

James Reese Europe: The Carrier of the Most Virulent Germ of the First World War, and All That Jazz

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The effects of World War One are still very much unsettled figures. It is really hard to know what the exact numbers of dead are, and still after 100 years, the missing are yet being found. The most likely facts are that - over eight million soldiers died, two million went missing, and more than sixty million were wounded in combat. Civilian conflict losses seriously augment those numbers.

Nevertheless, it shocks people today to learn that these figures pale in comparison to the effects of illness wrought upon the world as a result of the war's diseases.

There has been much discussion upon the devastating effects of the Spanish Flu on the world's population during and after the First World War, and there is little doubt that the war exacerbated the consequences of that horrific disease which ravaged the entire Earth's human inhabitants. The lowest estimates contend that over 500 million were made ill, and according to the CDC website 50 to 100 million died.¹ I personally lean more toward the higher estimates since according to the Smithsonian,

“Public health officials, law enforcement officers and politicians had reasons to underplay the severity of the 1918 flu, which resulted in less coverage in the press. In addition to the fear that full disclosure might embolden enemies during wartime, they wanted to preserve public order and avoid panic.”²

National Geographic claims the 1918 Flu pandemic killed more people than both World Wars put together.³

Even so, I argue that there was another more overwhelming **germ** that also engulfed the world during and after the war that was more infectious, much more overpowering, and indeed, much less violent than the Spanish Flu. Unlike the Spanish Flu, we have considerably more data about its dissemination.

After the war, one of the carriers of this “bug,” the famous Noble Sissle, wrote a biography about his WW1 black lieutenant. Like Sissle, the officer was also not its origin, but certainly one of the condition's incubators. Sissle wrote that the germ hit the French hard and then spread.⁴ Of course, the condition he was writing about was Jazz.

Hours of discussion could be had on the source or sources of Jazz, but as much as I would love to, as an old music teacher, molded by the likes of Victor Borga and Spike

Jones, instead, I want to propose that there was a single man whose efforts and influence caused Jazz to “go viral” in a pandemic greater than that of even the Spanish Flu, but to give credit where it is due, and to curb dissent beforehand, allow me to briefly point out that if you do a search on the internet today asking “Who was the Father of Jazz?”, on one of the top ranking sites you will find that Charles "Buddy" Bolden is “considered by many as the “founder-father” of Jazz. Indeed, Bolden has always carried the moniker of the first "king" of New Orleans jazz.⁵ Another comprehensive history corroborates saying that, “Buddy Bolden was truly a king in New Orleans...in the mid 1890’s.”⁶

Meanwhile, a white bandleader, Papa Jack Laines, is often credited as the "Patriarch of Jazz,"⁷ while NewOrleansonline.com, the Official Tourism Site of the City of New Orleans, points out that Creole Jazz great, Ferdinand "Jelly Roll" Morton was quoted as saying, "It is evidently known, beyond contradiction, that New Orleans is the cradle of Jazz, and I myself happen to be the inventor in the year 1902." ⁸

I agree with the anonymous author of the New Orleans article *Birthplace of Jazz* that “Jelly Roll” was wrong. Jazz is not an invention created by one mind. True, there were individual innovations, but Jazz is greater than one musician. New Orleans may well be the cradle of Jazz, and St. Louis and Chicago were where it was swaddled, but New York was surely the bottle that fed it.

Thus, I offer another originator-architect, without whose ingenuity, creativity, influence, and life-long work, Jazz might have been delayed, if not certainly handicapped. He was both a leader with a baton, as well as with a machine gun. Noble Sissle’s lieutenant, and band director was James Reese Europe.

Europe’s biographer, Reid Badger, in his *A Life in Ragtime: A Biography of James Reese Europe*, simply refers to Europe as a “legend,” and “...one of the most influential orchestra leaders and musicians in New York, and, indeed in the entire country.”⁹ Though Jazz truly has roots in music prior to the turn of the century, as I mentioned, I propose that it was Lieutenant James Reese Europe of the 369th Harlem Hellfighters of the battlefields of France that acted as Jazz’s mother.

It may seem awkward to name a man a mother, but it was what he did that so nurtured and caused Jazz to grow that I think earns him the praise-worthy title, and not his masculinity, of which the ladies of the time were quite fond. I could use the word “parent” instead, but that more generic term does not communicate those nurturing tasks that Europe shouldered to further spread “real negro (sic) music” as he called it.¹⁰

Before I give evidence to support this claim for Jim Europe though, it is important to answer the question, “Was Jazz an affliction?” a curious word when considering music, but to some the music was an affliction.

