scholars, scholars who exist outside of the jazz research community, and of whom Sudhalter has no apparent knowledge. And on the issue of a supposed mysterious mid-nineteenth century emergence of syncopation, he is even further removed from reality. The development of an indigenous style of popular music in America in that century was the result of many things, of minstrelsy and of borrowings, both accurate and inaccurate, from slave song and from slave performers, not to mention informal street performances. The rise of African American styles to a position of dominance was a gradual but pervasive thing, witnessed and reported in cities and rural areas all over the United States. Syncopation and flexibly accented rhythm were at the root of the new music and dance, and the African slave Diaspora was at the root of syncopation and flexibly accented rhythm. And there is nothing mysterious about it.

American popular music is a complex and wonderfully multi-faceted organism. The range of vernacular music which has emerged in the United States is astonishing in its natural and unselfconscious multicultural diversity, *in* the way it has subsisted on both a folk and commercial realm. Though, once again, the jazz world is fond of saying that its music is America's sole original artistic contribution, they leave out, at their own historic peril, country and hillbilly music, ragtime and show music, minstrelsy and Tin Pan Alley, not to mention gospel, rhythm and blues and rock and roll. This kind of snobbery is endemic to jazz, indicative of attitudes that, ironically, mirror the kind of snobbery and isolation that jazz itself faced in its formative years.

I came to grips with all of this about seven or eight years ago. While working on a curriculum design for the history of jazz, I suddenly came to the conclusion that the jazz world, in all of its arguments about legitimacy and musical origins, as well as in its debates about current developments in the music, continually asks questions that ignore the true depth of American popular song. I subsequently wrote a book, *American Pop From Minstrel to M. J. O.: On Record, 1893-1956* (Cadence Jazz Books, 1998), in which I attempted to address this larger world view, to show that American music has thrived in a landscape that is much larger, more complex, and more complexly interconnected than is generally acknowledged. The clichés by which we, in the study of the music, tend to live by—like, for example, the all-encompassing sanctity of the blues—tend to blind us to this bigger, and much more interesting, picture.

I encountered the same problem as I began to write this book, a history of jazz for the period 1900 to 1950. I faced the same entrenched myths of jazz's conventional line of development, myths which excluded so many musicians and which functioned as gross oversimplifications. The *great man* theory of jazz—which tended to point merely to the historic signposts of Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, and so on—had the same weakness and fallacies as that old Great Books curriculum from the University of Chicago—it told the student that he need only master a finite and manageable timeline in order to grasp the essence of the form, that the line of history was one that ran in a straight and easily understandable direction. My own experience told me differently, that jazz history had become captive of not only academics with little real feeling for the music, but of populist historians who

had as tenuous a grip on the complexities of jazz, who substituted for the academy's customary and isolation-induced myopia a rigid ideology of their own. Thus, Wynton Marsalis could write in *The New York Times* about how essential the blues was to Duke Ellington's musical vocabulary, when the truth was that Duke came to the blues as an outsider by reason of class and background, as a craftsman who used them in ways that made them useful but not always indispensable, as an element that was more effect than cause. But the blues has become such an ideological necessity to musicians like Marsalis—who, like his mentor Stanley Crouch, and the writer Albert Murray, is so critical of anything which does not reflect their use—that he has no choice but to make them a central part of every musical argument.

In his book Sudhalter thought he was offering a great corrective to the currently limited and dominating perspectives of jazz history. The problem is, though he has done many important musicians an important historical service (it's great to see undeservedly obscure figures like Bud Freeman, Red Nichols, Miff Mole, and Jack Purvis get their due) he has also shown he is incapable of offering much more than lip service to important African American traditions. He essentially describes jazz as a co-equal creation of black and white America, as an equal fusion of Euro and African American elements. Not only does this incorporate some very conventional wisdom (of Euro-African fusion) it shows how little he knows of the pre-jazz era, of 19th century white shadowing of African American music, and the deep African and African American roots of all of American culture.

So I wrote this jazz history, and I tried to bring an unjaded perspective to a music which has come to be regarded with glib historical clichés. In the process I came to what felt like a rediscovery—of early, show tune ragtime, of obscure pianists like Gus Haenschen (a society musician who recorded the first instrumental blues in 1916), of the wondrous Al Jolson, of obscure figures like the early black New York cornetist Tom Morris, the fascinating reality of Paul Whiteman (who, in spite of what you may have heard on the PBS documentary *Culture Shock*, had quite a good early pop *and* jazz orchestra), of black ragtimers like Will Ezell, not to mention the great territory jazz groups of the 1920s and 1930s, who were the garage bands of their time. I came to the conclusion that jazz, with its continual challenge of invention and re-invention, will never fit into the boxes into which critics, academic and otherwise, try to fit it. The music lives, even in periods that have long been dead to us, by its power of discovery and its penchant, in these days of the musically predictable, for telling us something that we don't already know.

INTRODUCTION (2)

Why We're Here

I've long been annoyed and bored by most of the standard jazz histories, whether academically oriented or aimed at general audiences. Many are competently written, many are not, many are technically accurate, and many are sloppily designed, the work of amateur enthusiasts who mean well but lack the critical and literary skills to write the kind of works that *they* want to write. Other sources, like Tom Piazza's *History of Classic Recorded Jazz* have increasingly started to take on the character of some totalitarian government's official chronicle of events. They leave out key, and usually white, musicians, recognition of whom is frowned upon by certain racist and conventionally liberal critics and historians. Like figures in official disfavor who are airbrushed out of photos that pre-date their political apostasy, the absence of these musicians leaves strange and unexplainable historical gaps or consigns them to the status of mere historical footnote. Even Gunther Schuller, one of the most important and astute of our jazz historians, has woefully, I think, understated their value, neglecting or underrating people like Red Nichols and Bud Freeman, Fud Livingston and Frankie Trumbauer and the Original Dixieland Jazz Band.

This book is an examination of both jazz and the "other jazz," of both musicians frequently cited and musicians frequently excluded from histories, those who, if mentioned, tend to be spoken of as merely peripheral figures. My method in examining and dissecting the music has generally been the simplest and most direct of all—to go right to the primary sources themselves, to the recordings which are jazz's version of "the text" I believe that jazz, like any art form, has an aesthetic reality, an expressive life that may be divorced from its social reality, as important and peripherally relevant, and historically resonant, as that reality may be.

This book encompasses over thirty years of listening to the music, of discussing it with musicians and historians, academic and otherwise, and of voracious reading on the subject. Without weighing it down with an unwieldy number of footnotes, I have attempted to synthesize all of it—the hours upon hours of listening to records and live jazz performances, the reading of *jazz* histories, personal interviews with musicians I have known, and liner note information—not to mention my growing interest in American music independent of jazz, like minstrelsy, the blues, songsters, ragtime, gospel, Broadway and Tin Pan Alley, rhythm and blues and rock and roll. I can only hope that the subliminal and psychological placement of jazz into this larger context is good for my purpose, which is to give a fresh and honest look at the music and its musicians.

