THE BLACK JAZZ MUSICIAN IN AMERICAN MAGAZINES, 1930-1950

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The period between 1930 and 1950 represents a paradigm shift in Americans' thinking about race and its status in public discourse. It was during this time that the prevailing ideology of the Reconstruction era—white supremacy—was overtaken by a new ideology of "color-blindness" or "race-neutrality." Admittedly, it is unlikely that the average American at this time would have recognized this transformation. However, chances are good that if our average American was a magazine reader, he would have been exposed to the direct effects of this ideological shift through his reading of articles about jazz. Changes in the portrayal of jazz musicians in magazines from 1930 to 1950 are closely associated with concurrent changes in racial ideology. Whereas the explicitly racist discourse of magazine writers in the thirties reflects the poisonous ideology that dominated at the turn of the century, coverage from the forties partakes of the dominant "color-blind" ideology that continues to influence public discourse even today.

The 1930s marked the tail end of what historians have termed the "nadir of race relations" in the United States.[1] This period, extending from roughly 1890 to 1940, marked the height of white oppression of African Americans after the abolition of slavery. The virulent racism of the Nadir was abetted by the spurious "science" of the eugenicists and social Darwinists who dominated the scientific discussion of race at the turn of the century. Race, according to these scientists, was a discrete, biological feature responsible for determining an individual's intelligence, disposition, and sexual behavior (Omi 14). Scientifically unsound comparative studies of IQ allowed eugenicists to claim that European (and particularly Nordic) intellectual superiority over other races was genetic. Comparative studies of white and black physiology allowed social Darwinists to suggest that whites were more evolved than other races (Sitkoff 191). Taking their cue from their colleagues in the sciences, historians set about the task of rewriting history to adequately reflect the supposed superiority of the white race.

Paradoxically, it was during the Nadir, when defenders of white supremacy were resorting to scholarly acrobatics to avoid attributing anything of cultural value to blacks, that jazz first became popular with white Americans. In the Roaring Twenties, jazz's origins in the African American community only increased its appeal—if not for the nation's conservative cultural critics, then for a younger generation of white Americans. They regarded jazz as emblematic of rebellion against the staid cultural mores of the older generation. That jazz was played by black musicians in illegal speakeasies and allowed for "close" (that is, sexual) dancing made it seem all the more exotic and transgressive.

By the 1930s, jazz's transgressive appeal had been mitigated by Swing music's admittance into the white mainstream. Band leaders such as Duke Ellington and Fletcher Henderson popularized swing in performances at urban nightclubs and large dance halls which, in the South at least, were segregated. The musicians themselves, however, were both white and black, with black band leaders such as Ellington and Count Basie enjoying at least as much success as white band leaders like Benny Goodman. Indeed, Louis Armstrong, the most celebrated and recognized Swing musician of that era, was African American.

To the extent that magazines covered jazz in the years prior to 1930, it was to denigrate it and the musicians who played it in the explicitly racist rhetoric characteristic of the Nadir. As Maureen Anderson points out in her article "The White Reception of Jazz in America," mainstream critiques cast jazz as the music of primitive and crude savages, dangerous because it encouraged listeners to revert to their animalistic instincts. As a critic in *Literary Digest* wrote in 1917, "The groups that play for dancing, when colored, seem infected with the virus that they try to instill as a stimulus in others" (qtd. in Anderson 136). A writer for *Current Opinion* in 1919 continued the assault on the jazz musician when he wrote of musician Jasbo Brown that "when he imbibed freely of gin, which was his favorite pastime, he had a way of screaming above the melody with a strange barbaric abandon" (qtd. in Anderson 140).

