

# Ragtime and jazz explained through the lifetime of music of james reese

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## **James Reese Europe**

On February 22, 1880 in Mobile, Alabama, Lorraine Saxon Europe and her husband Henry Europe welcomed their fourth child, James Reese Europe, into the world. Music had previously played a factor in both Lorraine and Henry's life, but neither could have anticipated the universal impact their newborn would later have on its overall style and development.

To some degree, both Lorraine and Henry were musicians. Henry was a child of slavery, so with knowledge of slave culture, it can be suspected that he was made aware of the importance of music at a very young age.

Resultingly, he inherited an intuition for improv that he used anytime he picked up an instrument, and it was said he could "play about everything that would emit a sound when properly coaxed". Lorraine on the other hand, had a much more structured relationship with music. Like Henry, music began its influence on her at a young age, however in contrast with his introduction, it came to her through a formal education. Having been born into a family incredibly active in the Trinity Episcopal Church - her father was one of the seven individuals confirmed as founding members of the first African Episcopal Church in Alabama - Lorraine was given many opportunities to both play with and learn from musicians in her church. She learned musical notation and piano in a conventional learning setting and was resultingly able to teach her own children the same; an effort that was rewarded and utilized by three of her five children becoming professionals in the music industry.

As a child, James Reese Europe was immersed in a musical household, so much so his love for music was most likely secured before he could even form full sentences. However, he had little time to be influenced by the music scene in Mobile; while he was still in grammar school, his father was offered a job in Washington D. C. and consequentially he, his younger sister Mary, his older siblings John and Ida and his parents had to pack up their things and move to the nations capital. Once in D. C., James entered the third grade at Lincoln Grammar School for his general education, but, outside of school he began to involve himself in music as much as he possibly could. At age nine, he was already showing signs of the determined and passionate musician he would later prove to be, as he balanced studying Violin under Joseph Douglass - the admired soloist and teacher who was the abolitionist Frederick Douglass's grandson - with Piano lessons from his mother. It took very little time for James' natural ability to become evident, and no time at all for both his parents to grow increasingly excited about these abilities. Henry heavily encouraged James to learn the fiddle and banjo, and put great effort into increasing his son's comfort with and proficiency in improvisation. Lorraine on the other hand, kept the conventional learning style alive in James' music education by teaching him musical notation alongside Piano. In addition to lessons, James found music scenes within his community he could take part in and like his mother, he became active in his church's music program. His outgoing nature and leader-like quality impressed the Reverend of his church, and by the age of twelve he was organizing concerts and dramatic performances for the church's younger members - a sign of the leader he was to become.

During the late 1800's, big bands were popular all over the country, and one of the most established ones was the U. S. Marine Corps Band based in Washington D. C. and directed by John Phillip Sousa - who lived a few doors down from the Europe family. Under Sousa's control, the Marine Corps Band members began providing instruction to promising African American children in the area. Both James and his sister Mary benefited from the band's new service, as they both received instruction on violin and piano from Enrico Hurlei, the assistant director of the band. During this same time, James enrolled at M Street High School, the first ever prep high school for African Americans. At M Street, there was large acknowledgement for the importance of a music education, and they developed their own band program, " The High School Cadets". It was a very short time before James was discovered and recruited by the cadets, which he quickly became an established member of. Within the band program, James served as Color Sergeant for the Corps and took part in the Price Drill Company, it was here he was first introduced to military band music, a style which he would greatly affect in the last few years of his life.

In 1899, Henry Europe passed away unexpectedly, and James was forced to drop out of school and work to help support his mother and younger sister. Around this same time, New York was gaining a name for itself as the thriving center for African American musicians and entertainers. John Europe, James' older brother was at this time making his living as a professional cabaret pianist and in 1900 he - along with many others of D. C.'s aspiring talents - made way to New York to further pursue music. Though James was

eager to follow his brother immediately, he felt a great responsibility to take care of his family in light of his father's death. It took two years, but once Mary was out of school, James finally made his way to Manhattan.