My motivations for doing this are many, but include, primarily, a desire to redress historical grievances, and not just those of white jazz musicians. I also mean to examine black musicians and singers like Clarence Jones, Thomas Morris, Pete Brown, Charlie Shavers, Walter Brown, Wilbur Sweatman and Will Ezell. The historical reality is that each of these people reflects some aspect of jazz and its expression, reflects not just the influence of jazz but its imprint on many different aspects of American popular music.

They need to be considered, to be made part of the official record, because they are not just passing figures but part of jazz's history in the deepest, Brechtian sense.¹ As much as any other musicians, they fought the daily battles for expressive freedom, and were the foot soldiers in the creation of a world of rhythmically assertive, intellectually complex music.

Let us not forget, as well, people like Nora Bayes, Marion Harris, Arthur Collins, Sophie Tucker, Stella Mayhew, the early Sousa Band, The Louisiana Five, Al Jolson, Irving Jones, Bert Williams, Chris Smith, Al Bernard, and other first-fifth-of-the-century remnants of minstrelsy, show entertainments, early jazz, and novelty ragtime. Even if we acknowledge that our view of jazz and its offshoots of these first twenty years is blocked by the racism that denied most African American performers access to the early recording horns, we still have to recognize that a body of early and interesting work exists on records. This work, if not readily available, is still accessible with a little research and effort. These records command our interest not merely as historical curiosities but as the first manifestations of a creative surge sparked by African American entertainments, inspired by the impulse toward rhythmic and improvisational freedom that would eventually spawn what others might call "the real jazz." I might quibble about such distinctions, but I won't spend a lot of time on such arguments because I think this music speaks, clearly and aesthetically, for itself.

There are other aspects of "the other jazz" that I mean to examine in this book, as well. These include not only such things as Russian Bolshevik trumpeters and American country guitarists, but the work of Duke Ellington as both a pianist and as a composer in the late 1940s, the short and long pieces that are too often considered to be the creative afterthoughts of a genius who did not, in actuality, categorize his own efforts in such a manner. There are Western Swingsters—"cowboys" like Bob Wills, Milton Brown, and Jimmie Revard—there are crossdressers like Frankie Half Pint Jaxon and Gladys Bentley, and there are alleged communists like Frankie Newton. There is the work of Louis Armstrong in the middle and late 1930s, which I consider to represent the height of his creative powers. Let us also not forget the music of Stan Hasselgard, Jimmy Raney, Barbara Carroll, Serge Chaloff, Bill Harris, Howard McGhee, Teddy Edwards, Tony Aless, Al Haig, or Lester Young in the late 1940s. I won't be the first to have noted the post-War records of Young, but they still need to be emphasized and included. And people like Haig, Aless and Carroll were not merely illustrious sidemen, but part of active and growing jazz scenes that may have culminated in greater fame for others, but not necessarily in more significant bodies of work.

Some Background

There are many different sources (some authoritative, some shallow, some silly) that detail, if not necessarily the origins of jazz, then its links to both Africa and to Southern plantation life of the 19th century. There have also been written some good relevant considerations of black American dance of the last several centuries. The truth is, if we try to trace jazz to a single root of the tree of American music we are doomed to failure, to oversimplification and the pursuit of long-dead intellectual ends. Jazz, particularly as it emerged during the first quarter of the 20th century, represented a very particular convergence of

many different strains of African American and American folk, religious, and popular expression.

Jazz contained, first of all, the motion of dance, a remnant of the hybrid forms of movement produced by the collision of European and African postures in the slaveholding South during the antebellum period. Aside from the obvious rhythmic inspiration dance offered, its early African American manifestation included a sometimes-frenzied interlude called a break, during which all other movement stopped while one lone dancer improvised a fill of new and varied steps. This was followed by a resumption, in "time," of the group dance; the relationship between this practice and some of the earliest forms of jazz (in which such "breaks," now purely musical, likely represented the first form of solo improvisation) is clear.²

Jazz grew, as well, from the attitude of 1890s "coon" songs, with their translation of some of ragtime's rhythmic ideas into more accessible turns of phrase, their adaptation of the piano rag's frequently elemental chord progressions, and their occasional appropriation of sly lyric hooks and double meanings from the oral culture of African Americans. The "coon" song itself had a symbiotic relationship with Tin Pan Alley and the new breed of professional songwriter, as both became prime sources of jazz's growing repertoire. The soul of ragtime, both formal and popular, was also woven into the melodic and rhythmic fabric of jazz, altered by the "novelty" aspect of its expression in early dance bands and Black show tunes, with their (to modern ears) rather sedate and quaint notions of syncopation.

Jazz embodied a strange (to this continent) but very unselfconscious and characteristically African American combination of creative religiousness, earthy sophistication, materialistic spiritualism, and sexual irreverence, derived from African notions of music's utilitarian place in daily life, from a pre-literate society's emphasis on oral means of communication, and a fusion of the poetic with the practical. In this jazz had more than a little bit of the spiritual quality of 19th century African American religious music, of that music's ecstatic and sustaining faith and daily, real-life application, all products of the Black church's decidedly un-ethereal idea of piety.

Jazz was also undoubtedly informed by the blues, with its stripping down of harmonic form into essentially diatonic repetition, its lyrical translation of Black life into relatively strict musical form, and its refusal to bow to the demeaning social conventions of much minstrel and "coon" song. Most importantly the blues codified, from common African American singing practices of the 18th and 19th century, the use of pleasing and satisfying forms of dissonance, now buried instinctively amidst the blues' common phraseology.

Another significant factor in jazz's development was American theater music of the 1920s, which had a relationship to it of both cause and effect. The new song forms introduced by such brilliant composers as Harold Arlen, George Gershwin, Jerome Kern and Richard Rodgers broadened jazz's repertoire and expanded its harmonic infrastructure. On the other hand, it is doubtful that these composers would have developed as they did without the liberating impetus of jazz's rhythms, its tonal inflections or verbal brashness.

Jazz also cannibalized the rhythms of the Latino Diaspora, which it at first simplified, than glorified, and than exploited. If jazz itself was sometimes gawked at as an example of domestic exotica, it was not

above exhibiting its own touristy exploitation of foreign mannerisms, its own simplistic notions of rumba and (much later) mambo madness.