Journalists in the 1930s, though generally more positive towards jazz and jazz musicians, nevertheless continued to partake of this racist discourse, though it could be argued their racism was of a more subtle variety than that of their predecessors. Nadir-era rhetoric was now deployed under the pretense of objectively "explaining" jazz to readers or else was dismissed as "all in good fun." The authors of "Hot Jazz Jargon," published in *Vanity Fair* in 1935, for example, offer readers a racist assessment of jazz music and jazz musicians under the guise of explaining jazz jargon. Another *Vanity Fair* article of the same year, entitled "Louis Armstrong," is written entirely in an affected "black" dialect that author Hermann Deutsch evidently intended readers to find humorous. The article is billed as "semi-fiction" and loosely relates the circumstances of Louis Armstrong's boyhood in New Orleans. The opening lines set the tone for the entire piece: "Hayah pappy! Hayah mammy! Hayah de gal chillen and de boy chillen all both!" Deutsch recognizes that Armstrong, a black musician in Jim Crow America, plays to audiences in the South that are entirely white, a fact that he seems to interpret as a bellwether of racial change: "White folks in de white light—Black folks in de black light—All but Louis Armstrong—He in de white light too, now. It ain't like it useter be, brudders and sisters" (70). Of course, the great irony is that the very existence of this offensive article delineates the very real limits within which Armstrong was forced to work.

Esquire's fictional "Impossible Interview" of the next year uses dialect to similar effect. The "interview," a regular feature in *Esquire*, pitted two cultural icons against each other in a fictional discussion. In this case, Louis Armstrong stands opposite the

popular white classical violinist Fritz Kreisler. There is no doubt that the contrast between Armstrong's dialect and Kreisler's normative English was intended to be comical, though it branded Armstrong as the uneducated one in the debate. However, the attitude of the author toward jazz musicians in general might be construed as positive; with encouragement from Armstrong, Kreisler begins to "swing" "The Moonlight Sonata" and declares: "Maybe there's something to this swing business after all" ("Impossible" 33). The author suggests white musicians might learn something from black jazz musicians, but he seems also to imply that jazz is legitimated only by white approval. Armstrong is portrayed as a grinning, happy-go-lucky, Uncle Tom who, in declaring "I don' wanna be in no symphony. I wanna swing," betrays a lack of sophistication and an inability to appreciate forms of "high art" (33).

Nadir-era racism was already on its way out by the 1930s. Criticism of the eugenicists' and social Darwinists' conception of race came from a group of social scientists headed by the eminent American anthropologist Franz Boas. How did anthropologists become caught up in a debate heretofore dominated by biologists? The historian Peggy Pascoe offers an explanation:

> [F]or social scientists, the attack on racialism was not so much an end in itself as a function of a larger goal of establishing "culture" as a central social science paradigm. Intellectually and institutionally, Boas and his followers staked their claim to academic authority on their conviction that human difference and human history were best explained by culture. (53)

Social scientists began their assault by refuting the claim that race was a discrete biological characteristic. The claims of scientific racism had rested on the biological purity of racial categories, but Nadir-era scientists had failed to arrive at a comprehensive list of discrete races. In fact, the number of identified races had continued to mushroom over the course of the nineteenth century as new categories were created to accommodate exceptions to the pre-existing metric. Social scientists exploited this weakness. The fact that, throughout history, people of differing ancestry had crossed paths and procreated, Boas pointed out, made the idea of discrete racial categories patently ridiculous. Finally, in a series of groundbreaking studies, Boas, Aldous Huxley, Lancelot Hogben, and Theodore Dobzhansky proved the degree of genetic variation within and between races to be roughly comparable (Sitkoff 193-4).

Other studies attacked claims that whites were both more evolved and more intelligent than blacks. The social Darwinists' assertion that physical differences—for example, in hair texture and degree of jaw protrusion—between whites and blacks indicated that whites had progressed further evolutionarily, was upset by a study reinterpreting the same data to indicate black evolutionary superiority. Psychologist Otto Klineberg's IQ studies undercut social Darwinists' claims about white inborn intellectual superiority. The IQ test, his studies concluded, did not actually measure

inborn intelligence. Rather, higher scores correlated with higher education levels and high socioeconomic status. Only a cultural explanation of intelligence, Klineberg argued, could account for the fact that blacks in the North often outscored whites in the South on IQ tests (Sitkoff 191-2).

