

Alabama

HERITAGE

PUBLISHED QUARTERLY BY THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA



M. E. A.



FRONT COVER: Detail from the Lanford album quilt.



BACK COVER: For more than three decades, "The Magic City" sign (erected in 1926) greeted visitors arriving at the Terminal Station in downtown Birmingham. Although the sign actually faced the terminal, the makers of the postcard from which this photograph is taken reversed the negative so that the sign appears to face in the opposite direction. Compare to photograph on page 25.

(Courtesy Birmingham Public Library)

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Rates, postpaid in the United States: One year (four issues) \$12.00; two years (eight issues) \$22.00; single copies, \$3.50, plus \$1.00 for postage and handling. All correspondence regarding subscriptions, change of address, renewals, gift subscriptions, donations, or manuscripts should be directed to: *Alabama Heritage*, P.O. Box CS, University, Alabama, 35486.

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Published quarterly by
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through the College of Arts and Sciences
and the Center for the Study of Southern History and Culture

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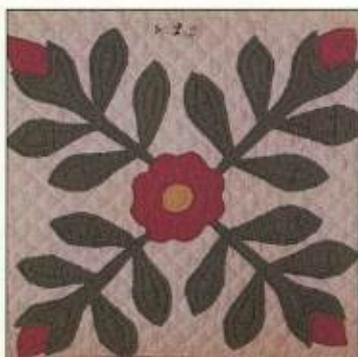
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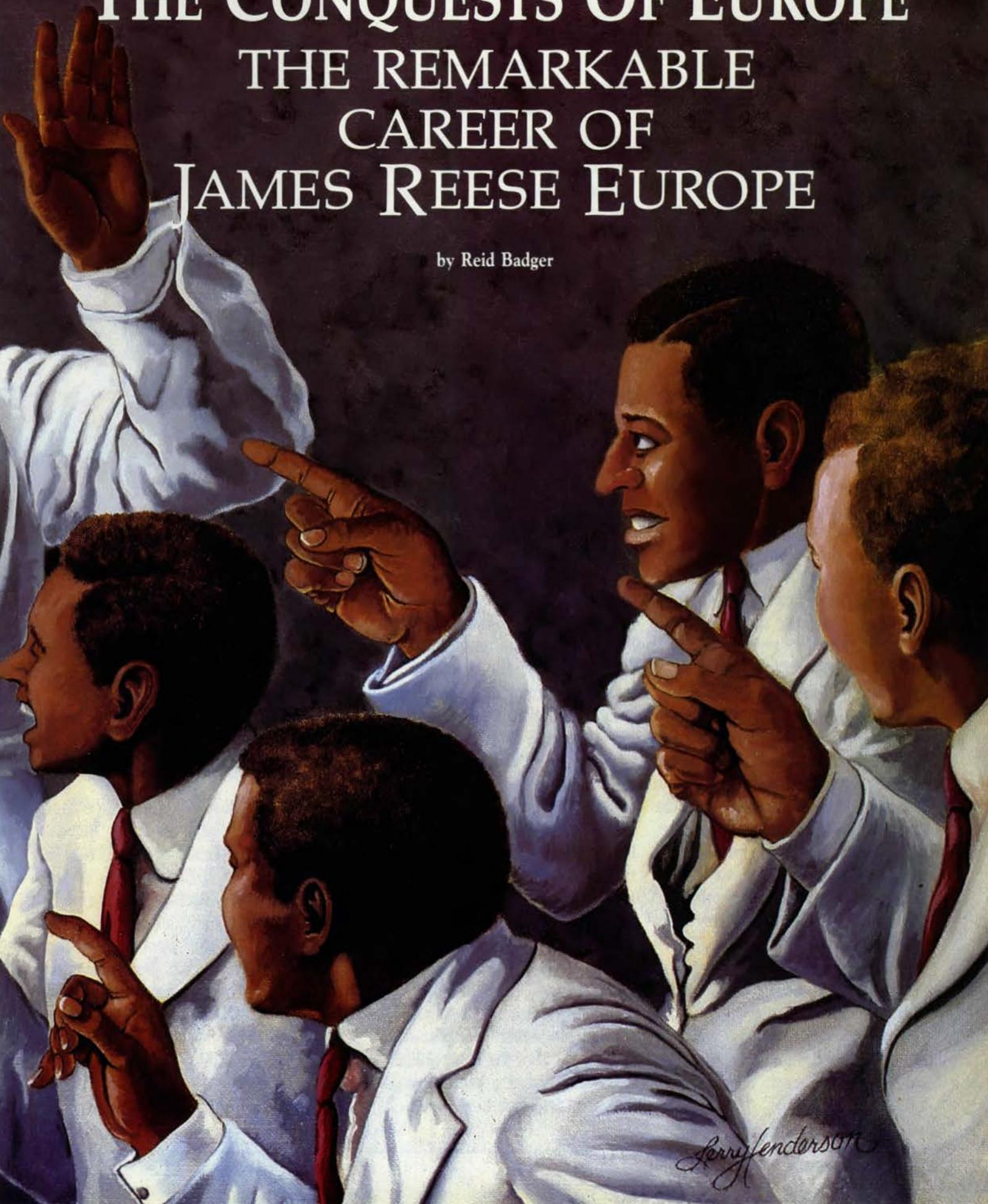
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THE CONQUESTS OF EUROPE