Primarily jazz personified, with the fusion of all these elements, the African American's native genius at transformation, at rearranging and altering the musical and social elements of a strange and brutal new land into his and her own scheme of creation, at shaping and re-shaping universal and public domain ideas of scale and harmony to his and her own improvisational ends. Jazz (if not all jazz musicians) also benefited from white America's quick recognition of the new music's commercially liberating qualities, and from the white musician's unashamed and fearless adaptation of its unwieldy rhythms and melodic strains to, at first, somewhat staid and second-hand musical ends.

Jazz developed, as do so many forms of music, as a hybrid of transparent racial, ethnic, and historical styles, into a category of multi-cultural, multi-national utterance. Finally, and most significantly in the United States (and contrary to the claims of certain revisionists), the white jazz musician succeeded, before very long, in fusing jazz's techniques to a very individual and sometimes delicate approach, though full creative equality would not come until the second half of the 20th century.

Such equality would come at the expense of some commonly held racial dogmas, most significantly the notion that American musical culture is inextricably embedded in both aspects of color and in its community of origin. Integration, not merely physical but that of the marketplace and the airwaves, and the resultant democratization of taste and influence, changed forever the human equations upon which sociological determinists had long calibrated their own theories of race and music.

Chapter 1 -

BEFORE JAZZ

Minstrels, String Bands, Ragtime, Coon Songs, and Other Quirks of Rhythm

The 19th century (particularly the second half) was a time of great musical ferment in the United States. Not only did African American ideas of both dance and music come into broad public consciousness, they also became the dominant forces shaping American popular entertainment. The absence of actual audio recordings before the late 19th century is one obstacle facing us as we try to imagine the sound and shape of such music and dance; the early and general failure of record companies to record (North American) black performers is another and more significant one.

The earliest American recordings are a fascinating if sometime melodically limited melange of marches, minstrel song, operetta, theatrical song, and polite parlor piece, sometimes suffering the stiffness of pseudo-European musical postures and the starchy sound of performers uncomfortable with a new and awkward technology, at other times offering much more than just a hint that sometime new, musically, was in the air. In the late 1890s and early 1900s there were, particularly, a number of recordings made of minstrel and minstrel-like performers, ragtime singers and concert bands. We now have, as well, old songbooks filled with early and late minstrel melodies, sometimes reinterpreted and re-recorded by contemporary performers. We also have the written music of piano ragtime, of people like Scott Joplin, Joseph Lamb and James Scott, as interpreted by both current-day pianists and even, in one case (Lamb's), by the composer himself.

The minstrel show, which first became popular in the antebellum period, is considered by some to have been the first truly African-American derived and domestically indigenous form of popular entertainment. In the domestic sense this is not entirely accurate, as various schools of genteel song writing and performance (as well as more roughhouse forms) had established colonial beachheads long before the emergence of minstrelsy.³ Their 19th century interaction with both older and newer forms, with African American ideas of song as well as some wilder domestic strains (related mostly to Scotch-Irish influences) quickly defined a new and domestic idea of music, an idea which fit particularly well with minstrelsy's rebellious response to the Euro-taint of 19th century parlor performance.⁴

Though there has been a lot of debate about the minstrel show's relationship to "authentic" black music and dance, its early white performers clearly reflected, at the very least, some second-hand knowledge of African American performance.⁵ Beyond such speculation, an argument can probably be made that, in any case, establishing the true relationship of black to white in minstrelsy is not all that necessary. It might even be said that, essentially, early white performances represented as much an imagining of black style as they did a mimicking of black performance, and that the proportion of one to the other is unimportant. The most important thing in all this is the musical result, and though the process

may hold intense interest for us it in no way *changes* the results, except in the minds of those with certain ideological preconceptions. Even in their folk and more popular stages jazz and its antecedents were creative acts, and subject to the kinds of imaginative leaps and license that inform any such things. And, in the end, the clash of the idea of representational accuracy with the ideal of poetic truth, a classically American intellectual conflict of journalistic-like realism and imaginative license, is more of theoretical than musical concern.⁶

At any rate, the transmission of musical ideas and rhythms from black to white and then from white to white, and then, again, from white to white (and then, frequently, from white back to black), if not a happy sequence for purists, was a leveling factor in the development of an American musical sound. This music came not only from early plantation forms of music and dance, but from waterfront workers and honky tonk musicians, primitive early bands and tuxedoed society orchestras, and its odd routes of transmission account for some very specific, interesting and valid white performance practices (they also account for more direct and less diluted forms of black music which, by the very strength of their survival, have periodically rejuvenated all forms of American song).

Minstrelsy has other strong connections to not only the tradition of African American music but to the development of modern popular music and jazz of the 20th century. As Thomas Riis, in his book *Just Before Black Musical Theater in New York, 1890-1915*, has written, the minstrel stage offered a synthesis of two very different traditions, that of oral improvisation and that of strictly notated parlor musical performance. The art of oral improvisation, related closely to an oral tradition transported from Africa, was well known to African Americans as a kind of extemporaneous invention which called for a special and culturally specific kind of transformation, requiring a talent for altering the stuff of individual lives into communal sound and story. The parlor performance tradition was, at the time, largely the domain of white America, and its union with the oral tradition both predicted and led to radical changes in native popular music, to a new type of song of both vernacular informality and harmonic/melodic sophistication.

Other musical elements of the early minstrel stage are harder to trace in a specific way to the African and African American tradition, though there can be no doubt that many of its songs reflected at least a pass through the prism of black life. Minstrel compositions by a growing community of both black and white composers showed the dual nature of African American song, its celebration of both the spiritual and the salacious, elements that continued their uneasy coexistence into the 20th century, maintaining separate identities and crossing each other's path primarily in the pre-World War Two country blues.

There were active and successful professional black songwriters as early as the 1870s, like James Bland and Sam Lucas, and there were early touring black minstrel troupes. Black directors and performers altered elements of the minstrel show to fit their own specific talents and tolerances, leading to changing formats and, finally, to the late 19th and early 20th century stage productions that marked full African American creative independence. The route to professional liberation was largely predicated on

the magnification and synthesis of folk and cultivated elements in both ragtime and early black song, a process that led many musicians toward the new kind of music that we now call jazz. Fortunately for us this coincided with the development of recording technology, and the beginning of mass distribution of the mechanical means of sound reproduction (or, in other words, record players).

What were some other aspects of late 19th and early 20th century American musical practice to reach or influence the new business of recording? Ragtime was a great force, in both the purist sense (the composed rags of Joplin, etc.) and in its mutation into popular forms of ragtime song. Early tunes popularly labeled "coon" songs owed a lot to ragtime's forthright rhythmic stance, to popular ragtime's "new" emphasis on one form or another of syncopation (meaning, basically, the occasional stressing of so called "weak," or "up," beats).

