

The Evolving Image of Jazz in Britain in Sheet Music

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The established view of the history of jazz in Britain is that it began in 1919 with the visits of the first American bands to perform specifically jazz music. However, this premise is clearly an over simplification as jazz compositions had been published in Britain since at least 1917, and the word 'jazz' was in general use and was included in song lyrics. The growth of the sheet music industry ran in parallel with the evolution of jazz in Britain, and before the widespread use of recording and broadcast technology this was the main way in which music of all types was disseminated. There was certainly a great demand for sheet music around the turn of the century, and popular hits could sell as many as 200,000 copies. [1] When this is considered in conjunction with Cyril Ehrlich's estimate that 'by 1910 there were some two to four million pianos in Britain – say one instrument for every ten to twenty people', [2] it becomes clear that ownership of pianos, and hence sheet music, was widespread through different social classes. This indicates that many people would have encountered jazz initially, or even exclusively, particularly outside the main cities, through domestic music-making rather than live professional performances. Thus, the importance of printed music in presenting jazz to the British public, geographically removed from the source of the music, cannot be underestimated; and it is therefore informative to examine the evolving image of jazz in the proliferation of sheet music available from the period. [3] [FN](#)

Jazz was part of a long tradition of American music in Britain, which had begun with the visits of minstrel troupes in the nineteenth century. Retrospective analysis of contemporary song lyrics clearly illuminates jazz as a replacement for the previous American musical craze, ragtime, which was rejected by a surprising number of songs, almost all written as early as 1912-1913. Reasons for the rejection of ragtime at this time include objections to black performers, the impropriety of light-hearted music at a time of War and that it was simply an outdated style. Later, in a jazz song of 1919 [h3993.e(45)], ragtime is explicitly rejected in favour of jazz, as it describes a man who 'was crazy on ragtime', but goes on to say that 'one fatal night he yelled with delight/"I've just learned to jazz and it's great!"". In the chorus of the song, this idea receives particular emphasis.

Heigho, jazz it with me
It's easy as easy can be
It's better than ragtime or any zig-zag time
Maggie come jazz it with me

Of the many themes common to 'jazz' and 'ragtime' songs in the period 1900-1919, the link between music and dance is the most prevalent. American musical styles had been the basis for most popular dance music in Britain from the nineteenth century, and this meant that jazz was perceived, initially at least, as merely another dance craze. The majority of songs to contain the word 'jazz' in the title contain the phrase 'jazz band', where the songs describe the reactions of people to performances by these groups, including references to dance. Indeed, the verb 'to jazz' meaning 'to dance' (as in the above quotation from *Heigho! Jazz it with Me*) was also extremely common in song titles and lyrics.

It is interesting to note the consistency in the language used in connection with dance in song lyrics from throughout the period. The infectious nature of the music is often emphasised, and expressed through the inability of anyone listening to keep still, suggesting that the music had a strong power over the listener. This idea is often linked specifically with the music of a jazz band, such as in *When I Hear that Jazz Band Play* [h3996n(22)] 'Say what you will, you can't keep

still while they're playing'. The precise nature of the movements associated with dancing is also referred to in song lyrics. In ragtime songs, this tends to be a list of stylised dance steps:

Inside the ballroom bands are gaily playing
Ragging the music, see those dancers swaying
Two-steps and tangos and ragtime fandangoes
Argentine sliding and Gaby gliding [h3990.t(34)]

In later jazz songs, there are no references to specific dances, and lyrics emphasise the freedom now permitted to dancers. This indicates the increase in improvised dancing that developed alongside jazz music. The song *Jazz!* [h3988.yy(1)] encourages dancers:

When you hear that rhythm- just go with 'em- jazz jazz!
For when the music's playing start in swaying jazz jazz!

Lyrics also indicate that there was a perceived risk, expressed as having to 'take a chance', associated with the sort of dancing which required participants to lose their inhibitions to the music. Initially it was difficult to resist – 'You want to dance, so take a chance/Come on and hear that Jazz Band music!' [h3991.ii(5)]. Some songs take this idea further, describing the hypnotic power of the music, which has the ability to exercise control of the minds of the listeners, for instance, the performance of the *Javanese Jazz Band* 'Hypnotizes, puts you in a trance' [h3996.f(43)].