THE REMARKABLE CAREER OF JAMES REESE EUROPE

by Reid Badger



On a bright, clear morning in mid-February 1919, a huge crowd of perhaps a million people gathered along Fifth Avenue all the way from Madison Square Park to 110th Street and from there along Lenox Avenue north into the heart of Harlem, New York City's Black Manhattan. Along with such well-known public figures as Governor Alfred E. Smith, Mr. and Mrs. William Randolph Hearst, John Wanamaker, and Henry Clay Frick, they had come to welcome home the men of the legendary Fifteenth Regiment of New York's National Guard, those highly decorated men who had fought so well as members of the 369th Infantry Regiment of the American Expeditionary Force. Under the command of Colonel William Hayward, the 369th had served almost ten months with French divisions and had survived 191 days under enemy fire. Alone among the American forces, they had been

Fifteen hundred of their number had been killed or wounded in battle.

awarded the *croix de guerre*, and, as the French high command's supreme mark of honor, had been chosen to lead the victorious Allied march to the Rhine. Fifteen hundred of their number had been killed or wounded in battle, but the regiment never lost a prisoner, never lost a foot of ground they were expected to hold, and achieved every offensive objective save one—and in that the fault lay with a failure of artillery support.

The great crowd had also come to catch a glimpse of another legend of the Great War: Lieutenant Jim Europe's

The "Hellfighters" band conquered European audiences with the novel sounds of a syncopated native American music.

369th "Hellfighters" band. The band's members had not only contributed to the defeat of Germany (all had served in the trenches), they had also conquered French, Belgian, and British audiences with the novel sounds of a syncopated native American music. "I just had to see these boys," one middle-aged white spectator told a reporter. "I never will get another opportunity to see such a sight, and I can get another job." Indeed, with Drum Major Bill "Bojangles" Robinson out front, Europe's sixty-member band, indisputably the best in the army, led the returning tide of black soldiers through the new triumphal arch at Twenty-fifth Street, past the reviewing stands on Fifth Avenue, and on toward Harlem. At 130th Street, the heretofore strictly martial music suddenly ceased, the men broke their tight French-style marching ranks, and the band exploded into the popular tune "Here Comes My Daddy." "For the final mile or more of our parade," recalled Major Arthur Little, "about every fourth soldier of the ranks had a girl on his arm—and we marched through Harlem singing and laughing." The "Hellfighters" with its celebrated band had returned from the war-to-end-all-wars in triumph. For its famous leader, Alabama-born James Reese Europe, the parade was yet another conquest in a remarkable series of triumphs which now placed him at the threshold of the most brilliant and successful career a popular musician had ever achieved in America.

James Europe, fourth of five children, was born in Mobile, Alabama, on February 22, 1881. His father, Henry J. Europe, one of the numerous free blacks of that name in Alabama's port city, had held various positions in the post office and customhouse during Reconstruction and had since become pastor of one of the Baptist churches in the city. James' mother, Laura Saxon Europe, was actively involved in the music of the church, and it was from her that he received his first musical instruction. In

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions. To view this image, refer to the print version of this issue of Alabama Heritage.]