Black show music of the time displayed a new and somewhat tentative independence from the racist conventions of even black minstrelsy, and white show music (with the parallel influence of black show music) began to liberate itself from the oppressive reach of European operetta. The brass band, one of the major bridges between American and European styles, became more and more of a domestic entity, with a rhythmic momentum that helped distinguish the American form from old world dance accents, though these were still significant factors in the shaping of performance styles. The march itself had a strange though very natural relationship to the emerging idea of "swing," to the idea of expansion and contraction that gave so much American rhythm its own unique (and, ultimately, African American derived) feel.

There was also vaudeville, which followed a route of late parallel development to the minstrel show. Though its origins were around the time of the Civil War, vaudeville developed most specifically as a form of variety show some fifteen years or so later. Many of the performers we will later speak of as having a place in early white forms of jazz, like Sophie Tucker, Nora Bayes, and Stella Mayhew, used vaudeville as a springboard to the much more prestigious Broadway stage. Early singers and instrumentalists (including many future jazz musicians) no doubt found it to be a vital training ground, in which minstrel remnants of blackface and "darkie" dialect lived well into the 20th century.?

Grossly underestimated (actually, generally unmentioned) in most jazz histories is the tradition of the African American string band. This tradition, though myopically ignored by early record producers, may be, in its merger with the wind ensemble, the truest key to the development of jazz as both a specific discipline and as an art form. The image of the brass and marching band may have more of a visceral and romantic appeal, but the tempering effect on early dance music of the combination of brass and string sonorities is probably closer, in its aesthetic lineage, to jazz's actual birth.

This yin-yang combination of string and brass is evident all over the African Diaspora, particularly in the Caribbean and other parts of the Americas, where American companies recorded black performers well before 1920. Early combos made up of black musicians in Puerto Rico, in Cuba, Trinidad, and Brazil

and recorded in the first part of the 20th century offer fascinating glimpses of the African method in both collision with and in isolation from Euro forces, in the throes of publicly issued declarations of cultural independence. These groups may lack the particular and peculiar influence of ragtime (and, thus, a specifically jazz-like lineage), but they do show that the musical idea of tempered steel and brass was far from new

The gentler dynamic of the brass/string group is a central aspect of early New Orleans music; New Orleans was, after all, as Dick Spottswood has pointed out relative to migration, "one more Caribbean port."⁸ New Orleans music, as bassist Pops Foster has testified in his autobiography, had much more to it than the tradition of "hot" playing. Its softer side, associated with a range of social events, was just as important to the professional development of its musicians (and ultimate development of the music) and represented a very distinct and gentle alternative to the brassy strut of its marching and second-line disciples. Even Louis Armstrong, consigned in his earliest recordings to groups labeled as variously sized "hot" ensembles, had a lyrical side that did not completely emerge until the 1930s and later.⁹ In his own autobiography he professed to like the opera to which he was exposed as a child, and it is well known that in later years he expressed admiration for the music that had "the sweetest sound this side of heaven," that of America's one-time king of New Year's Eve, Guy Lombardo.¹⁰

The Great White Way

Though some historians have played down the significance of early 20th century white recordings, labeling them as stiff and lacking in real jazz-type syncopation, they've missed the point. There is contained in these recordings a newly emerging and distinctive American popular rhythmic style that will link itself through these performances and performers to early expressions of jazz.

We don't know with certainty the full range of real syncopation that African American musicians were practicing in the late years of the 19th century and early years of the 20th; the methods of white peers and copyists were likely, as we've said, learned at second, or even greater than second, hand. We do know, on recorded evidence, however, that black performance styles stood out in real relief to those of whites, and we have recordings of vocal groups, with their ragged (or raggy) vocalizations to prove it.¹¹ But we can be reasonably certain that, in the public mind, the new way of playing and singing was a powerful departure from older forms of performance. It was in this very rebellion, conscious and unconscious, against the European standard that the liberating force of "the other" jazz could be felt, in the power of new white performance styles and the sound of aggressive white singers singing their own rhythmic declarations of independence. This they did even as they probably lied to themselves, sometimes claiming sole credit for musical ideas that were, at the very least, racially collective, and succeeded in a system that viciously excluded black performers. Certainly there was more than a little bit of self-deception involved in the white appropriation of new and jazzy mannerisms, in the undoubtedly paternalistic attitudes that likely involved convincing themselves that by popularizing certain and very specific African American ideas of song and movement they were actually doing those excluded black performers a great favor.

It's very hard to imagine the sound of American music of the so-called "Gay 90s," or of the turn of the century. Any mental soundtrack that we can conjure up is inevitably dominated by the echoes and images of film and television portrayals of the era, by the plunking of a prepared piano in the setting of an old barroom, or by the dreamy strains of a ragtime piece. This early history is further obscured by the dearth of surviving written documentation of the popular musical habits of the African American community, as well, as I've said, by the early recording industry's failure to archive the work of black North Americans in any real numbers. Contemporary research in old African American newspapers has helped fill in some of the blanks by providing citations for theatrical appearances and contemporary journalistic testimony, but we can only conclude that as much (or probably more) has been lost in the mists of history as has been discovered by diligent historians.

In his early professional days Scott Joplin made his living playing some form of popular piano style in black honky tonks, and we can only presume that the style he worked in was related to the sound of early ragtime. Several schools of historic ragtime have lined up on opposite sides of an argument about just what constitutes a rag; some make a claim for only the formal and written aspects of the music, as personified by Joplin, Lamb, Scott et al., and others advocate a broader interpretation, as in early ragtime and coon songs. The truth is that the rag has come to be defined in so many ways as to make hopeless any attempt to limit its musical scope. Blind Blake played ragtime guitar, as did the Reverend Gary Davis; Blind Boy Fuller sang his rags, Freddie Keppard improvised in a ragtime style, and Bunk Johnson no doubt considered his origins to be in ragtime. Irving Berlin composed popular ragtime songs,¹² and Mike Bernard played ragtime on the piano, both in ways that would never be confused with those of African Americans. The reality was that by the time of Berlin's earliest flowering, ragtime stood for a new kind of music that was not merely (or always) syncopated, but "peppy," rhythmically driven by a new vernacular style of melody and lyric. This vernacular style could be traced back to the secular music of slavery or to an early songwriter like Stephen Foster, to an early popular approach that emphasized the spirit and rhythm of black music and musicians, but which also applied the old-time sound of the white Scottish and Irish settlers of the Southern states.