By the late 1940s, the popular conception of race had been so radically undercut that many intellectuals were calling for race to be banned from public discourse entirely. In a 1941 issue of the *Journal of Heredity*, British anthropologist Ashley Montagu argued that race should be abandoned for the following reasons:

> (1) that it is artificial; (2) that it does not agree with the facts; (3) that it leads to confusion and perpetuation of error, and finally that for all these reasons it is meaningless or rather more accurately such meaning as it possesses is false. Being so weighted down with false meaning it were better that the term be dropped than that any attempt should be made to give it new meaning. (qtd. in Sitkoff 191)

Even biologists seemed to agree. Julian Huxley wrote that "the question begging term race [should] be banished . . . from all discussion of human affairs" (qtd. in Sitkoff 191).

Color-blindness was born out of this desire to relegate race to the sidelines of public discourse. It encouraged Americans to ignore or at least de-emphasize race as a significant factor in people's lives. Race might still have been a problem, but it was a problem with a built-in solution: the success that Irish and Jewish immigrants had had in assimilating into mainstream American culture would, many Americans felt, inevitably be repeated by African Americans. Slavery had set them back in this process, but that roadblock had since been removed. All that was left for Americans to do to facilitate black assimilation into the normative culture was to ignore race and let the problem solve itself. Needless to say, the shift toward a color-blind ideology did not represent a wholesale abandonment of the idea of race. As Jon Panish explains, "The not-so-subtle message encoded in color-blindness . . . is that white and black Americans should begin to move away from the stigmatized category of blackness to the privileged, unmarked category of whiteness" (6).

Color-blind discourse began to emerge in mainstream magazine coverage of jazz in the years after WWII. By this time, Swing could no longer claim the undivided attention of the press; Bebop was taking over. A new avant-garde style of jazz pioneered by a younger generation of musicians, Bebop was largely a response to what musicians criticized as the "sticky" sweetness of popular Swing music. Developed during after-hours jam sessions at Minton's jazz club in Harlem, it was fast, frenetic, incorporated unusual new harmonies, and often had no discernible melody. Trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and saxophonist Charlie Parker were Bebop's primary innovators, but it was Gillespie who became the ambassador of Bop in the mainstream magazine press. Richard O. Boyer's use of color-blind discourse in *The New Yorker's* July 1948 profile

of Gillespie is marked. He reports that Gillespie's fans, "both white and black" describe him adoringly using the same, characteristically "bop" slang. Gillespie, they say, is "real crazy," "a bitch," and "a killer" (28). Boyer associates black jazz musicians and their black fans with cultural movements revered by *The New Yorker's* intellectual, and mostly white, readership. "Many of the Negro adherents of bebop" he writes, "take a subsidiary interest in psychoanalysis and abstract art" (28). When musicians have received formal musical training, Boyer mentions it. In fact, he continually offers up an image of the jazz musician as a thoughtful intellectual, someone with whom *New Yorker* readers might presumably identify. He describes the Bop pianist Thelonious Monk as "scholarly" and quotes him as saying "We [Bop musicians] liked Ravel, Stravinsky, Debussy, Prokofieff, Schoenberg, and maybe we were a little influenced by them" (30). He attempts to offset the popular stereotype that Bop music was fueled by jazz musicians' drug habits, emphasizing Gillespie collaborator Gil Fuller's "impeccable morals" and relaying Fuller's view that claims of drug use were "a gross and gratuitous libel" (29).

When a discussion of the racism Jazz musicians faced becomes unavoidable, Boyer's language becomes either vague or light and dismissive. He notes, for example, that "many Negro boppers like to pretend that they are Arabs," assuming Arab-sounding names and wearing turbans. Thelonious Monk, he says, "sometimes forgets that he was born of West Sixty-Third Street and announces that he is a native of Damascus" (31). His joking tone trivializes what he clearly recognizes as an attempt by black jazz musicians to escape the racism to which they were regularly subjected. When he reveals that Gillespie dons a turban from time to time when abroad, he speaks of him "[appreciating] this flight from harsh reality," (31) leaving readers to infer just what the nature of Gillespie's reality might be. He goes on to attribute the Islamic conversions of many boppers to a desire to escape what he vaguely calls "their American environment" (31).

