

### A VERY Short History of Jazz

Jazz developed in the 1890s with roots in several different strands of American music, including traditional African American spirituals and hymns, the blues, piano ragtime, and brass funeral marching bands in New Orleans. In the late 1890s, New Orleans licensed a 38-block vice district known as "Storyville," which housed most of the saloons and brothels and became the "cradle of jazz." During World War I, thousands of black Americans migrated from the South to better-paying jobs in the northern factories. Additionally, the Department of the Navy pressured the New Orleans city government to shut down Storyville, putting hundreds of musicians out of work (not to mention the other employees of Storyville). Jazz musicians found a waiting audience of transplanted Southerners when they arrived in Chicago and New York looking for work, and almost overnight, those cities (especially Chicago) became the new center of jazz activity. New Orleans jazz musicians became the rage of the northern cities and were soon performing in bars, clubs, and restaurants, making more money than ever before.

Also around that same time, phonograph record companies began sending recording equipment down South to record black jazz musicians; these were called "Race Records" in the 1920s and represent some of the earliest recordings of jazz and blues musicians. This new genre of recordings allowed many African Americans artists to reach a national audience for the first time. A large segment of race records were marketed directly to an African-American audience, and soon became part of the black community's culture. The *Chicago Defender* newspaper encouraged "lovers of music everywhere and those who desire to help in the advance of the Race" to purchase these records. Listening to and enjoying these recordings not only unified the listener with the artist, but also with African-Americans in other communities across the country, giving them a voice and a place within the chaos of urban life. Newsboys sold blues records. So did door-to-door salesmen. Pullman porters carried copies south with them and peddled them at whistlestops. The records that singer Bessie Smith and her rivals made were a sensation all over the country.

Phonographs had detached jazz and blues from their Southern (and black) context and it had begun to spread and be appropriated by white band leaders. But jazz was seen as deeply threatening; one newspaper complained "those moaning saxophones and the rest of the instruments with their broken, jerky rhythm make a purely sensual appeal. They call out the low and rowdy instincts." A 1921 article from the General Federation of Women's Clubs worried, "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. A number of scientific men who have been working on experiments in music-therapy with the insane, declare that... that the effect of jazz on the normal brain produces an atrophied condition on the brain cells of conception, until very frequently those under the demoralizing influence of the persistent use of syncopation...are actually incapable of distinguishing between good and evil, between right and wrong."<sup>1</sup>

Novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald titled his 1922 collection of short stories about the new American era, "Tales of the Jazz Age," which helped attach the term to the entire decade of the 1920s, with its abandon of old morality, its shorter skirts, celebration of opulence, and hedonism. Jazz seemed to stand for—and embody—those cultural changes with its jagged rhythms and unpredictable, syncopated, modern sound.

---

<sup>1</sup> Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, p. 26.