

SPEAKING OF JAZZ

Playbill's guide to the classic arts by Barry Singer

Freedom is what makes jazz American music definitively. To love jazz, all you really need to love is freedom.

But jazz is also, specifically, the sound of the African-American experience; the sound of freedom yearned for, of oppression confronted and overcome. To really hear jazz, one must really hear this.

The music some initially called “jass,” was blended alchemically in New Orleans near the dawn of the 20th Century by local black and Creole musicians who liberated through improvisation the marches of Sousa and the like, and the syncopated melodies of ragtime; “jassing ‘em up” with their own inflections and an ever-more elastic beat. The drumming and vocalized chants of tribal Africa were at the root of these elaborations, filtered through the plantation songs and field “hollers” of slaves and their consequent evolution into “The Blues,” the stark, brutally eloquent music of black pain and transcendence.

The first “jass band” from New Orleans to reach New York City was a six-piece all-black ensemble billed as: That Creole Band, in a 1915 Broadway revue called *Town Topics* at the Winter Garden Theater. “Merely a noise that some persons called ‘music,’” opined one less-than-impressed critic, but That Creole Band was soon followed to New York by The Original Dixie Land Jass Band, an all-white New Orleans group that took up residency in January 1917 at Reisenweber’s, a semi-posh restaurant-cabaret right on Columbus Circle. The O.D.J.B. struck an unexpected chord nationwide with its first raucous recordings, “Livery Stable Blues” and “Original Dixie Jass One-Step.” Explosive sales soon exceeded one million copies.

The unfettered freedom of jazz music made it the perfect accompaniment to the illicit consumption of alcohol after The Volstead Act officially went into effect in the U.S. on the night of January 16, 1920, triggering Prohibi-

tion and “The Jazz Age.” By 1922, there were an estimated 5,000 speakeasies in Manhattan alone, many with small jazz bands backing up the booze. In 1924, though, a classically-trained African-American pianist named Fletcher Henderson brought a much bigger jazz band and his revolutionary “arranged” big-band approach to jazz, into the whites-only Roseland Ballroom near Times Square for a residency that would extend by popular demand to the very end of the decade. Henderson also made a strategically brilliant personnel choice that year, inviting Chicago’s hottest young jazz instrumentalist, a New Orleans-born horn player named Louis Armstrong, to venture east and join his group at Roseland. Armstrong’s stunning new conception of the jazz solo, his virtuoso brilliance on the trumpet, and his pioneering improvisational sensibility as a vocalist, effectively re-invented jazz on the spot in Armstrong’s own image.

Jazz to this day lives in the enveloping shadow of Armstrong and Henderson. The pre-eminence of the jazz soloist is largely Armstrong’s innovation – from Coleman Hawkins to Charlie Parker, right on through Wynton Marsalis. The essence of the jazz big band remains Henderson’s invention – from Duke Ellington and Count Basie, through Benny Goodman and the Swing Era that he spawned (using Henderson’s own arrangements and often Henderson himself as his arranger), right up to the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra.

Freedom is their unifying musical language, just as freedom is the unifying spirit of America. If the history of this nation is the history of freedom refined, then jazz is not just the soundtrack, it is the sound itself. All you have to do is listen.

Barry Singer has written about the arts for Rolling Stone, The New Yorker, New York Magazine, The N.Y. Times, Opera News, and Playbill.