In some recent banjo recordings of early minstrel sheet music we can hear these forces interacting.¹³ In these, the gentle and consonant sound of the Irish jig is meshed with a new kind of dance, with the white minstrel's acquired taste of slave steps. What we hear is both tame and a little bit daring, mixing occasional syncopated figures over a usual two-beat rhythm, with overlapping diatonic and pentatonic melodies. There's no way of knowing with what kind of rhythmic abandon early instrumentalists played these tunes, but many of these current-day interpretations sound right, like the tentative first steps of a musical genre still in the process of self definition.¹⁴ This is not American song at its most uninhibited or indigenous, and yet the sound of it is new and unique, energized by a sense of careful frivolity, melodic freshness, the relative innocence of its lyrics, and by the banjo's singular resonance.

Minstrels weren't the first or only white Americans to pick up on the sound of the music of the vernacular. Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829-1869) was an American piano virtuoso and a native of New

Orleans who successfully translated native melodies and rhythms to the keyboard in a somewhat formal, and written, manner. A contemporary of Stephen Foster and the beginning of the age of the professional songwriter, Gottschalk made his reputation and living touring the world as a concert pianist. His travels took him to South and Central America, whose native musics not only re-enforced the Latino tendencies of his home city, but also further exposed him to the effect of the African Diaspora on Latin music and rhythm. His own compositions for piano were fascinating and prophetic realizations and transpositions of the popular/vernacular style to the concert stage, lacking in either condescension or affectation.¹⁵

I won't take the oversimplified approach of attempting to make direct links between some early musical formats and jazz. It seems clear that different musical strains, the convergence of which at certain musical nexuses produced the kind of stylized rhythmic and melodic interpretations of music that we call jazz, followed parallel paths in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. No single aspect of early music may be cited as the sole antecedent of jazz, which we might define, in its earliest phase, as the product of a new and freer kind of melodic paraphrase crossed with dance-defined rhythms, the result of the overlapping of diatonic, pentatonic, and chromatic scales, and of the collision of formal and folk-derived instrumental techniques.

A parenthetic but significant influence on developing 20th century jazz practices was 19th century brass training, particularly as expressed by virtuosos like the cornetist Herbert Clarke. The development of a "light" classical repertoire and its juxtaposition of an articulate soloist with a subservient wind ensemble presages Louis Armstrong's pre-Swing and Swing Era flights of fancy. Did Armstrong hear Clarke? If not Clarke specifically, he must have known and understood the format and felt its liberating possibilities.

Recorded Minstrelsy on the Rag: Military Bands, Show Tunes and Vaudeville Days

At the start of the 20th century the minstrel tradition remained strong, as we hear in some recordings of the time. Arthur Collins, a successful singer of this era, sang with the occasional asides of the "darkie" dialectician; the increasing transparency of these asides reflected, at least on recordings, the fact that white singing was changing, a change that signaled the beginning of a recognizable white pop/jazz style, with probable references to black models but also its own distinct cadences.

A lot of material clearly defined, at least in a white market sense, as ragtime, was recorded before 1920, and the term "coon shouter," used in minstrel and vaudeville showcases, became the descriptive term for people like singer May Irwin, who regularly sang black songs from a black perspective. While Collins had a relatively small, if effective, singing voice, Irwin sounded like a tough old broad, as in her well-known version of *The Bully*, a song that originated in African American folk sources. More jazzy was Irwin's version of *When You Ain't Got No Money You Needn't Come Around*, from 1907, which gives

us some idea about the merging of theatrical conventions with new ideas of syncopation.

Arthur Collins was more novelty and humor, and made an early recording of one of the most durable of minstrel tunes, *Bill Bailey Won't You Please Come Home*, in an effective talking/singing manner. Some of this style of presentation obviously had to do with the primitive methods of acoustic recording, which required its own kind of projection and enunciation, so we have no way of knowing how these renditions compared to those performed in front of audiences. There is, however, a great deal of folksy exaggeration in the singing of Arthur Collins,¹⁶ which gives it the appearance, at least, of authenticity, of someone trying to faithfully reproduce for the recording horn the sound of a living per-

formance.¹⁷ A song even more centrally located in the timeline of popular ragtime's song style is *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, which Collins recorded with his partner Byron Harlan in 1911. Some have assailed it as foreign to real ragtime or jazz because it lacks, to some ways of thinking, actual syncopation or ragtime feeling. This not only disregards freer ideas of phrasing (to which this durable melody is so easily adaptable), it misses the point about its lyrical summation of all that was going on in the turbulent world of Tin Pan Alley song-writing in the early 20th century.

Collins and Harlan were an important team, and probably the most significant stylists working in the early and largely undefined world of jazz and jazz singing. In a few years they recorded songs with more specific jazz reference (*That Funny Jas Band From Dixieland* from 1917); their whole manner of presentation indicated that theirs was a key stream of what would become the early 20th century waterfall of minstrelsy/ragtime/jazz, and in the assimilation of hitherto separate styles and schools of singing and playing. Collins, in particular, was a singer with more than just an idea of how to give a song that certain feeling, of smart-guy minstrel smirk coupled with material control and genuine musicality. His continual appropriation of the tradition and his perceptive musical comments (hear also his *Ruff Johnson's Harmony Band*, which he recorded in 1915 and which Gene Green covered later) all show his talent for early jazz. It's unfortunate that his reputation has remained so stagnant through the years, as he was a singer of uncredited and enormous significance.¹⁸ His stylistic resemblance to Bert Williams, an early African American theatrical performer, is also notable, though there is, unfortunately, no way of knowing how much, if anything, one got from the other.

Other singers, like the minstrel Len Spencer, recorded with more extravagant Negro-isms, with the kind of references to watermelon patches and pickanninies that make them sound more dated and offensive to contemporary ears. Still, Spencer, as on his pre-turnof-the-century reading of *Climb de Golden Fence*, had a good deal of early (almost) jazz feeling, an idea of swing and energy that, in the absence of more convincing African American recordings, gives us at least a partial picture of pre-jazz practices. His recording of *On Emancipation Day* (ca. 1902), a very fine and carefully crafted reading of a song that was from an early show starring Bert Williams and William Walker, has particular significance in the absence of any version recorded by the stars¹⁹ and gives us what is very likely a very good

idea of the sound of the early black stage.

In those early days of recording another of the more common formats was that of the neo (or pseudo-) military band. Military groups were usually record company house bands, and had monikers like Voss' 1st Regiment, the Columbia Orchestra, the Victor Military Band, the Metropolitan Orchestra, or the Zon-O-Phone Concert Band. Sometimes they went by their leader's name, as in the case of Walter B. Rogers' unit, Prince's Dance Orchestra, or, to cite the best known, the John Philip Sousa and Sousa/Pryor bands, led first by one of the founders of the American march style and then by Arthur Pryor, a trombonist and skilled arranger/composer.

