Cultural Daily

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America's Duet of Music and Race

Dennis McNally · Wednesday, October 29th, 2014

This is an excerpt from 'On Highway 61: Music, Race, and the Evolution of Cultural Freedom,' just published by Counterpoint Press.

The great black migration had transformed Harlem from a small middle-class neighborhood with housing designed for sixty thousand into a city-within-a- city of three hundred thousand, mixing poor immigrants with the more prosperous residents of Sugar Hill and Strivers' Row. Then came the rise of the glamorous and exotic nightlife of Harlem, the (segregated) Cotton Club, Connie's Inn, and Small's Paradise, where white celebrities like Dorothy Parker and Eugene O'Neill came to play, as well as more outré attractions like Hazel Valentine's sex circus on 140th Street, which was definitely not open to the public, although available to those with discriminating tastes. If people wanted exotic Harlem, they could buy it.

Intellectually, black minds stretched ever further away from the nineteenth century's horrors. Having fought and contributed significantly to the American war effort, a minority became interested in Marcus Garvey's Pan-Africanism, but almost all were ready to grow. Among other responses, Howard University professor of philosophy Alain Locke published *The New Negro* in 1925, and what came to be called the Harlem Renaissance bloomed. Unfortunately, the intellectual basis of the movement was severely constricted, bound up in the inherently elitist concept of uplift.

Locke was a Harvard graduate and Oxford Rhodes Scholar who wanted high culture to "lift the race," and thought jazz would be great—once it had been absorbed into symphonies, like the work of William Grant Still. As Sterling Brown summed him up, "For Locke, if Stravinsky liked it, it had to be good. And that's bad."

W. E. B. Du Bois, perhaps the preeminent mind of the day, black or white, had the same conflicts. He and Locke, for instance, celebrated the career of Roland Hayes, who was able to sell out Carnegie Hall with a program of European art songs and spirituals so Europeanized that the spirit appeared lost to many. Du Bois respected the spirituals, but jazz brought out his genteel Victorianism. Just as (mostly young) white people were celebrating the twentieth-century jazz attack on Victorian repression, Locke and Du Bois defended, as one scholar put it, "sublimation, Western rationalism, and the Protestant work ethic." Du Bois was revolted by what he saw as Carl Van Vechten's primitivist sexual fantasies, and saw him as a vampire preying on black people.

Van Vechten was the great white patron of the Harlem Renaissance, and he would deserve great credit for his championing of various black artists. His friend James Weldon Johnson would say so, writing to him that "you have been one of the most vital factors in bringing about the artistic

emergence of the Negro in America." Johnson would also wonder at the callous thoughtlessness that would go into Van Vechten's choice of title for his most famous book, *Nigger Heaven.*

Among the best-known black intellectuals, folklorist and Barnard graduate student Zora Neale Hurston and poet Langston Hughes would reject the Locke/Du Bois assumptions about high culture. Hughes saw the blues as having their own power as "urban folk music, and a proletarian art form rich in political implications." Hurston objected to Du Bois's characterization of the spirituals as "sorrow songs," seeing a much wider world within them, and criticized concert spirituals as "squeezing all of the rich black juice out of our songs and presenting a sort of musical octoroon to the public."

Hughes was of special stock; his maternal grandmother's husband had been one of the five black men killed with John Brown. Raised by a strong grandmother, he projected a proud racial consciousness that presided over a diverse black folk culture. His blues poetry seemed spontaneous, and he championed the blues, "as fine as any folk music we have." Perhaps it was simply that Hurston and Hughes were of a new generation, a little more comfortable with the world.

In the end, the primary impact of African American culture on mainstream America in the 1920s was through jazz, and the true flower of the Harlem Renaissance and the "New Negro" was the work of one Edward Kennedy Ellington, the greatest American composer of any stripe, who did exactly what Locke wanted—create a polished African American art that used the elements of blues and jazz among other forms to create one of America's most remarkable bodies of music.