The words 'craze' and 'crazy' are used very frequently in songs, particularly in connection with dancing. These are often juxtaposed and mixed even within the same song, as it is the overwhelming and infectious enthusiasm for music which is constantly heard and provokes a compulsion to dance ('craze') that drives people to a state of 'madness' ('crazy'). The idea that music also has the power to make people crazy by controlling their minds is frequently explored in the lyrics of ragtime songs, in fact there are two songs called *Rag-time Crazy* [h3995.o(14) & h3995.jj(30)] which assert respectively that 'Ev'ry one seems crazy with ragtime on the brain' and 'Ev'ryones raving ragtime mad/The youngster the mother and the dad'. This is explored further in some songs such as *Don't Sing in Ragtime* [h3994hh(10)] 'We're right on the brink of it, brink of it, brink of what? Of the lunatic asylum'.

Surrendering to the power of the music through listening or dancing is shown in some lyrics to create a mood of reckless abandon, for example: 'Come and hear the Ragtime band play Dixie... And you'll feel like jumping o'er the moon!' [h3991.t(44)]. In most ragtime songs the results of this are usually left to the imagination, but here the risk associated with surrendering to the music is made clear, as the lyrics suggest that ragtime music is a threat to domestic stability: 'It's a tune I'd leave my happy home for... Put your arm in mine, for there's danger on the line when the band plays Dixieland'.

The nature of this 'danger' is shown more explicitly in jazz songs, which demonstrate that the music can provoke excesses of emotion that can easily lead to possibly illicit romantic activity:

I've got a heart so big, come on and hug me kid,
Hug me and don't ask why. [h3994.xx(47)]

The link between dance and sexual attraction is made explicit in some later songs. The presumably 'ordinary' *Rag-time Postman Bill* seems to be universally popular with women due to his dancing abilities as 'When he goes by all the girls cry' and 'Parlour maids and nurse maids banish their pride/Throw their arms around his neck and do the wedding glide' [h3996.f(47)]. The syncopated characteristic of ragtime is used as a sexual image in the sentimental ballad *Ragtime Kisses* [h3990.o(1)]:

Just you and I dear together in Ragtime ecstasies quite new
Those syncopating palpitating kisses and you.

Dancing, or 'jazzing', is used as a more direct sexual metaphor in later jazz songs, with the new independence permitted by improvisational dance equating to the increasing sexual liberty and freedom of women in social situations. In *Heigho! Jazz it With Me* [h3993.e(45)], jazz dancing is linked with flirting:

She wore the Jazz skirts and like all the Jazz flirts
Maggie didn't object to a squeeze.

In the same song, Maggie's uncontrollable flirtatiousness and promiscuity due to jazz leads to inappropriate activity:

One day on a bus oh! There was such a fuss
That poor Maggie she could not keep still
She grabbed the conductor, a fat old conductor
And Jazzed with him till he was ill.

In *The Coster Jazz Song* [h3991.r(24)] a woman describes how her partner Bill, a lower-class man, is able to mix with the upper classes, and secure the affections of women, due to his dancing ability: 'E's took to dancin' nah and I'm as jealous as can be/ 'Cos all the gels 'e dances wiv gets mash'd on 'im yer see'. This song suggests that jazz dancing was primarily an occupation of the upper classes, and a form of entertainment towards which those in the lower classes could only aspire. Certainly, in London at this time many of the venues for dancing to jazz were luxurious hotels, restaurants and clubs that would only be open to those with money and social connections. In *The Coster Jazz Song* his wife complains 'My Bill 'e's always jazzin' it', but is unable to stop him due to her lack of dancing ability: 'Oh lor! nah wots a gel to do? 'Cos I can't dance yer see'. In this song, 'jazzin' once again becomes a metaphor for sexual activity:

My poor Bills' goin' orf 'is 'ead
'E comes 'ome at any time and flops in bed
Dreams I'm somebody else instead
And starts jazz-jazzin' it wiv me

Indeed, moral objections were being made at this time against what some people saw as the overt sexual connotations of jazz dancing, and explicit imagery in songs may have played a part in fuelling this debate, publicly aired in *The Times* and other national papers. [4] [FNAs](#) well as the sexual implications of inappropriate body contact between dancing partners, it can be seen that jazz was also developing metaphorical associations with other activities that were thought of by some as socially and morally inappropriate. In the song *That Ragtime Suffragette* [h3988.zz(14)] ragtime music became symbolic of a woman's suffragette activities in a portrayal which is clearly disapproving [my emphases]:

She's no household pet
Oh mercy! while her husband's waiting home to dine
She is *ragging* up and down the line a-shouting 'Votes for women'

Bands are playing as she swaggers by
Banners are waving as the men all cry
"Why don't you go home and bake a cake?
One like dear old mother used to make?"