1890, when James was nine, his father accepted a position with the postal service in Washington, D.C., and the family left Mobile for the capital city. There, young James completed his public education and began in earnest his musical studies, for which he had demonstrated an unusual aptitude. He studied piano and violin with Enrico Hurlei, Assistant Director of the U.S. Marine Corps Band, and at the age of fourteen, entered a city-wide contest for music composition, finishing second. (His talented younger sister Mary, who

later taught music for many years in Washington high schools, captured first prize.) James continued his studies with several of the notable musicians then living in Washington, concentrating on formal music theory and instrumentation. By the turn of the century, he had decided upon a career in music, but teaching did not interest him, and opportunities at the time for an ambitious black American in the field of "serious" music composition and performance were bleak at best.

Jim Europe (standing center) and Noble Sissle (seated second from right, with banjo) and members of Europe's String Octett photographed in the early years of the Clef Club's existence, c. 1910-1912.

(Courtesy James Reese Europe, Jr.)

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In one area, however, that of popular music and popular entertainment in general, the picture seemed more promising. For a variety of complex reasons, sometime around 1890 American popular taste in music, dance, and song began to shift away from traditional European models and toward more native sounds. New popular songs like Benjamin Harney's 1895 composition, "You've Been A Good Old Wagon, But You've Done Broke Down," for instance, could not possibly be mistaken as having come from a London music hall, a Paris cafe, or from Berlin or Vienna. Ragtime, which emerged as a distinctive piano

James Reese Europe leads the Clef Club Band in this 1914 publicity photograph.

(Courtesy Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

style in the nineties, was also clearly home-grown, as were such new dances as the cakewalk and one-step, which swept the country during those years. Of equal significance, black musical comedy was entering its post-minstrel stage, and black entertainers were beginning to move slowly toward the

presentation of genuine black musicals, providing their own interpretations of Negro materials, characters, and situations. And the geographic locus for all of these developments, as it was for so many other important changes in American culture, was New York City.

In 1904, James Reese Europe headed north to make his mark, he hoped, as music director of one of the new black Broadway shows. Although his first efforts at finding employment were disappointing, he did meet many of New York's top entertainers, including Ernest Hogan, one of the leading black Broadway performers and businessmen, who asked Europe to write the

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions. To view this image, refer to the print version of this issue of Alabama Heritage.]

Irene and Vernon Castle, among the first to anticipate the restless mood of America in the Jazz Age, became a national sensation dancing to the music of James Reese Europe. "Castle House Rag" and "Castle House Walk" were composed by Europe in 1913 and recorded by him on Victor Records early in 1914.

(Courtesy James Reese Europe, Jr.)

music for a variety show he was then organizing. Hogan's group of some twenty or so musicians, singers, and dancers, billing themselves as "The Memphis Students" (an excellent name if one overlooked the fact that none of the performers were students and none were from Memphis) opened in May of 1905 for a two-week engagement at Hammerstein's Victoria Theatre on Broadway. The Memphis Students' orchestra, which included banjos, mandolins, guitars, violins, brass, double-bass, and drums, was a resounding hit. Although the group has been called, somewhat loosely, "the first modern jazz band ever heard on a New York

stage, and probably on any other stage," it would be stretching our modern definition of the word to describe their music as truly "jazz." The group was composed of excellent musicians, nonetheless, and the Victoria Theatre held them over for five weeks.

From all appearances Jim Europe was on his way. His stint with the Memphis Students was followed by a season or two as musical director of the touring company for Cole and Johnson's *Shoo-Fly Regiment* and then for Bert Williams' *Mr. Lode of Kolo*. By the fall of 1909, however, Europe was back in New York leading his own small dance or-

chestra, accompanying various recitals, and giving piano lessons. That same year, the almost simultaneous deaths of Ernest Hogan, Bob Cole, and George Walker (Bert Williams' managing partner in the Williams and Walker Company) seemed to signal the end of what had been a promising new era for black theater on Broadway. But it was not just the deaths of these great entertainers that initiated an "almost total exodus of black performers from the mainstream theaters of New York." The Wilson administration's return to a policy of segregation in the federal government, the growing racial tensions in Northern cities which attended the great migration of blacks from the South, and even the widespread hostility toward Jack Johnson, America's first black heavyweight champion, all had their chilling effect on white acceptance of black entertainers. Blacks who remained in the field played to black audiences, and not on Broadway. There, the old blackface minstrel tradition returned in a new form as black-faced white performers like Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor became virtually the only representatives of Afro-American theatrical artistry.