Before it finally won broad popularity, critics, which included social reformers as well as disapproving classical musicians, fought to suppress Jazz because of its origins and

character. In his comprehensive history, *All the Years of Popular American Music* David Ewen states,

“...the emotional climate in New Orleans was most favorable to Jazz’s early growth...After 1897, prostitution was confined by city ordinance to a specific locality known as Storyville. Cradle of vice. Storyville also became the cradle in which Jazz was born...It was music with kinesthetic appeal, full of emotional thrusts. It was music calculated to make the heart beat faster, (and) the feet grow restless.”¹¹

Respected medical professionals, considered it “a threat to public health” and even called ragtime dancing a mental illness.¹² The *Ladies Home Journal* published an article entitled “Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?”¹³ and even Jazz geniuses like “Jelly Roll” Morton could not avoid referring to it as “the Devil’s music.”¹⁴

But the appeal of Ragtime and Jazz was intoxicating, and no matter what the critics said, there was no stopping its infectious dissemination. Even Jim Europe himself associated his music with the terms of medicine. When writing his explanation as to the gradual abandonment of the term “Ragtime” to his music, he explained that the name Ragtime was merely a fun name given to Negro rhythm by Caucasian musicians, and that “many eminent Anglo-musicians have become **inoculated** with that **serum**-Negro rhythm...” He goes on to say that even John Phillip Sousa who, “remained **immune** from its **contagion**” still used a Negro theme in one of his own compositions.¹⁵

So, what was James Reese Europe’s role and importance? Even before the war there were several key elements to the growth of Jazz that Europe accomplished.

First, he was instrumental in the formation of several professional support organizations, (the Frogs in 1908 and the *Clef Club* in 1910,) which were dedicated to improving connections for the Negro in the theatrical profession, and raising professional standards, and elevating the race generally.¹⁶ As president of the *Clef Club*, Europe stimulated significant improvements in the black musician’s working conditions. In prior situations, black musicians would be hired in lower paying custodial jobs, and then expected to perform for tips. In addition to requiring the providing of room, board, and transportation expenses for out of town jobs, *Clef Club* President Europe demanded employers of club musicians insure a fixed salary and a job that did not include any other tasks than musical performance.

He then conceived of a symphony-sized concert composed entirely of black musicians for a combined black and white audience.¹⁷

Thirdly, in 1911, “Big Jim,” referring to his big heartedness, his musical importance, and of course his height at six foot, held a keen interest in the development and success of the Music School Settlement for Colored People in Harlem. His recommendations were crucial in the selection of teachers, and the raising of funds. It was his idea to hold a

benefit concert at Carnegie Hall, which was the first time an all Negro show was produced there.

In fact, the first documented time that American white High Society caught the “Jazz bug” was at the Carnegie Hall concert. Reid Badger reports that, by the end of the first number,

...the audience—perhaps for the first time at any concert in the United States, composed of the two races—came to its feet and New York “woke up to the fact that it had something new in music.”¹⁸

Black author, lawyer and fellow composer, James Weldon Johnson, later wrote,

New York had not yet become accustomed to Jazz; so when the *Clef Club* opened its concert with a syncopated march, playing it with a biting attack and an infectious rhythm,...the applause became a tumult.¹⁹

James Reese Europe’s composing and conducting reputation exploded after that first Carnegie Hall concert, but it particularly accented his reputation as an organizer hoisting his name to that of sovereign of the Jazz impresarios, and reversed some of the entrenched negative bias misjudging black popular musicians.

Afterward, members of the *Clef Club* were engaged to play for “nearly all of the best functions, not only in America, but in London and Paris,” as well as exclusive functions there and on private yachts around the world.²⁰ Jim Europe and his *Clef Club* were building a reputation to equal that of any symphony orchestra in the nation, and it was at the private high society events that James Europe was so successful at eliminating the usual racial barriers that prohibited blacks from performing. December of 1913, realized a significant milestone for black musicians when he signed the first contract with a major record label to release a series of dance numbers. The following month with the support of the famous white dance team of Vernon and Irene Castle they broke the race barrier again at the Palace and Victoria Theaters, against union rules, by performing in those restricted “first class” Times Square theaters.²¹

Next, in 1914, James Reese Europe established the *Tempo Club* to exploit the new interest in popular dance orchestras, and “to keep the colored musical world up to a certain standard morally, socially, and artistically.”²²

Additionally at that time, Europe also formed the acclaimed *National Negro Symphony*.

Prior to the outbreak of war, Colonel William Hayward of the New York National Guard and James Reese Europe, worked together to form a military band who Jim said had goals that included forming “an organization of Negro men that will bring together all classes of men for a common good...it will build up the moral and physical negro (sic) manhood of Harlem.”²³ Thus, in September of 1916, he joined and became a combat officer of the New York 15th Infantry Regiment (Colored.)