Paradoxically to these prevalent images of social and moral impropriety, weddings are a surprisingly common theme in both ragtime and jazz songs, presumably because the musical styles were popular with younger people, who were of the age to be getting married. In several songs, jazz or ragtime replaces the traditional wedding music, and in this way jazz acts as a metaphor for the increasing

Freedom of young people to usurp tradition:

Said the bridegroom looking stiff as starch,
We don't want any organist to play the wedding march...
Old man Joe on your old banjo
Play a little bit of ragtime music [h3990.i(47)]

Examination of song lyrics is extremely illuminating of the differences in the images of jazz and ragtime. A large number of songs emphasise that ragtime had permeated all levels of society, for example in *Rag-time Crazy* 'No matter where you wander ragtime music fills the air/From the cottage to the mansion you can hear it everywhere' [h3995.jj(30)]. Ragtime is also shown in song lyrics to have infiltrated many aspects of everyday life, such as church and school, and there are also many ragtime songs about 'ordinary' people including the milkman, postman, policeman, and motor man. This idea receives extended and exaggerated treatment in *I'm Certainly Living a Rag-time Life* [h3986.ss(11)]:

I've got a rag-time dog and a rag-time cat,
A rag-time piano in my rag-time flat
Wear rag-time clothes from head to shoes
I read a paper called the 'Rag-time News'
Got rag-time habits and I talk that way
I sleep in rag-time and I rag all day
Got rag-time troubles with my rag-time wife
I'm certainly living a rag-time life.

However, jazz songs rarely make the link between music and everyday life and more often portray exotic scenes and express escapist sentiments. Indeed, several jazz songs mention the ability of jazz bands to lift the spirits and take away the 'blues', and the roots of the now legendary assumption that jazz is linked with excesses of alcohol and drugs is mentioned in songs from 1919. The chorus of *Johnson's Jazz Time Band* [h3991.q(4)], which is set 'down in Sheriff Johnson's gin and fizz saloon', begins:

When old man Johnson is serving out the grog,
And the cabin's full of smoke like a London fog,
Well all the coons are busy jazzing till your heart feels
good...

The exoticism of the setting of the song *That Mandarin Jazz* [g426.d(33)] is further enhanced by references to drugs ('Dream pipe dope is rife tonight') and the intoxicating power of these substances is compared to that of jazz music which creates 'a sinister spell like opium.'

Songs are set in a variety of exotic locations including China, Java, Hindustan and the Indian Seas and American place names including Alabama, Arizona and New Orleans are used in a similarly random way to provide settings. Thus, songs give only a general impression of exoticism rather than a clear idea of the specific geographical origins of jazz; indeed, Arizona was probably as foreign to the majority of the British public as Java in the early twentieth century. The fact that exotic settings appear to have been chosen indiscriminately indicates that for song writers and the public, any setting outside the West could represent the 'other' and thus achieve the effect of establishing jazz as music of 'another world'. This added to the appeal of jazz as an escapist music with the power to take the listener out of his or her own environment.

Significant numbers of songs specifically associate ragtime and jazz with the stereotypical 'nigger' or 'coon'. These caricatures would be familiar to the public through their use in a huge body of songs published in Britain from the late nineteenth century. Typical elements of the Negro stereotype, which had descended from the minstrel show, are presented in songs. The 'coon' is portrayed as a simple character, with nothing to do expect make music: 'Who sang all day in such a pleasing way/That they called him the 'Rag-time Coon'' [h3989.f(42)]. If engaged in employment, it

is a menial task such as selling oysters and clams [h3651(45)], although even then the 'coon' is portrayed as being lazy as he 'takes things easy-goes along at a crawl'. The minstrel stereotype emphasised that Negroes supposedly had large mouths, and therefore loud voices, which are useful when selling produce: 'Ev'ry weekday morning comes a long thin greasy coon/A-shouting "Oysters" and A-shouting "Clams"!'.

Songs often link the 'crazy' element of the music with the influence of 'coons' on the music. For example, in *Rag-time Crazy* [h3995.o(14)], 'Ev'ry one seems crazy with the Coon song on the brain'. Interestingly, few songs depict black performers of ragtime or jazz, and those that do are derogatory or patronising in nature, for example 'You ought to hear those crazy tunes/Played by all those crazy coons' [h3988yy(1)]. This is taken to extremes in *That Jungle Jazz in Congo Land* [h3994.dd(31)] which could be an innocent, slightly nonsensical song about jazz in the jungle, but could also have racial undertones. Written in 1919, it clearly prefigures the pseudo-African 'jungle' music of Duke Ellington. The song begins:

Have you heard the latest news from Congo Land?
All the animals home from zoos in Yankeeland
Brought with them to kill the 'blues' that new Jazz Band
Now they make the forest ring each night