Unfortunately, James found little success for the first few months. Theatrical producers and managers as well as club owners and their scouts would attend clubs and saloons for the purpose of finding new talent. So, these clubs would maintain an "open floor" policy where musicians could come in and perform and potentially audition for those scouting talent. At first, James auditioned at clubs on violin, but he soon found that the scouts were not interested in a classical-violin playing black man. So after weeks of rejection, James decided to pick up the mandolin and also audition as a pianist; very quickly doors began to open up. James was now picking up regular employment around New York and especially at cafes in Manhattan's "Tenderloin" district. In later years, George Gershwin would speak of James Reese Europe as some of his earliest inspiration, as he used to sit on the curb as a 7-year old child, outside Baron Wilken's night club in Harlem, listening for hours as James played the piano.

During the first decade of the 20th century, the most important gathering place for professional African Americans in the music and entertainment industry was the Marshall Hotel in Manhattan; it was here that James met John W. Love in 1903. Love was the private secretary to Rodman Wanamaker, one of New York's most elite and successful businessmen. When Love heard James play he immediately booked him and his first group - a string quartet - for Wanamaker's birthday celebration. After James'

success at the birthday party, Wanamaker requested that he and his music be a part of every Wanamaker family celebration. Not only did the Wanamakers treat and pay James well, but they also provided him with the very valuable introduction to the social and financial elite of New York and Philadelphia. Through this introduction, James Reese Europe quickly became an established name among the elite crowd, and with the resulting increase of gigs, James' name also began to make its way to the ears of the Best of New York's music and entertainment industry.

In the Fall of 1904, James got his first opportunity to showcase his abilities to a new audience when he was asked by the John Larkins [Theater] Company at the very last minute to direct the orchestra and chorus for a musical farce called A Trip To Africa. The show opened in October to an integrated audience, and though the reviews were mixed, those who knew about James' last minute admittance to the show, were impressed by his ability to organize and take control so quickly. James had been composing since he was a kid, but it wasn't until the time of the show that his pieces started getting published and he began achieving success in the Tin Pan Alley . His compositions began to gain popularity, which brought him to the attention of various theater companies and productions which resultingly sought after him. In 1905, one of these companies asked James to lead the orchestra and chorus as well as to contribute music to a successful musical farce called The Shoo-Fly Regiment - the show had a very strong military theme. His musical contributions resulted in one of the show's hit songs, and his background with military music made for an authentic performance from the orchestra

and chorus. His success with *The Shoo-Fly*, had James Reese Europe's name known by many of the biggest names in Black Musical Theater; among them was Ernest Hogan, who took a particular interest in James.

Ernest Hogan was the first African-American entertainer to produce and star in a Broadway show, so, James was quite elated and quick to accept when Hogan asked him to be a part of his new project, *The Memphis Students*. *The Memphis Students* was a new song and dance group assembled by Hogan that didn't actually include any students; the singing, dancing, twenty-member orchestra consisted of the best singers and instrumentalists in New York City, among them was James Reese Europe. In an extremely short amount of time, *The Memphis Students* became a huge hit, and their style and methods of playing resulted in them being considered the first modern Jazz band to ever be heard on a New York stage. Unfortunately, the group didn't last for too long, and eventually Hogan was ready to move on to new things. So, while many of the now former *Memphis Students* traveled to Europe together to tour, James stayed in the city to continue his education and concentrate on musical theater.

From 1905 to 1907 James continued work on *The Shoo-Fly*, but, in 1907 an opportunity offered itself to him, that forced him to leave the show as well as New York City. James was asked to write new music for and travel as musical director with the musical comedy *The Black Politician*. The show and James' pieces were a huge success and the 1907 to 1908 season turned out to be James' most rewarding personally and professionally. After only six years in New York's competitive music scene James' was leveling in success and

recognition with the most preeminent Black musical theater directors and composers.