Black dance orchestras remained popular in the hotels and cabarets, however, and Negro musicians found somewhat sporadic employment in the then fashionable "gypsy" ensembles, but jobs in the better paying downtown locations were rare. At the age of twenty-nine, James Europe concluded that if black musicians and entertainers were to survive and prosper, and if Afro-American cultural expression was to grow as a creative force in American popular entertainment, then black professional musicians and entertainers had to organize themselves and their business in a more systematic manner. And to succeed, they would have to capitalize on the popular mystique of the Negro's "natural" folk and dance music genius, which had been firmly established during the ragtime era.

On April 11, 1910, Europe and several other well-educated black composers and players (including Will Vodery, William Tyers, Ford Dabney, and Will Marion Cook) announced the formation of the Clef Club, with offices on West Fifty-third Street near the Marshall Hotel, the traditional gathering place for black entertainers. They took out advertisements in the telephone directory, contacted the city's booking agencies, and invited all the city's black professional musicians to become members. The Clef Club, they hoped, would become the main union, clearinghouse, and booking agency for the employment of black musicians in the city. It would provide bands of from three to thirty members any time of day or night, oversee contracts and wages, and guarantee the professionalism of its performers. By fronting its own first-rate orchestra, the Clef Club would secure the black musician's place in the forefront of popular music in the public's (and especially in New York high society's) mind.

Jim Europe, the guiding force behind the club, was elected both president of the organization and conductor of its orchestra. The club's concept was an immediate success with black musicians, and Europe moved quickly to secure its success with the public as well. The Clef Club Orchestra's first concert, held on May 27 at the Manhattan Casino, the center of Harlem's social life, was highly advertised, well-attended, and widely reviewed. Although Europe kept the program relatively simple (light classics, popular songs, and some ragtime)—or perhaps because of it—the evening was a great success. Other concerts followed in regular succession, and Europe's name became as widely known as that of the Clef Club itself. After one concert a reviewer wrote: "Mister Europe is so completely identified with the public appearance of the Clef Club that a concert without Europe would be similar to seeing *Hamlet* played with no Hamlet present."

Europe's crowning achievement with the orchestra occurred on May 2, 1912, when he brought his 125 Clef Club singers and instrumentalists to the stage of Carnegie Hall for a "symphony" of "Negro music." It would be hard to overestimate the significance of the event; Europe had "stormed the bastion of the white musical establishment and made many members of New York's cultural elite aware of Negro music for the first time." So well-received was the concert that Europe and the Clef Club Orchestra returned to Carnegie Hall for performances in 1913 and 1914.

As dramatic as the public performances of the orchestra were, they were by no means the only important accomplishment of the Clef Club under Jim Europe's leadership. Between 1910 and 1914, the Clef Club was the greatest force for organizing and channeling the efforts of black musicians in New York, providing musicians for vaudeville or-

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chestras, hotel bands, and private society functions. Clef Club musicians dressed in tuxedos, played regular hours, and were well paid. For a number of years, the club held a near monopoly on the business of entertaining private parties, where they furnished music for the rash of new dance steps then sweeping the country. It was Europe's success in this area, and especially the fact that his name had become so well known to New York society, that led to his break with the Clef Club.

By 1913, Europe had been regularly providing music for the city's elite, directing the Clef Club's Society Orchestra for the Astors, Vanderbilts, and others, and there was some jealousy in the ranks about his playing the society jobs himself. It is also true that many of the people who called the Clef Club offices demanded Europe's own orchestra and no others.