These bands all carried the military march beat which must not only have been very popular at the time but which also, with its heavy list, must have been easiest for the early acoustic recording studios to deal with. Some groups were definitely more interesting than others, not to mention more swinging, like the New York Military Orchestra, whose *Hungarian Bag* from 1913²⁰ is a great snapshot of early Americana (though composed, not surprisingly, by a Hungarian), or Voss' 1st Regiment Band, which has a contagious beat not unrealized on even 100-year-old recordings like *Aunt Dinah's Supper Party*. The Sousa and Sousa/Pryor band also makes sense of its popular material, giving us in 1901 a rare early transcription of Gottschalk (*Pasquinade*),²¹ and showing itself to have a firm grasp of an early idea of vernacular rhythm in recordings like *St. Louis Rag* from 1906.²² Pryor did much of their writing, and he obviously had an appreciation for the changes occurring in the body musical.

The beginnings of an American concept of swing were related to the liberation of the beat by military and marching bands North, South, and West, and Sousa's group was more liberated than most. Like others of these sometimes stiff organizations its public approach was typically dictated by the demands of the popular ragtime style, and with its two-beat regularity and usual emphasis on the subdivision of the sixteenth note, its typical pop repertory was a not-so-distant cousin of the classic rag. Bands like this also adapted, as a condition of survival, to the varieties of public dance tastes, to the growing demand for "hot" playing and its application to even supposedly foreign forms like the popular polka.

These brass-dominated organizations were almost all essentially dance bands, and they were working frantically to adapt to the apparently insatiable public appetite for the newer forms of pop music. The Victor Military Band, for one, which operated as a house group for that label, was, though sometimes stodgy and workaday in its interpretations, made up of obviously talented musicians who could rise to certain occasions. *Blame It On the Blues*, which it recorded in 1914, is a crucial and early proto-big band performance of a Tin Pan Alley tune by what is almost a jazz band in the making. Most importantly and significantly, for our purposes, and against what may have been the better judgment of contemporary recording company executives, it almost *swings*. Ragtime soon became a world music, and we find its creation and reproduction in some surprising places. Several years back, on a lecture tour for the United States Information Agency in Germany, I played two early recorded rags as a kind of blindfold test for my audiences. They were almost always shocked to learn that these wonderfully played and fully idiomatic works were performed not by American bands but by the "Orchester Des Palais De Danse,

Berlin," a German unit which recorded them (*Temptation Rag* and *Black and White Rag*) in 1912 and 1913.

The king of "classic" rags, not only in current image but also in historical reality, was Scott Joplin, though he was but one of a musical triumvirate, along with James Scott and Joseph Lamb. Architects and visionaries of "classic" ragtime, of piano works with a specific formal design, these men didn't lack for followers and disciples. Ragtime, however, was composed not only by these "formalists" but by a growing school of professional songwriters, both the talented and ordinary laborers of the rising industry of professional songwriting. The professional songwriter's m.o., then as now, was the formula, hook, and/or novelty, but his search for the next sheet music "hit" led not only to formulaic pap but to a new kind of composition with roots in Joplin and his disciples.

The work of these professional ragtime songwriters lives on in old recordings, in piano rolls and in old sheet music, and though we may be uncertain of how accurate the piano rolls reproduce the composers' original intentions (subject as they were to editing and augmentation), they no doubt, in a very particular way, let us in on the sound of early music, truncated and altered from its original form as it may sometimes have been for the ever-present player piano. Their range of songwriting methods is broad, from pieces that genuflect before the classic style to songs that echo late minstrelsy's smug and unsubtle lampooning of African American speech, dress, and manner. The greater body of popular ragtime contained, however, neither crudely racist caricature nor formal renderings of Euro-American ideas, but workaday portrayals of love and humor and sentimentalized ideas of death and courtship, in songs that formed the basis for the repertoire of countless minstrel-influenced 20th century singers. One in particular, the future Grand Old Opry star Uncle Dave Macon, appreciated minstrelsy's unkempt sentimentality, its merging of weepy memory song with misogynist tirade, its habitual irreverence and ability to be almost all things musical to all kinds of people, both drunk and sober.

Still other rag composers produced more middle-of-the-road works that might be called "light" classic ragtime (with a nod to the classic rag's approach to form but without its creative gravity or consistent design), but it was the more straight-forward of minstrelsy's songs that became, as the 20th century developed, the common language of domestic popular music.

Many of the old piano rolls of ragtime's early songs have a strangely appealing robotic vitality to them. A few examples are Neil Moret's *Cubanola*, with its seemingly Gottschalk-like appropriation of Latin melody and rhythm, Kerry Mills' enormously popular cakewalk, *At A Georgia Camp Meeting*, Adeline Sheperd's *Black and White Rag*, with its populist reference to the cultivated tradition, and Arthur Marshall's vernacularization of Joplin (regal melody, less formal design) in *Silent Rocket*. Tom Turpin, a contemporary of Joplin's and one of the earliest and most proficient of ragtime composers, wrote delicately pretty pieces like *St. Louis Tickle* and more robust things like *Pan Am Rag*, with its smart, rhythmically altered middle section; E. Philip Severn wrote *Jungle Time*, which, despite its title, is a carefully and seriously constructed work, and Abe Holzman, in the popular *Smoky Smokes*, used right hand figures which either influenced, predicted, or mimicked the kind of stops that would eventually be

heard in the early work of jazz piano pioneer James P. Johnson. Charles Hunter titled one of his best works, quaintly, *Possum and Taters*, and it was a pop piece in the best sense of the word, owing its freshness and originality to its lack of rhythmic and melodic cliché, its avoidance of the kind of musical caricature that makes some early rag pieces sound like either provincial ditties or sarcastic send-offs of black style.

Their muses were clearly both the parlor and backroom types of white and African American musicians, and these new composers were not only black but white; by their efforts the fresh breeze of creativity blowing through the ragtime era (roughly 1890-1917) carried African American rhythms throughout the country, and it's no accident that these startling musical changes were occurring in the half-century after the Civil War and emancipation. A new black and nationalist political and cultural liberation movement was stirring and its voices, though often divided by region and self interest, education and ideology, were heard in everything from the intense and inspired writing of Frederick Douglass to the quietly passionate treatises on black education of Booker T. Washington; in the ironic fictional and thoughtful biographical musings of James Weldon Johnson, and the cold-eyed, uncompromised, yet pragmatic political philosophizing of W.E.B. Du Bois; in the new and unconventional show music of Bert Williams and William Walker, the developing musical and business independence of band/orchestra leaders like James Reese Europe and Wilbur Sweatman, and in the nationalist political organizing of Marcus Garvey; and in the development of black-owned businesses (and later the first black-owned record label) in places like New York City, not to mention the newly racially respectful style of show music composed by the likes of Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle.