Though Manhattan would become the jazz capital of America by the late 1920s, it would take Fletcher Henderson of Georgia and Duke Ellington of Washington, D.C., to bring jazz bands to the city. Before they arrived, the black music of New York was largely played by solo pianists, who took their approach primarily from ragtime, heavily affected by the proximity of Tin Pan Alley and the Broadway theater district. Garvin Bushell would recall, "There wasn't an eastern performer who could really play the blues. We later absorbed it from the southern musicians we heard, but it wasn't original with us. We didn't put that quarter-tone pitch in the music the way the southerners did. Up north we leaned toward ragtime conception—a lot of notes."

The New Yorkers were very good at what they were playing, good enough that when Jelly Roll Morton rolled into New York, they were not impressed. Perry Bradford would see Jelly going against Stephen "The Beetle" Henderson and report that the man from New Orleans had faded. Duke Ellington said much the same thing. It was true that all opinions of Jelly tended to reflect his abrasive personality, but it was also true that New York piano players were a special breed.

They called it stride. From before World War I until nearly the next world war, a collection of New Yorkers named Kid Sneeze, the Beetle, Richard "Abba Labba" McLean, Charles "Lucky" Roberts, Fats Waller, Willie "The Lion" Smith, and above all James Price Johnson played a shouting style of piano that added blues melodies and Southern rural dance rhythms to a ragtime left hand. Stride was improvised ragtime in which the left hand played single notes on the first and third beats and chords on the second and fourth, with the right hand playing counterrhythms.

The greatest of the stride pianists was James P. Johnson, who as a teen in 1908 would move from New Jersey to San Juan Hill (possibly named for the black Tenth Cavalry, which had fought in Cuba), a black area of Manhattan in the West Sixties later razed to create Lincoln Center. A friend

of Johnson's had learned to play Scott Joplin's "Gladiolus," and James was transformed. His mother got him a piano, and he learned harmony and counterpoint from a friend studying opera. "I was on Bach," he said, and "double thirds need good fingering."

That came on top of church songs, pop songs, and classic rags, and also hearing Jelly Roll Morton while still wearing short pants. There were docks near San Juan Hill where boats from Savannah and Charleston came in, and where the dockworkers were frequently Gullah (low country South Carolina and Georgia) and Geechee (the Ogeechee River of Georgia) people. They brought music with them, and dances, and James P. took that and created a song called "The Charleston," which he put in the 1923 Broadway play called *Runnin' Wild.* The song was a thundering hit. Along with his "Carolina Shout" (as in ring shout), it established him as a popular songwriter.

His chief competition was Willie "The Lion" Smith, who'd earned his nickname as an artillery gunner during the war. The Lion was a special man, as he revealed in his wonderful autobiography, *Music on My Mind.* Born in 1897 in New Jersey, he attended various churches as a child and particularly liked Baptist singing and ring shouts, but spent so much time at a neighbor's Hebrew classes that he was bar mitzvahed. He also took a serious interest in astrology. By 1913 Willie was working saloons in The Coast, Newark's vice district. Postwar he held forth at Leroy Wilkins's place at 135th Street and Fifth Avenue, the center of black Harlem.

Generally, Willie played in New York and stayed in New York— he avoided the South, he said, because "The weather down there just didn't fit my clothes." But he did travel with a show to Chicago in 1923. When stranded there, he decided to stick around for a while, playing at the Flume Café, and consequently was able to hear King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, and so forth. "The bands proved to be the real treat because we hadn't heard groups in the East that could play the blues and stomps like these guys in the Middle West . . . a brass- player's paradise."

Back in New York, a black entertainment district sprang up between Lenox and Seventh avenues, and between 131st and 133rd streets, with places like Connie's Inn, the Lafayette Theatre, the Nest, Tillie's Chicken Shack, and the Rhythm Club, where the musicians gathered to loaf, schmooze, and find jobs. A tree grew in front of the Lafayette on Seventh Avenue and became known as the Tree of Hope, a lucky wishing tree something like a similar tree in Congo Square the previous century, and the block became known as the Corner, the Boulevard of Dreams, or the Stroll. One major feature of the Stroll by 1930 was one Milton "Mezz" Mezzrow, purveying the best marijuana in Harlem. (Mezz sold to white people too; one of the people he turned on was a white man named Jerry Wexler, who in the 1950s at Atlantic Records would go on to be one of the great producers of black music in history.)