After finishing touring with *The Black Politician*, James returned to New York, to find out his friend and mentor Ernest Hogan had suffered a physical breakdown while starring in *The Oyster Man*. Hogan's incident and the lack of support he received from the entertainment industry, woke up many performers to how vulnerable they all were as professionals in an industry without any organized health or social security protection. This realization caused those involved in New York Theater to group together to attempt to establish a professional support organization. When Hogan was diagnosed with TB and died shortly thereafter, a benefit was organized in his name by eleven industry professionals, one of whom was James Reese Europe. In the month following the benefit, the same eleven men organized themselves into a club with the purpose of "promoting social intercourse between the representative members of the Negro theatrical profession and to those connected directly or indirectly with art, literature, music, scientific and liberal professions, and patrons of art". The group called themselves "The Frogs", after a musical comedy they all loved, but despite the almost mocking name, they were truly aiming to raise the standard of the theatrical profession as well as to elevate the race. The Frogs dealt with a small obstacle when Judge John W. Goff refused to grant incorporation to their organization on the grounds that "frogs" and art didn't "go together"; however, Goff's decision was quickly reversed by the New York Supreme Court. As soon as they were made official, James was appointed the librarian,



and they were successful in recruiting prominent black professionals both inside and outside the theater community to join. During his time with The Frogs, Europe became absolutely certain that his musical career would be as a conductor, composer, arranger, organizer and director of musical organizations rather than as a performer.

For the next two years, James Reese Europe continued to work in the Black musical theater both writing and directing. When Bob Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson - two very well-known playwrights and composers of the early 1900s - did their last full-length musical comedy together, titled *The Red Moon* they requested that thirty-year-old James write the music to which they wrote the lyrics. The same year, James was hired to replace the musical director of the Bert Williams show, *Mr. Lode of Koal* until it closed in 1910. 1910 marked the downfall in popularity of the Black musical theater, but, despite having spent the previous six years establishing himself as a leading figure in Black musical comedy James wasn't discouraged. James believed that there was an opportunity to be taken advantage of in the continuing demand for musicians in New York hotels and cafes. John Europe was still doing well as a cabaret pianist in New York and Mary was one of the most respected concert accompanists in D. C., so James knew there was still a very large place for African American musicians and performers in the professional world.

As James transitioned back into the world of music off the concert stage, he realized the performers in this area had as little protection as those who performed on stage had had before *The Frogs* came about. James believed strongly in the fair treatment of these individuals, and took it upon himself to

build an organization that would address the specific needs of these singers, dancers and instrumentalists. In April of 1910, James and a number of the Marshall Hotel's regulars met at the Marshall and decided to form James' proposed organization, which they named " The Clef Club". Since he was the leading figure in the Clef Club's formation, it was no shock when the other members elected James as the organization's first president. The organization was initially a trade union and booking agency for entertainers, which aimed to help better their salaries and treatment. The Preamble to the organization read: "[The Clef Club has been established to] inculcate the science of vocal and instrumental music technique, and execution of vocal and instrumental music and to promote good fellowship and social intercourse" . Within the Clef Club, James built an orchestra of over one hundred African American instrumentalists, singers and dancers - New York's first symphony-sized orchestra composed entirely of African American members. Only a month after the orchestra's formation, the Clef Club held its first event at the Manhattan Casino on 155th St. and 8th Avenue in Harlem, at which they were to be the " big feature" under James Reese Europe, Joe Jordan and Al Johnson's instruction. James' incorporation of Jazz and syncopated Ragtime music into the orchestral music was greatly received as the orchestra was immediately a huge success; it was clear from the way the crowd responded, that the Clef Club Orchestra had a bright future ahead of it. In 1912, the Clef Club and James Reese Europe made history when they played a concert at Carnegie Hall. Though they were not officially a jazz band they were the first band to play proto-jazz at Carnegie

Hall as well as the first to band to play music written solely by black composers.

James' outspoken personality and his insistence on playing his own unconventional style of music, earned him a great deal of both positive and negative attention. But, when criticized for this he said simply, " We have developed a kind of symphony music that, no matter what else you think, is different and distinctive" . Nevertheless, James was very aware of those not in agreement with his style of directing; those who refused to validate his fusion of ragtime, jazz and syncopated rhythms into his orchestra included his own mother and sister Mary - even though they were both willing to accept the money he earned from it. Nonetheless, James never strayed from his style and when he finally left the Clef Club to create a new orchestra, he only became more submerged in the music that would one day be considered Jazz and Ragtime.

