**Jazz Musicians as Cultural Intermediaries**

Jazz was born out of the cultural experience of African Americas and can be traced in a direct line to the slave songs of the plantations through the Negro Spirituals, Ragtime, and the Blues. Music was an essential aspect of African American life. Many of the great spirituals expressed faith, perseverance, and a passion for freedom. “In the riotous rhythms of Ragtime” according to James Weldon Johnson, a prominent African American poet and musician, “the Negro expressed his irrepressible buoyancy, his keen response to the sheer joy of living.” Blues were a reflection of the trials and tribulations of life. The cultural experiences of African Americans weave in and out of the lyrics and reflect emotions ranging from lamentation to exuberance.

In 1921 Johnson published an anthology of African American poetry and spirituals, entitled The Book of American Negro Poetry. In his preface Johnson wrote that artists accomplish their best when working with something they know best and, according to Johnson, “race” is what African Americans know best. In his poem, “O Black and Unknown Bards,” Johnson recognizes the power of song and celebrates the memory of “slave singers, gone, forgot, unfamed.” The poem reflects Johnson’s view that music formed the core of African American culture.

Jazz was born in the lower Mississippi Delta and was nourished in New Orleans. In the first decades of the twentieth century its emotional rhythms moved north with the Great Migration, a mass movement of Blacks from the South to urban areas seeking better opportunities and attempting to escape from rigid Jim Crow laws [1] that held them in a state of virtual slavery. This distinctly American music, with an emphasis on improvisation, captured the spirit of the nation. The radio and phonograph had a major impact on Jazz’s popularity as improvisation and the spontaneity that typified the music was better conveyed through sound than sheet music.

During World War I, African American soldiers introduced jazz to Europe. Band director Lt. James Reese Europe and his “Harlem Hellfighters” of the 15th Regiment Machine Gun Battalion, gave a concert in Paris as part of the Allied celebration surrounding the Versailles Peace Conference. Popular enthusiasm for jazz prompted the French government to request that Europe’s band give a series of performances in Paris. A French band director, unable to coax the same sound from his military band, invited Lt. Europe to a rehearsal. Europe explained that jazz was more than musical chords; it was a release of emotions. In an interview published in the Literary Digest on his return to the United States, Europe remarked: “I have come back from France more firmly convinced than ever that Negroes should write Negro music. We have our own racial feeling and if we try to copy whites we will makes bad copies. . . . The music of our race springs from the soil. . . .” (Literary Digest, April 26, 1919, Vol. 61, No. 4, pp. 27-28)

By 1920, jazz had traveled from the rural Mississippi Delta to New Orleans and through the Great Migration to northern urban centers and across the Atlantic to the capitals of Europe. The music had captured the imagination of white society and thousands of patrons flocked to dance halls and cabarets to revel in the music of African American musicians and singers. Music from the jazz clubs confronted the prejudice of the era. In the midst of the racial turmoil of the 1920s Survey magazine remarked that “…jazz with its mocking disregard for formality is a leveler and makes for democracy.” (Survey, March 1, 1925, p. 665)

Although jazz musicians helped to erode racial prejudice, they were sometimes unable to break down long established barriers. At the same time Black musicians were opening doors, Harlem’s Cotton Club, the most popular New York jazz club of the 1920s and 1930s, featured Black entertainers but seated only white patrons. In Chicago, Black musicians were prohibited from playing at downtown clubs but became well established in enclaves outside the center city.

In time color lines began to blur and interracial jazz bands formed.[2] Black and white jazz musicians formed bonds based on their music and “gradually saw themselves as workers in similar creative enterprises. . . . Occasionally these bonds were strong enough to overcome deep mistrusts.” (Burton Peretti, The Creation of Jazz: Music, Race, and Culture in Urban America, p.199)

In the 1920s some African American musicians looked upon jazz as a means of smashing Jim Crow barriers. Mixed audiences in northern urban areas began to put aside their prejudices. According to pianist Earl “Fatha” Hines, “it was musicians and theatrical people who first began to change the strictly segregated way of life.” A half-century later, Hines organized band tours through the South to challenge Jim Crow laws.

While millions celebrated America’s popular culture, jazz was not free of critics. In 1922 The Ladies Home Journal ran a series of articles charging, “Jazz disorganizes all regular laws and order; it stimulates to extreme deeds, to a breaking away from all rules and conventions; it is harmful and dangerous, and its influence is wholly bad.” (Anne Shaw Faulkner, “Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation,” The Ladies Home Journal, Vol. 38, No. 8, August 1921, p. 34) Jazz was considered to be nothing more than vulgar, cheap music. A refrain echoed by established African American families in the North admonished black migrants urging them to “blend in.” But, jazz survived the barrage of detractors and became widely accepted. So dominant was its impact on American society that the 1920s came to be called the “Jazz Age.”

Questions to consider:

1. How does James Weldon Johnson’s poem O Black and Unknown Bards reflect the influence of music on Black culture?
2. How important was the Great Migration in spreading jazz throughout the nation?
3. According to James Reese Europe, how was the Black experience interwoven with jazz?
4. What accounts for the popularity of jazz in American popular culture?
5. How did jazz musicians begin the process of breaking down racial barriers? How effective were they?
6. Why do you think that jazz in the 1920s was characterized in some quarters as harmful to American values?