

Example of the influence of african-american troops on the european culture durin...

[Countries](#), [England](#)



Traumatizing, disruptive, transformative – all of these words can be used to describe the First World War, an event of fateful proportions that swirled the troops of the Allied and Central Powers all across the old continent in an unfortunate search for victory. It was an event that crushed the naïve and proud courage of young men who threw themselves honorably into belligerent waters for the sake of their countries, only to find depressing, muddy trenches instead. The legacy of the Great War lay far away from the pedestal of glorious victories; instead, it succumbed into the pressing reality of a high death toll and swiped a deep psychological scar across the European nations. The Ottoman, Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires crumbled and fell to pieces, lacking any economic or ideological resources to cope with the nationalist spirits of new, emerging countries. The class system in Great Britain was significantly weakened, as the lower classes became aware of the changing social and economic climate, along with the opportunities that came with it. Europe lost its hegemony in international affairs to the young and powerful federation across the Atlantic, which also became the leader of the international economic environment. New ideologies emerged, culminating in the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, which ultimately brought more than half a century of communism into the world. Along with all the social and economic changes, culture in Europe had to undergo important transformations as well. Artists could not have stayed indifferent to the horrors of World War One; any romantic feeling that once might have accompanied the concept of war was gone: “ the war was insanity, irrationality and the triumph of unreason” 1. Perhaps the Dada movement expressed it the best, since it rejected any connection between

rational thought and artistic expression; it was the art of the absurd, the nonsense. Cubism, fauvism and surrealism supported the same idea and reflected a society troubled by dark cosmic insecurities. Culture did not belong to the high society anymore, abandoning old rules, traditions and protocol; it hosted, on the other hand, avant-garde movements that brought it closer to the popular masses.

The involvement of the American military forces in the Great War was also a catalyst for change in the cultural grounds: African-American troops brought with them a new and innovative style of music: jazz. It was a flavored assortment of musical sounds, combining different influences from non-European cultures; it was energetic, daring and full of improvisations. It certainly challenged the European culture – that massive, conservatory and elitist structure, which took centuries to build. As jazz and swing music slowly infiltrated Europe through the African-American troops, a new era of cultural communication began: among countries that exchanged innovative ideas, as well as between artists and their audiences, bringing everybody together with a hopeful sense of community². At the same time, jazz offered tremendous opportunities of self-expression and became representative of the post-World War One era, when the rebellion against “the proper conduct”, the “order”, the “organized artistic thought” was unraveling. Lawrence W. Levine creates a powerful antithesis between the jazz music, along with everything that it represented, and the concept of culture, viewed from a European perspective after the World War One. “Culture was exclusive, complex, available only through hard study and training”³, while jazz was entering the cultural cities of Europe – Paris and London – as an

improvised and inclusive art and form of expression. The Europeans were used to a cultural environment that was “ harmonious, embodying order and reason” 4, while jazz eradicated order and freed the spirit. At the same time, the divide between the artist and the audience disappeared in jazz performances; jazz was “ openly an interactive, participatory music in which the audience played an important role, to the extent that the line between audience and performers was often obscured” 5. The audience was not a mere spectator anymore, becoming actively engaged in the artist’s performance. Moreover, Lawrence strongly points out that the jazz music incorporated and reflected the diversity of the American heritage, which in great part came from elements that did not originate in the great European hub. Music in Europe was marked by a long-standing tradition; composers were educated in outstanding universities, where they studied the mastery of their predecessors; it also followed an organized code of writing, as well as public presentation. Jazz, on the other hand, was disruptive and certainly did not fit into the patterns of academic composition. Originating from gospel music, spirituals and minstrels, jazz music was an expression of a creative community, eager to convey its feelings and its desire for freedom⁶. This way, when it arrived on continental ground, jazz was welcomed with both skepticism and fascination. As Lawrence W. Levine points out, jazz offered a significantly new and different perspective on art, a view that was far away from European traditions. It demonstrated that America had a very big cultural potential, which was way more flexible than its European predecessor⁷. At the same time, jazz represented everything that was foreign and therefore, not likely to be accepted easily by conservatory minds

on the old continent. Interestingly enough, jazz music received less criticism in Europe than it did in the United States. As Lawrence W. Levine accounts, German critic George Barthelme called jazz a 'musical revelation a philosophy of the world, just like Expressionism and Impressionism'⁸. The French people especially grew interested in jazz music and its expressive possibilities in the interwar period, when more and more artists joined in the free jazz movement⁹. Jazz also offered refuge for people who needed to get away from the pressures of the postwar society: "we have to understand the importance of such actual and symbolic cultural oases as Paris and Greenwich Village for those who sought relief from the overwhelming sense of Civilization in the post-World War I years"¹⁰. Therefore, compared to the traditional European culture, Jazz stands out as an engaging and energizing form of art that helped people to get passed the horrors of the First World War and open up towards an era of cultural innovation, diversification and inclusion. It also paved the road for a cultural environment that admitted the limitations of the pre-war exclusive order and traditionalism and learned to embrace new forms of artistic expression. Jazz has created a generation of performers above all, as opposed to the old European culture that used to produce composers¹¹. At the same time, jazz has helped artists discover and develop new forms of self-expression that challenged pre-established academic standards and brought the performers closer to the public. This way, the arrival of African-American troops definitely brought a wave of new and interesting cultural elements; there are accounts of African-American soldiers forming bands and playing jazz music in France, watched by the astonished, yet interested local crowd¹². For the African-American