James' next project was his " Society Orchestra". In 1912, this orchestra became nationally famous while accompanying the dancing duo of Vernon and Irene Castle who were the forefront of a new movement geared towards gaining acceptance for ballroom dancing. With James' help, the Castles introduced and popularized the foxtrot as well as many other dances that were drawn from ragtime and other non-traditional types of popular music. The Castles were so impressed with James' Orchestra's rhythmic abilities, that they insisted that he and his orchestra accompany them exclusively - which he did until Vernon volunteered for the military and was killed in combat. Because of the Castles, James was given the connections to make

eight recordings for the Victor Talking Machine Company; the recordings from these sessions are considered to be some of the best examples of ragtime prior to the jazz-era. Unlike Europe's recordings would be after the war, the Victor recordings were not marketed as Jazz, and sounded nothing like the existing recordings of Ragtime, so at the time nobody knew exactly how to define the music that was the result of James Reese Europe's excitable directing.

In 1915 the African Americans in Harlem, New York convinced the Governor of New York to grant them their own unit - the 15th infantry regiment, or as history books know them best, the Hellfighters. In addition to training, the next logical step was to find a worthy band leader to lead the new regiment's band; it was decided the man worthy of the task was none other than James Reese Europe. At this point, Europe was the best known orchestra leader in New York; he had already begun to create a buzz with the incorporation of Jazz and syncopated ragtime into the otherwise unembellished big band and orchestra music, but this new opportunity would turn that buzz into a roar in very little time.

When it came to his new military position and the marches his band was to perform, Europe took on the same creative and improvisational energy as he had done with his orchestra. In an extremely short amount of time, Europe's band was manifesting a sound never before emitted from a military band. The band members physical march went virtually unchanged, but, the music was so ornamented that other bandleaders believed them to be using trick instruments, because " otherwise," they said " such sounds are not

possible". On New Years Day 1918, Europe and the 15th Regiment arrived in France. Their first appearance consisted of marches and the French Marseillaise - national anthem; but, it was said that Europe's men played with such drive and excitement that it took a great while for the French audience to even recognize it. Unexpectedly, the response to the performance was not just an appreciative enjoyment, but rather, a passionate beg for more; resultingly, the 15th Regiment band stay in Europe was extended from a few days to eight weeks. They toured throughout army camps and French Villages on request from the American Officers. They entertained by playing their syncopated versions of both French and American marches, plantation melodies, and the song that Europe would make famous: " Memphis Blues". Europe only got more confident and experimental in his style and the public continued to celebrate his creations, for the first time, thanks to Europe, Jazz had crossed American borders and was officially making its way to the top in France.

On April 20th, 1918, James Reese Europe became the first African American officer to face combat during WWI as he accompanied a French night mens patrol across no-man's land under heavy enemy fire. This act and quality of bravery proved to be consistent throughout the 15th Regiment, for when they returned at the end of the war, they had more officers than any other unit decorated for bravery. However, the greatest honor for James Reese Europe and his Hellfighters band was yet to come. When it came time for the 1919 Victory Parade, in which the Hellfighters were promised to appear, New Yorkers both Black and White poured and swarmed into the streets in hopes

to cheer on and hear in person James Reese Europe and his Hellfighter's incredible sound. No New Yorker was disappointed, as it was said the Hellfighters could be heard for blocks before you saw them and blocks after they disappeared from view. Never had an integrated crowd reached such size and agreement, it was truly incredible. That Spring James and the Hellfighters band cut twenty-four records and planned to make a grand tour of the country,

However, on May 8th tragedy made these plans impossible. After having a heated argument with his drummer Herbert Right, who had accused James of treating him unfairly, Right stabbed James, who died shortly after at the age of only thirty-nine. The upset that resulted from the horrible news had no race limitations; people of all races and standings in society mourned James Reese Europe and the New York Times called the loss "incalculable" and continued to say, "Ragtime may be Negro music, but it is American Negro Music... and Europe was one of the Americans that was contributing most to its development". Before being laid to rest, one more "first" was credited to James Reese Europe, for he was the first African American citizen to be granted an official funeral, to which thousands of mourners of all races showed up to pay. James Reese Europe did so much for the world of music in his thirty-nine years of existence, but most importantly, as said by the Priest at his funeral service "He took the colored of this [New York] from their ported places...and raised them to positions of importance, as real musicians".