When the Lion left Leroy's club, he was replaced by an up-and- coming youngster, a student of James P.'s named Thomas "Fats" Waller. By the early '20s, a very young Fats was at the Lafayette Theatre, which had a fine organ. New York being the center of the recording industry of the day, he was soon writing songs and heading midtown to work in the studios. What Mamie Smith had kicked off in 1920 would have lasting reverberations. Ralph Peer, the music director at OKeh, had first labeled the music "Negro Records" and then "Coloured Records," neither of which caught on. Then he saw the term *race* in the *Chicago Defender* and created the phrase *race records,* and it stuck. Soon he brought in Clarence Williams, whom we first encountered trying to hustle Bessie Smith, but who would have a lasting career in New York as a producer and not terribly good piano player (the Lion said he played as though wearing mittens).

Clarence Williams's Blue Five, which featured Sidney Bechet, recorded the classic songs "Wild Cat Blues" (written by Clarence and Fats) and "Kansas City Man Blues" in its first session, in 1923. In partnership with Spencer Williams, Clarence would put out the classic "Royal Garden Blues," and Spencer would write (though Clarence would claim it) Fats's first hit, "Squeeze Me." The next year, Sidney would pair with Louis Armstrong on Clarence's "Cake Walking Babies from Home" before departing for Europe to work with Josephine Baker.

Fats would go on to meet one Andriamanantena Paul Razafinkarefo, also known as Andy Razaf, and by the end of the decade, with Andy as lyricist, begin recording hit after hit, including "Honeysuckle Rose" and "Ain't Misbehavin'," which would be part of the show *Connie's Hot Chocolates*, sung by Cab Calloway and Margaret Sims onstage, and later by Louis Armstrong from the pit. The same show also had his "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue." Fats's combination of brilliant composing, equally brilliant playing, and humor—his line "Hmm, I wonder what the poor people are doing tonight," delivered with a cocked eyebrow and a sly smile, became part of the American joke bank—made him a national treasure for black and white people alike.

Before he went off to Europe in 1925, Bechet played a show in Washington, D.C., that would have lasting consequences. In the audience was one Edward Kennedy Ellington; it was the first time that he'd heard New Orleans music, and it would transform him. Bechet even briefly played with Duke, and Ellington would take the counterpoint, romance, and beats of New Orleans music and build a compositional cathedral.

Duke was in some ways the oddest of ducks. Born in 1899, he'd been raised in a totally bourgeois family, yet he had no formal musical education. He would eventually write symphony-like extended jazz compositions that were still very strongly racially conscious, telling *DownBeat* in 1939 that he wasn't interested "primarily in the playing of jazz or swing music, but in producing musically a genuine contribution from our race . . . We try to complete a cycle."

Over the 1920s, building on Art Hickman and the white dance orchestras, Fletcher Henderson had developed the primary elements of the jazz orchestra, and Ellington would bring them to an absolute peak. He would ensure that the form would stay vigorous and not too sweet by hiring what one author called "hard-drinking and combative bad boys for his band, who produced the funky timbre, blues, and wails of the rural tradition." The orchestra was his instrument, and he played it masterfully. He was artist and patron both, composing pop tune hits to finance more ambitious pieces, and all this while touring. By the time he was done he would copyright fifteen hundred pieces.

The most important of those pop tune hits came in 1930. Duke had three songs ready for a small group recording date but needed a fourth. While waiting for his mother to finish cooking dinner, he whipped the tune out and called it "Mood Indigo." They recorded it in the afternoon and played it that night at the Cotton Club, and it was established as a hit forever. Duke would take the revenues from that song and so very many others and use them to finance the band, put- ting them on a tour bus—and plane and train—to wander the world and create music, in his own phrase, that was "beyond category," but central to American culture in the twentieth century.

Top image: Louis Armstrong. Photo from Library of Congress.

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