Why were these efforts a courageous daring risk? Because in the racially charged environment of the time, besides sparking violent objections, any performance of black musicians that was perceived as poor could seriously cement the already general perception that the black musician was just incapable. This would reflect upon the race as a whole.²⁴

So, who actually declared James Reese Europe the carrier of the affliction Jazz?

Besides leading a machine gun company as a lieutenant, Europe helped to grow the regiment by overseeing the development of its regimental band. His hand in this insured the most unique band in the Army. Three times the size of a normal Army band, it boasted the inclusion of some of the finest imminent Jazz names, thanks to Jim Europe. He also insisted upon utilizing music that he knew would invigorate the men of his race. More than once did one of the regiment's enlistees referred to it as, "that damned band"²⁵ because of the power of its jazzy siren song.

It was this sound that the band took with it to France and under the baton of its architect and director repeatedly enthralled and rejuvenated the troops there, but not just the Americans. Early in their performances in a French town, (likely Tours) Sergeant Noble Sissle, then vocalist, cornetist, and occasional drum major reported,

...the baton came down with a swoop that brought forth a soul-rousing crash (and) both director and musician seemed to forget their surroundings...as the drummers struck their stride their shoulders began shaking in time to their syncopated raps.

Then, it seemed, the whole audience began to sway, dignified French officers began to pat their feet along with the American general, who, temporarily, had lost his style and grace.

Lieutenant Europe was no longer the Lieutenant Europe of a moment ago, but once more Jim Europe, who a few months ago rocked New York with his syncopated baton. His body swayed in willowy motions and his head was bobbing as it did in days when terpsichorean festivities reigned supreme. He turned to the trombone players, who sat impatiently waiting for their cue to have a 'Jazz spasm,' and they drew their slides out to the extremity and jerked them back with that characteristic crack.

The audience could stand it no longer; the 'Jazz germ' hit them, and it seemed to find the vital spot, loosening all muscles and causing what is known in America as an 'Eagle Rocking Pit.' "There now," I said to myself. "Colonel Hayward has brought his band over here and started ragtinitis (sic) in France; ain't this an awful thing to visit upon a nation with so many burdens?" But when the band had finished and the people were roaring with laughter, their faces wreathed in smiles, I was forced to say that this is just what France needs at this critical moment.²⁶

According to eminent black historian Nell Irvin Painter, during one concert in 1918, on the Champs Élysées in Paris, where the regiment's band performed in a joint program after several other allied military bands, Jim Europe's band performed pieces of Jazz with complex syncopation. The crowd "went wild" for the "infectious" music.²⁷

It appears that it was so for the entire continent, for throughout the 369th Regiment's service overseas, in France, and after the Armistice in Germany as well, Lt. James Reese Europe's *Harlem Hellfighters Band* spread the "Jazz germ" with much the same results. Evidence of the pandemic can be seen in the February 1919, headline of *The New York Age* entertainment section, which read "French Now Want Colored Musicians From United States."²⁸

Though Post Traumatic Stress was a mysterious disorder known as Shellshock in WW1, it did its damage to the individual just as severely. It is most probable that while suffering its effects, a drummer in Europe's band, who was also a veteran of the horrors of battle in France, lost control and fatally stabbed James Reese Europe in his dressing room one night after their return to the states in 1919. Had that not occurred, today we would likely recognize the name Jim Europe as easily as that of Louis Armstrong.

His was the first funeral parade for a black man in New York history, and certainly the largest, with Negro, Hispanic, and Caucasian mourners lining the streets. They testified the importance of "Big Jim" Europe and his music.

If one **were** to ask, "Which was the more virulent, the Spanish Flu Germ or the Jazz Germ?" certainly, the longer lasting was Jazz. Outside of finally forcing the enemy to the peace table, perhaps the greatest impact Americans of the Great War had as a whole on the world was jazz, and that, American Jazz was the most prominent catalyst for cultural change offered by our troops,²⁹ introduced to the world by James Reese Europe.

¹ Jeffry K. Taubenberger, David M. Morens, "1918 influenza: the mother of all pandemics," *Emerging Infectious Diseases* [serial on the Internet]. Pub. Date: 2006 Jan [date cited]. Available from <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/EID/vol12no01/05-0979.htm> Access date: Oct 23, 2018, <https://www.webcitation.org/5kCUIGdKu?url=http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/EID/vol12no01/05-0979.htm>

² Richard Gunderman, "Ten Myths About the 1918 Flu Pandemic," *www.smithsonianmag.com*, Pub. Date: Jan. 12, 2018, Access date: Oct. 23, 2018, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/ten-myths-about-1918-flu-pandemic-180967810/>

³ Toby Saul, "Inside the Swift, Deadly History of the Spanish Flu Pandemic," *nationalgeographic.com – History Magazine*, Access Date: Oct. 23, 2018, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/archaeology-and-history/magazine/2018/03-04/history-spanish-flu-pandemic/?user.testname=none>