Ragtime was a music of enormous significance though, as much as we understand its stylistic implications and scope, it still remains, in the material sense and in its direct relationship to jazz, largely a mystery. We know little of its practitioners' musical experiences, the stages of their musical development, the specific sequences of their musical educations.²³ We're dependent, in evaluating it, on piano rolls and old sheet music and a relative handful of recording — relative, that is, to what must have been an enormous volume of professional domestic activity. And because Black (North) American instrumental music went largely unrecorded (before 1920), and because the record business itself was scattered in its attentions, we lack much clear contemporaneous evidence of the side of ragtime that probably led directly to the new rhythm patterns of jazz improvisation.

The earliest and most fascinating artifact we have of ragtimers' attempts to liberate themselves from the music's conventional cadences is a recording from 1912 by a white vaudevillian named Roy Spangler of a piece called *Red Onion Rag*. *Red Onion Rag* is rendered with remarkable swing and a sense of idiomatic prophecy, with more (pre) jazz feeling than most of composer/pianist Eubie Blake's early solos, and with as much momentum as those of the first great and visible jazz pianist, James P. Johnson.

One might argue that a comparison with James P. is irrelevant, as popular ragtime players had much different aims than performers of the early jazz of the stride era. Both men, however, were part of an effort to circumvent some of the narrower strictures of ragtime's performance practices, to break away

from its neo-classical conventions. Note, particularly (and somewhat shockingly) the start-stop rhythm which Spangler introduces about halfway through the performance. This is a technique we hear ten and more years later in recordings of stride pianists like Johnson, and which soon became a staple of the stride style, and which we might otherwise have presumed was a creation of the early New York pianists. Spangler, a veteran of vaudeville and traveling shows, had as much feeling for the music as any other pianist who recorded in the first quarter of the 20th century and yet we know virtually nothing about him, reminding us once more (if we need to be reminded) of how elusive the true origins of any popular style really are.

All of this reinforces the difficulty of relying solely on recordings to trace musical development. Though we have early anecdotal evidence as well we are still left wondering not only what musicians but what styles were left undocumented between Spangler's 1912 rendition and the middle 1920s explosion of white and black jazz recording.²⁴ Judging by the work of some of his disciples (which we will discuss later on), it is even likely that James P. Johnson left a part of himself outside of the studio in his early professional years, though the puzzle of why he may have done so is probably unsolvable.

And yet — and yet there are some amazing and tantalizing hints to be found from time to time, hidden in what seems, sometimes, to be the secret storeroom of American popular music. For example, Gus Haenschen, a pianist who later used the name Carl Fenton to lead what was apparently a society band, made a striking and astonishing recording in 1916 which we might just want to call the very first jazz record — if that were not too simple and insufficient a designation. In that year Haenschen/Fenton recorded something called *Sunset Medley* accompanied by drummer J. T. Schiffer, and what it (and Haenschen) reveals confirms all that we may have suspected about how little we really know about this whole transitional period of American music. The initial strain of the medley is a blues played with ragtime lilt, the first, as far as we know, strictly blues instrumental committed to record (the Victor Military Band had recorded W.C. Handy's *Memphis Blues* in 1914, but only one strain of that was a blues). This blues strain not only seems to imply or predict some idea of stride piano (a style which would represent perhaps the first radical keyboard break from ragtime into jazz), it is strung together with some popular melodies, during the last of which he takes a very interesting and poised jazz-like break.

Who was Gus Haenschen, and was it an accident that he recorded this in St. Louis, with its Midwestern and Southwestern ties, and its tight connection to the black barrelhouse piano tradition that presumably nourished the introduction of ragtime in some of its most significant forms (nee, in particular, Scott Joplin)? We may never really have definitive answers to any of these questions, though they are questions that we must, repeatedly, ask.

Irving's Ragtime Friends

If rhythm was ragtime's business, there was still no consensus on its metronomic setting, either within or outside of the classic ragtime repertoire. Some schools of thought have held that pieces by the likes of Joplin, Scott, and Lamb should be played precisely as written, with no variation or

embellishment. Others say that these works beg for interpretive freedom, for variances in tempo and phrasing that reflect their living tradition.

While issues of embellishment and improvisation in classic ragtime are problematic, we have some good ideas of the form's original conventions of tempo. Scott Joplin, as is well known, warned pianists never to play the music too fast, but more compelling is the example we have as set by one of the music's primary sources, Joseph Lamb. A disciple of Joplin who outlived the master by many years and who wrote some of the classic form's most graceful rags, he was discovered by Sam Charters in the 1950s to be alive and well and living in the borough of Queens, New York City. Fortunately he was still able and willing to play, and his renditions of his own work, if sometimes technically hindered by a lack of practice, may prove the moderates in the debate to have the advantage. Lamb's interpretations are loose yet never really stereotypically "raggy," of medium speed but relaxed and never stodgy or stiff. One might make the argument that this evidence was recorded some forty or fifty years after the fact, making it invalid; Charters' interviews with Lamb, however, show him to have been completely uninvolved in the music business for some time and isolated from the radical social and musical changes that had taken place. He had spent little or no time keeping up with trends, instead living his life in familial isolation. Because of this it seems very likely that his approach to performance had remained largely unchanged, faithful to its early 1900s origins.

This doesn't invalidate other approaches, which are legitimate reconstructions of early ideas of playing. As a matter of fact, Joplin's cautionary warning against playing ragtime too fast probably tells us that stylistic schisms have always existed, that, even in his day, interpretation was an issue. It's likely that popularizers of the form were already stretching boundaries of tempo, and introducing new notions of pop virtuosity. These notions would quickly spread — as we know from the testimony of people like Eubie Blake, Willie the Lion Smith and James P. Johnson, the idea of virtuosity for its own sake was not foreign to the early days of "sporting house" piano cutting contests, contests which, at least some of the time, seem to have taken on many of the characteristics of athletic competitions.

Speed, while not a virtue in itself, does not rule out swing and subtlety; witness the world of difference between early popular ragtime pianist Mike Bernard's shallow rhythmic skimming and the deep and passionate rapidity of James P. Johnson. For a later parallel, compare Bud Powell's up-tempo flights to those of Oscar Peterson. While Powell's are filled with mid-air and sharp but subtle shifts of phrasing and accent, Peterson's have all the subtlety of an express train (or a player piano). The issue is not speed but idiomatic interpretation, the ability of an instrumentalist to express nuances of time and touch at any tempo, and with dynamic range to boot.²⁵

It is unlikely, based on some later recorded evidence, that even the most radical innovators of ragtime/honky tonk music played, in the early 1900s, with crazed syncopation. What seemed radical to some observers of the time would probably seem much more conventional to us, accustomed as our ears are to 100 years of musicians rebelling against ideas of rhythmic conformity.