soldiers, jazz music was a sweet reminder of their home and a small alleviation to help them cope with a hostile environment. Still, jazz was ultimately adopted by Europeans in the interwar period and flourished in important cultural centers such as London and Paris. In Great Britain, the defining moment considered to be the beginning of British jazz music is the arrival of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band in 1919; however, Catherine Parsonage's study¹³ interestingly points out that several antecedents that prepared the British culture for receiving and eventually adopting the jazz music brought in later by the African-American troops. For example, minstrels performed by Black slaves visiting from America greatly fascinated British audiences at the end of the nineteenth century and created "strong links between British theatrical promoters and American performers which laid a firm foundation for subsequent visits in the twentieth century, and thus helped to pave the way for the presentation of jazz in Britain" ¹⁴. At the same time, there was some "ragtime" and "jazz" sheet music published in London during the first two decades of the 20th century. This way, when the Original Dixieland Jazz Band did arrive, the British public was, in some manner, prepared for it. However, the music performed by the band presented clear style characteristics were specific for New Orleans and "the band's rhythmic drive and tempi were different to anything that dancers would have experienced before, and this seems to have thrown the conventionalists of the dancing world into panic" ¹⁵. Therefore, as mentioned before, jazz music brought inspiration to popular masses through its unique and innovative style.

Jazz music was brought to France by James Reese Europe, who conducted

the band “ The Hellfighters”, formed by African-Americans, soldiers in the United States army. Thus, as in Britain, jazz conquered a top place in the preferences of the Parisian public with the help of black performers: The Hellfighters were welcomed by audiences with great curiosity and enthusiasm, which ultimately lead to the development of an iconic era centered on jazz music. 16. However, at first, jazz music did attract a lot of criticism, since it was foreign and above all, the music of African-Americans – “ la musique nègre” 17; it was definitely far away from French musical tradition. Embracing jazz also meant accepting the American influence and therefore opening up to the American way of doing things: in business and in society; for many French people, it also signified their acceptance of the American way of life and way of thinking. Still, these collective worries were nothing else than a consequence of the fact that Europe indeed, has lost its former economic power and that the United States were going to replace it as leader on the international stage. With all its joy and energy, jazz music was somewhat a reminder of the fact that Europe was already lagging behind and that the high-end culture that once dictated taste and style internationally was no longer viable.

Even so, it was soon enough that French musicians became fascinated with the sound of jazz and started to learn from American performers, as well as to perfect their skills, making jazz music their own. This way, a group of energetic artists and fans created the Hot Club, which aimed to propagate jazz even further within the French entertainment area. Artists such as “ Ventura, Grégor, Grappelli, or Reinhardt” 18 reinterpreted jazz songs in a French manner, without major alterations to the original style. The whole

industry of night clubs, restaurants and cabarets changed its interiors and decorations in order to adapt to the growing demand for jazz music and dance. At the same time, since jazz music attracted very large audiences, it made sense financially for music hall owners to put it in their programs, thus increasing even more the popularity of jazz. This ultimate embracement of jazz demonstrates the fact that the French culture managed to open up, while “ French artists and intellectuals were able to absorb elements of other cultures and to make those expressions their own in the interwar era” 19. It also created one of the most beautiful eras in history, vibrant with individual self-expression, as well as freedom of thought and movement. All in all, given the fact that jazz is an art form that actively promotes diversity, it has definitely induced a more inclusive view towards race within both the French and American societies and has allowed a more open expression of human sexuality, desires and ambitions²⁰.

Thus, in order to reiterate the conclusions of this paper, one must bring once again to the attention of the reader the fact that the First World War was a catastrophic event, which caused the people in Europe to feel despair and insecurity. Perplexed by the absurdity of the war, they were seeking refuge from the economic and social problems that the war left behind. Culture, as it was designed in the pre-war period, could no longer offer sustainable means of self-expression. Therefore, several avant-garde movements developed shortly after the end of the war, promoting individual expression, the abolishment of the rules and the abandonment of useless traditions. In this particular setting the jazz music was introduced in Europe: a society in turmoil, but eager to embrace change. Therefore, brought by the African-

American troops, jazz shortly became subject of both criticism and appraisal on the European continent. Even if carried on by foreign tides, it inspired French and British artists to perform it and develop it, creating a new cultural phenomenon that now stands as representative for that era. In London, the foundations of jazz music were laid as early as the end of the 19th century and the third decade of the 20th century saw the real development of jazz in Britain. In Paris, jazz music became quickly accepted and promoted, reshaping the whole industry of night clubs and cabarets; it also strongly appealed to the masses, creating an impressive popular culture.

Perhaps one of the most important ideas is, however, that jazz strongly opposed the classical, European idea of culture. Jazz wasn't originally academic and it did not abide strict interpretative rules. On the contrary, it was based on the freedom of artistic expression, on improvisation and musical inventiveness. It also created a special relationship between the performer and the audience, since the latter became sincerely engaged in the performance. This way it annulled the classical concept regarding the rigid gap between the public and the artist. Jazz was, and is, effervescent music and engaging, perfectly expressing the transformations that were happening both in Europe and in America at the beginning of the 20th century. It is also important to remember, from a historic point of view, that the adoption of jazz in Europe marks the beginning of the American leadership and influence of the international economic and cultural arena.

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