⁴ Noble Lee Sissle, *Memoirs of "Jim" Europe American Memory*. CREATED Carbon copy of typescript, ca. 1942, Part of the African American Odyssey, Library of Congress Music Division. Washington, D.C. DIGITAL ID musmisc ody0717, p. 120-21

⁵ Jeff Winke, "Buddy Bolden: The insane life of the founder-father of jazz," *allaboutjazz.com*, Pub. Date: Dec. 14, 2014, Access date: Oct.22, 2018, <https://www.allaboutjazz.com/buddy-bolden-the-insane-life-of-the-founder-father-of-jazz-buddy-bolden-by-jeff-winke.php> Para. 7

⁶ David Ewen, *All of the Years of American Popular Music – A Comprehensive History*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1977) p. 134

⁷ Winke, (2014, Para. 3)

⁸ "Birthplace of Jazz," *neworleansonline.com*, Access date: Oct. 23, 2018, <https://www.neworleansonline.com/neworleans/music/musichistory/jazzbirthplace.html> , Para. 4

⁹ Reid Badger, *A life in Ragtime – A Biography of James Reese Europe*, (New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 8

¹⁰ "The Negro's Place in Music," *New York Evening Post*, March 13, 1914, p. 7, reprinted in Robert Kimball & William Bolcom, *Reminiscing with Sissle and Blake* (New York, NY, Viking Press, 1973) p. 35-44, Quoted in Badger, p. 95-98

¹¹ Ewen, (1977) p. 132

¹² One esteemed doctor claimed "Many of the new cases of insanity developed in the United States in the last few years may be traced to modern eccentric dances as a causal source, and one-tenth of the insane of this country have lost their minds on account of the troubles which may correctly be tied to modern dances." Mark Knowles. *The Wicked Waltz and Other Scandalous Dances: Outrage at Couples Dancing in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009) p.102.

¹³ In August 1920, less than two years after the war ended, the *Ladies Home Journal* published this statement by head of the Music Department of the General Federation of Women's Clubs in an article entitled "Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?"

In history there have been several great periods when music was declared to be an evil influence, and certain restrictions were placed upon the dance and the music which accompanied it. But all of these restrictions were made by the clergy, who have never been particularly enthusiastic about dancing anyway. To-day, however, the first great rebellion against Jazz music and such dances as the "toddle" and the "shimmy" comes from the dancing masters themselves. Realizing the evil influence of this type of music and dancing, the National Dancing Masters' Association, at their last session, adopted this rule: "Don't permit vulgar cheap Jazz music to be played. Such music almost forces dancers to use jerky half-steps, and invites immoral variations. It is useless to expect to find refined dancing when the music lacks all refinement, for, after all, what is dancing but an interpretation of music?"

Anne Shaw Faulkner, "Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?" *Ladies Home Journal*, August 1921, pp. 16-34.

¹⁴ *The Devil's Music: 1920s Jazz* is written, produced, and directed by María Agui Carter and Calvin A. Lindsay, Jr. Dion Graham narrates.

¹⁵ Lester Walton, "Is Ragtime Dead?" *New York Age*, Lester Walton's column, April 8, 1909, p.6, Quoted in Badger, p. 51

¹⁶ Badger, (1995) p. 37, Quoted from the *Afro-American Ledger*, November 5, 1913

¹⁷ Badger, (1995) pp. 53-55

¹⁸ Badger, (1995) p. 67

¹⁹ James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), pp. 123-24

²⁰ Tom Fletcher, *100 Years of the Negro in Show Business*, (Da Capo Press, 1954), pp. 260-61

²¹ Badger, (1995) p. 89

²² New York News, April 4, 1914, Quoted in Badger, p.88

²³ Sissle, (1942) p.36

²⁴ Sissle, (1942) p.28

²⁵ Sissle, (1942) p.73

²⁶ Sissle, (1942) p. 120

²⁷ Nell Irvin Painter, *Creating Black Americans - African-American History and Its Meanings, 1619 to the Present*, (New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2006) p. 182

²⁸ "French Now Want Colored Musicians From United States," headlines of *The New York Age*, February 8, 1919, p.5

²⁹ *How a Harlem Hellfighter spread the 'Jazz Germ' throughout Europe after WWI*, Available as a reprint of Library of Congress article on the LOC Blog, *WW1: American Jazz Delights the World*, Posted January 24, 2018 by Wendi Maloney (This is a guest post by Ryan Reft, a historian in the Manuscript Division.) Reposted by 20thcenturytimemachine on January 24, 2018, Access date: Oct. 23,2018, <https://20thcenturylibrary.com/2018/01/24/how-a-harlem-hellfighter-spread-the-jazz-germ-throughout-europe-after-wwi/>