There are other interpretative issues. For example, one of the biggest problems with contemporary

ensembles that play turn-of-the-century music, whether classic ragtime or popular ragtime, is that so many of their members come out of the world of classical music and tend to approach notation with an overly formal idea of tradition. They usually lack any real sense of vernacular dance motion, and the frequent result is lifeless ensemble playing. The antidote to this is not necessarily careless abandon (though that's one alternative); a musician needs an internal rhythmic clock set to vernacular time, an appreciation of the transitional idea of swing that this music reflected and an understanding of how ragtime represented both a collision and an accommodation of vernacular and classical ideas of dance and rhythm.

Joshua Rifkin was a classical pianist who helped spark the Scott Joplin revival of the 1960s with his seemingly faithful re-creations of the original rags, but just compare these to the rag performances of another pianist, Knocky Parker. Rifkin's interpretations aren't bad, but Parker shows brilliantly how the ragtime tradition can be made to live, without caricature. His playing breathes with a very personable introversion, and his slight embellishments of the Joplin canon never lack continuity or purpose.²⁶

Many of those who participated in the inaccurately-labeled New Orleans Revival of the 1940s and 1950s, particularly African American veterans of the early New Orleans musical wars like Bunk Johnson and Mutt Carey, were also (unofficial) advocates of a particular school of ragtime interpretation. Though we'll get into more detail about their music in a later chapter, these musicians combined updated, if still somewhat provincial, ideas of rhythm with old-style notions of ensemble discipline and even older, rag-like concepts of embellishment. These concepts had originally been based on the popular model of ragtime, and their development into much more sophisticated methods of polyphony failed to disguise, even in the 1940s and 1950s, their debt to that archaic form. The appeal of these groups to new audiences had a lot to do with their very pleasing use of both tonal and rhythmic dissonance and their juxtaposition of seemingly primitive textures with eternally sophisticated and indigenously African American ideas of swing. In their own odd way they were a very self-contained modernist movement, giving life to an increasingly abstract idea of ragtime.

One early type of song included in the general ragtime category was the cakewalk. The cakewalk had legitimate slave/plantation origins, as an early form of black dance that parodied the ruling class. It was a lowbrow corruption of highbrow ambition, a cynical take on the false Southern aristocracy's idea of cultivated posturing in pseudo-European dances. These stiff-backed steps were grist for the mill of slave satire, though, in creating a caricature of the master's pretensions, slaves turned white laughter upon both whites and upon themselves. On the one hand the cakewalk was a sharp depiction of white vanity, of the absurdity of people trying to develop cultivated sensibilities in the midst of something as depraved as slavery; on the other hand whites, who loved watching blacks assume high-falutin' poses while wearing raggedy-fancy clothes, saw in these slave shows not themselves but something which would become a minstrel prototype: the hopelessly and hilariously deluded Negro with designs upon a class status he could never, by his very nature, achieve. Late in the 19th century the cakewalk became another Tin Pan

Alley spinoff of ragtime, a form of instrumental ragtime song. No longer a plantation phenomenon, it was now just another commercial hook, one held in some contempt by today's more formalist critics of ragtime. It may, however, have greater significance, as not only an early type of American popular song but as a route to the development of jazz.

Intertwined as it was with the idea of syncopated dance, the cakewalk had a vernacular association, a connection with ideas of rhythm and movement less formal than those of classic ragtime (though it was, not surprisingly, very much a part of the popular ragtime style). It was usually played with a two-beat rhythm, subdivided, like ragtime, into sixteenth notes. Early *jazz* would place its basic emphasis upon the eighth note (a subdivision very close in feeling to the sixteenth), as well as on the coupling of eighth and quarter note triplets.

This transition, from the idea of the sixteenth to the idea of the eighth note, was accompanied by a change in perceptual emphasis. Eighth notes placed together, in order to swing in a jazz way, were now played almost as dotted eighths followed by sixteenths, with varying degrees of herky-jerkyness. This marked a radical change from formal ragtime's austere Euro-rhythmic consensus, a change that may have been first suggested in the rhythmic wake of the cakewalk's syncopated swagger.

The popular cakewalk was the ultimate dance music of the time, the realization of new and growing ideas of swing. The idea of it continued to capture the imaginations of historians for many years; a recording released in 1904 on the Zon-O-Phone label in 1904 called *Rooster Dance* was, many decades later, dubbed for re-release on several different LPs of early pre-jazz music and labeled *Cakewalk* (at the time the title was unknown). Though there is no way of knowing whether this was the original intent of *Rooster Dance*, it came, in those collections, to portray a contemporary idea of that historic dance, to represent a transference of contemporary historic ideas and hopes. Happily and significantly the recording, by a white band (Hager's Orchestra), is much more engaging than most other (usually "military") band recordings of the day, and seemingly on the verge of a very early, pre-jazz, form of musical levitation.²⁷

One of the most perceptive looks at ragtime's place in the cultural liberation of both black and white America is Professor Berndt Ostendorf's essay on E.L. Doctorow, *The Musical World of Doctorow's Ragtime*. To Ostendorf the musical form of ragtime in both its classic and popular sense embodied and symbolized a new era for the African American artist. As he writes:

...to be "black and proud" was much harder in 1896. The first and hardest job, and this is what ragtime was all about, was to overcome the unthinking racism of minstrelsy inscribed in musical taste as in cultural behavior.

Even in those days before the Harlem Renaissance there breathed a black cultural underground movement aided and abetted by sympathetic white audiences and by whites in the music business, a growing number of whom were immigrant Jews. Referring to early black entertainment figures like Bert Williams and William Moore, Bob Cole, Will Marion Cook, Gussie L. Davis, Paul Laurence Dunbar,

James Reese Europe, and James and Rosamond Johnson, Ostendorf tells us that

Their historical role has not been properly acknowledged by mainstream historians of American culture. These young blacks represented a recognizable urban cohort that was subversively active in the creation of new types of American popular entertainment. The irony and subversion lie in the fact that the Americanization of music through ragtime resulted in the blackening of American musical grammar at the worst possible moment in race relations. And to add ethnic insult to nativist injury immigrant Jews were its midwives or secondliners. Most American music in the twentieth century is of course black-derived, but ragtime marks that crucial moment when black music began to set the agenda. Before it was "Swanee River" and "After the Ball," now it was "Alexander's Ragtime Band" by Irving Berlin and "Shuffle Along" by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake.²⁸

In reality the musical actions of these black performers and composers were not as culturally radical as they may appear, in historical hindsight, to have been. Though African Americans did, through their musical efforts, affect a powerful and significant historical transformation of American popular song, one form of music (black) did not replace the other (white). Instead they co-existed as popular and commercial entities with equal prominence, part of continually evolving ideas of native musical populism.