These lines could refer to Negroes emancipated from captivity in American 'zoos'. However, the general lack of any associations between jazz and black performers in songs published in England is significant, especially when considered together with other statistics which suggest that overall numbers of songs about 'niggers' or 'coons' dropped rapidly in the second decade of the century when jazz was coming to prominence. [5] Interestingly, this indicates that jazz was not presented in songs as a black music, and that the origins of the music had therefore become suppressed. [FN](#)

A significant number of songs make detailed references to the specific characteristics of musical styles. Indeed, by examining the differences between the way that ragtime and jazz are described in song lyrics, conclusions can be reached about what distinguished jazz from other syncopated music styles heard in Britain. Whereas more than half of jazz songs examined contain the phrase 'jazz band' in the title, instrumental aspects of jazz performance tend to be emphasised, very few songs refer to instrumental performance of ragtime, and there is a strong link between ragtime and song. Singing in a ragtime style was a common subject for ragtime songs, and characters in these songs are often portrayed either singing or whistling the music whilst going about their work, which once again reinforces the idea of ragtime permeating everyday life, contrasting with the exotic settings for jazz.

The idea of 'ragtime' is retained in lyrics of songs written after the ragtime craze as a characteristic of jazz, such as in *Johnson's Jazz-time Band* [h3991q(4)] ('Sammy with the bones is full of ragtime tricks') and *Stick Around for the New Jazz Band* [h3991.ii(5)] ('Dan on the banjo as cute as can be/Picking out the rags in any old key'). It is particularly significant that references to ragtime within 'jazz' songs are associated with the most rhythmic instruments, banjo and percussion, indicating that 'ragtime' was perceived as a primarily rhythmic characteristic. This may have been influenced by the prominence of the banjo in most performances of syncopated music before 1919, either as a solo instrument or as part of the bands that played for dancing. These performances reinforced the rhythmic characteristics of the music due to the origins (as an instrument to accompany dancing) and percussive, rhythmic nature of the instrument.

Indeed, the banjo is the most frequently mentioned instrument in songs that describe performances of syncopated music, and in ragtime songs the inclusion of the instrument often becomes a metaphor for nostalgia. In a song called *The Ghost of the Rag-time Coon* [h3989f(42)], it is the characteristic sound of a minstrel's banjo that alerts people to the presence of his ghost: 'They'd hear the strains of the old banjo and this is what they'd say: It's the ghost of the rag-time coon'. Thus, by the second decade of the twentieth century, banjo ragtime is metaphorically portrayed as the ghostly remnants of the earlier minstrel banjo style in a way that seems to imply that minstrel and ragtime music are of the same 'spiritual' roots. This imagery also shows that the banjo was widely

understood and well established as a traditional symbol of black music-making.

The description of performances of jazz on a wider range of instruments suggests that this was the main way in which jazz was distinguished from previous American syncopated music. The drums are the most frequently mentioned instrument in jazz songs, and this emphasises the centrality of 'noise' in descriptions of jazz. For example, when *Johnson's Jazz-time Band* are playing 'You can always hear the melody a mile away' [h3991.q(4)]. Indeed, from about 1919 there is evidence of an actual and perceptual shift in focus from the omnipotent banjo to the drums as the provider of rhythmic drive and excitement in syncopated music. In January 1919, one of the first reviews of a jazz performance in Britain was entitled 'The Art of Jazz: Drummer as Chief Conspirator'. [6] ^{FN} Reviews of the earliest 'syncopated' or 'jazz' bands often devoted significant space to descriptions of the 'trap drummer' and his extensive equipment, and visiting black American drummers quickly achieved notoriety in the British press. The drums are normally referred to in songs as 'pans' and 'tin cans', of which the principle characteristic is the volume of sound produced, not always appreciated by the audience:

There'll be sixteen iron pans
And a set of old tin cans
Twenty saucepans and a worn out bassinet
Just fill your ears with chunks of cotton wool [h2452(33)]

Indeed, the loud and unrefined nature of the sound, as produced by pots pans and cans, is also the principle feature of performance of jazz on other instruments. An important characteristic of jazz performance as presented in song lyrics is the ability to produce odd noises from familiar instruments:

Hear that trombone with that peculiar moaning
That saxophone with that peculiar groaning [h3996n(22)]

They got a funny clarinet
And a man that plays cornet
In such a funny manner [h3993.e(9)]

This can even be taken to the point of 'producing sounds that pianos never ought to make' [h3991.q(4)] and creating the assumption that jazz bands 'play all out of tune' [h3996n(22)].