That intellectuals at *The New Yorker* would be responsive to color-blind discourse may not be surprising, but this same gesture is discernible in *Life*'s photo essay of a few months later. A series of thirteen glossy photos, appearing in the magazine's regular feature "*Life* Goes to a Party" document what readers are led to believe constitute the scenes of Dizzy Gillespie's everyday life. In one, Gillespie jams with other jazz musicians, including the white pianist Mel Powell. In another, he signs publicity shots for white female fans who, in imitation of him, wear blue berets, thick-framed black glasses, and fake goatees. Shots taken at Billy Berg's Hollywood nightclub show the popular white singer Mel Tormé and actress Ava Gardner (wearing her own beret, glasses, and fake beard) enjoying Gillespie's show and socializing with the musician. One cannot imagine a more compelling illustration of mainstream white approval of the black jazz musician.

However much magazine writers or photojournalists partook of color-blind discourse, it was not enough to fully overcome their opposing tendency to "otherize"

black jazz artists. Bop musicians were too often portrayed one-dimensionally as adherents of an exotic and entertainingly coded subculture. The role of the white magazine writer was to interpret, often humorously, the curious behavior of the Beboppers for their white readership. In the *Life* photo essay, for example, a series of four photographs illustrates the "Bebop Greeting." The first photo depicts Gillespie and fellow musician Benny Carter greeting each other with what the caption explains are typical Bop salutations: "Bells, man! Where you been?" Next they flash "the flatted fifth" hand signal (which the author explains is a note common in Bebop), and shout "Eel-ya-dah!" (in imitation of Bebop triplet notes), before finally gripping one another's hands in the last panel. The caption wryly explains that it is only after completing this "ritual" that Beboppers can "converse" (139). With an air of theatricality, the author refers to Gillespie's beret, glasses, and rumpled suit as "the boppers' required costume" (139). Musicians' Islamic beliefs function as another entertaining aspect of their subculture, necessitating yet another set of complex rituals exotic to white readers. A photo depicts Gillespie (who was not actually Muslim but Bahá'í) at home in his Hollywood apartment bowing prostrate towards Mecca. The caption explains that Beboppers who have converted to Islam often "interrupt rehearsals at sunset to bow to the east (142).

Thus while magazine articles about jazz musicians during the period 1930 to 1950 show a distinct trend away from the racial discourse of the Nadir to the color-blind discourse of the 1940s, this does not mean racial discourse was abandoned. There remained a tendency to exoticize the jazz musician—to emphasize rather than downplay racial difference. In articles that self-consciously adopt the discourse of color-blindness, the importance of race is felt in its absence. It is the thing not spoken about. Race in these articles emerges as significant only insofar as it serves the interests of the white magazine writer to have it do so.

That the oppositional tendencies to downplay and exoticize race could exist side by side in articles about jazz should come as no surprise, as these impulses continue to characterize our modern discourse. What, after all, is "political correctness" if not a kind of color-blindness? If magazine writers in the 1940s adopted color-blindness because they believed, like so many white Americans, in the inevitability of assimilation, they have remained so today because to discuss racial difference would be to concede that it cannot yet be relegated to history. In spite of the persistence of color-blind discourse, however, the American mass media continues to exoticize the black musician. Just as white Americans in the twenties were captivated by the transgressive black jazz artist who inhabited the exotic world of Harlem speakeasies, white Americans today are transfixed by the black rap artist, evoked in the popular imagination as a streetwise hustler negotiating the urban ghetto. In this tendency towards the simultaneous diminution and amplification of race, the limits of color-blindness as an ideology are laid bare. After almost seven decades of operating within

these limits, perhaps it is time for a new generation of Americans to ask whether it will continue to do so.

NOTE

1. The Nadir was first defined by the historian Rayford W. Logan as the period from 1877-1901. The length of the Nadir period has since been redefined by a number of scholars. Here I adopt the sociologist James W. Loewen's definition of the Nadir as the period from 1890 to 1940.

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