Significantly, the accompaniments in many 'jazz band' songs are no longer merely functional, but are more musically interesting, containing features such as 'fills', breaks and counter-melodies to a much greater extent than ragtime songs. In some cases the piano parts are specifically illustrative of the elements of jazz performance described in the lyrics. There are also examples of contemporary piano pieces that try to 'describe' jazz in musical terms, sometimes with appropriate annotations on the music to indicate to the player the effect or instrument that he/she should be attempting to reproduce or represent on the piano keyboard. This seems to indicate that not only the instrumental effects were fundamental to the accepted image of jazz, but also that the genre had begun to develop a clear musical identity which was linked with the instruments on which the music was performed.

The perception of ragtime as the basic syncopated rhythm and jazz as instrumental colour which is clearly asserted in song lyrics, is also the basis of an early definition of jazz, written by Robert Mendl, author of the first British book on jazz:

Strictly speaking, jazz has nothing whatever to do with rhythm: it is solely concerned with instrumentation, and it would be possible to have jazz music that is not syncopated at all. You cannot play jazz music as a pianoforte solo: if you perform syncopated dance music on the pianoforte it is ragtime, not jazz. It only becomes jazz when it is played on

This definition is clearly very different to the way in which jazz is generally described today, but however strange Mendl's ideas may sound, the fact that it largely concurs with the way in which jazz was presented in popular song suggests that it is an accurate representation of the image of jazz in Britain in the early twentieth century.

Jazz was clearly perceived in Britain as part of a larger category of music defined by Mendl as 'modern syncopated dance music'. Initially the word 'jazz' was a vague, all-embracing term for current syncopated dance music in Britain, but jazz quickly developed a strong image as a radical new music that was representative of the spirit of the age in Britain. It had exotic and escapist associations that were desirable in the aftermath of War, and was closely linked with the massive growth of dance as a main post-war recreational activity, and particularly with the development of improvised dance that encouraged social and even sexual freedom, particularly for women. This clearly established jazz as fundamentally different to earlier dance music in Britain, even before the musical characteristics of the style were understood. Therefore, as soon as any musically distinguishing features emerged, these became accepted and established as the definitive elements of the jazz style.

The fact that the image of jazz portrayed in songs is also consistent with the way in which it was presented by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band from America gives an indication of the strength of their influence. This band established an image of jazz as being primarily concerned with the kind of noisy, comical instrumental effects that are clearly presented in song lyrics and accompaniments. Also, the rejection of the banjo – which was strongly symbolic of black music-making – by this group also implies a rejection of the origins of jazz in black music, which became explicit when later the group claimed to have 'invented' jazz. This is reflected in the fact that black performers are rarely mentioned in songs, which suggests that the black origins of the music were not a significant part of the British understanding of jazz. Thus, the image of jazz that was presented in sheet music served to disseminate further and establish as seminal the performances of these white men who, in 1919, presented jazz in Britain in such a way that 'the blind prejudice felt by many towards what they think is jazz can be traced straight back to Original Dixieland Jazz Band's comic hats'. [8] [FN](#)

Footnotes

1 Ehrlich, Cyril, *Harmonious Alliance: A History of the Performing Right Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 5.

2 Ehrlich, Cyril, *The Piano: a History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 91.

3 For the purpose of this study, I examined around 50 pieces of music in the printed music collection of the British Library, and restricted my research to songs published in London, to ensure that the songs would be known in Britain. The songs are referenced in the text using the British Library volume number. [Back](#)

4 See, for example, 'Jazz Dancing: A Canon's Denunciation' in *The Times* (London 15/3/1919), 7; 'Wild Dances and Hideous Clothes: Sir Dyce Duckworth on Degraded Morals' in *The Times* (London, 18/3/1919), 7; and 'Jazz-thoughts and Some Older Ones' in *The Times* (London, 29/4/1919), 15. [Back](#)

5 The following table shows the number of incidences of the words 'coon' and 'nigger' in titles of songs published in London in the British Library Collection:

	Nigger	Coon
1880-1890	6	2
1891-1900	9	69
1901-1910	12	140
1911-1920	3	23
1921-1930	2	0 Back

6 'The Art of Jazz: Drummer as Chief Conspirator', *The Times* (London, 14/1/1919), 11. [Back](#)

7 Mendl, Robert W. S., *The Appeal of Jazz* (Glasgow: Robert Maclehose, 1927), 45-6. [Back](#)

8 Harris, R., *Jazz* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1957), 201. [Back](#)

Further references

- Bradley, J., *Dancing Through Life* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1947)
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Moseley, S. A. (ed.), *Brightest Spots in Brighter London: A Comprehensive Guide to London Amusements, Shopping Centres and Features of Interest to the Visitor* (London: Stanley Paul, 1924)
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