Europe's dignified and somewhat

stiff demeanor may have also contributed to dissension within the Clef Club ranks. Though always courteous, he does not seem to have been a particularly open man or to have encouraged informality. A typical *New York Age* article of the time described him as having "a very commanding presence" and a "graceful yet decided" manner of wielding the baton. This seems accurate; Jim Europe was a serious person—about himself and about music. Unlike a number of other well-educated and race-conscious black musicians at the time, he was able to recognize the popular demand for dance music as an opportunity to expand the audience for the music of black Americans and to demonstrate the art that music involved. In this regard, he resembled another Alabama pioneer of native American music, W. C. Handy.

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CASTLE HOUSE SUGGESTIONS FOR CORRECT DANCING

- Do not wriggle the shoulders.
- Do not shake the hips.
- Do not twist the body.
- Do not flounce the elbows.
- Do not pump the arms.
- Do not hop—glide instead.
- Avoid low, fantastic, and acrobatic dips.
- Stand far enough away from each other to allow free movement of the body in order to dance gracefully and comfortably.
- The gentleman should rest his hand lightly against the lady's back, touching her with finger-tips and wrist only, or, if preferred, with the inside of the wrist and the back of the thumb.
- The gentleman's left hand and forearm should be held up in the air parallel with his body, with the hand extended, holding the lady's hand lightly on his palm. The arm should never be straightened out.
- Remember you are at a social gathering, and not in a gymnasium.
- Drop the Turkey Trot, the Grizzly Bear, the Bunny Hug, etc. These dances are ugly, ungraceful, and out of fashion.

(From Vernon and Irene Castle's
1914 book, *Modern Dancing*.)

Europe's crowning achievement during the Clef Club years occurred on May 2, 1912, when he brought over a hundred black musicians and singers to the stage of Carnegie Hall for the first "symphony of Negro music." That same Clef Club Orchestra, pictured here, performed regularly from 1910 to 1914.

(Courtesy Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

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Europe was a prolific songwriter as well as an arranger, orchestrator, and conductor.

(Courtesy James Reese Europe, Jr.)

By 1914, “syncopated orchestras” had succeeded in replacing the “gypsy” or “novelty” bands as the most fashionable accompaniment for dancing in New York, and the three people most responsible for this revolution in musical taste and style were Vernon and Irene Castle and James Europe. Vernon Castle was a tall, slim, always impeccably dressed Englishman who had come to America seeking a career on the musical stage. Irene Foote, who also had theatrical ambitions, was the beautiful, athletic, and slightly rebellious daughter of a well-to-do New

Irene bobbed her hair and smoked cigarettes; Vernon was erect, crisp, and very British.

Rochelle family. They met, danced together in the musical *Watch Your Step* in 1912, married, and became the special project of Mrs. Elizabeth Marbury, a prominent society woman. With Mrs. Marbury’s enthusiastic sponsorship, the Castles began a dancing school offering instruction in the latest steps to New York society. The School was immediately successful, so successful in fact that the Castles soon opened their own studio, the Castle House, on Forty-sixth Street across from the Ritz Carlton Hotel.

At the time of the Castle’s phenomenal rise in popularity, American culture was in a state of flux; the Victorian moral order was under siege, and many people across the country feared that the new social dancing might be the Trojan horse of the battle. Allow it in unchallenged, and the whole Victorian moral order might be lost. In this context, the Castles represented a more relaxed and modern social standard. It might be said, in fact, that they were the first couple to anticipate the moods and at-

titudes of the Jazz Age. But they were also clean, handsome, and *married*. While Irene bobbed her hair, smoked cigarettes, and wore loose fitting, athletic gowns, Vernon was erect, crisp, and very British. Their dancing, although sensational, was actually a simplification of the more unrestrained and controversial ragtime dances like the turkey trot, the grizzly bear, or the bunny hug. It was their aim, the Castles said, to rescue social dance from such vulgarity and to purify it so that "no objection can possibly be urged against it on the grounds of impropriety." In their 1914 book, *Modern Dancing*, they predicted that "social reformers" would soon "join with the medical profession in the view that dancing is not only a rejuvenator of good health and spirits, but a means of preserving youth, prolonging life, and acquiring grace, elegance, and beauty." The individual they selected to accompany them in this uplifting mission was James Reese Europe.

Europe began his historic collaboration with the Castles sometime in the fall of 1913. As Irene later remembered it, they had good reasons for wanting Jim Europe's orchestra. Not only was it the most famous orchestra of its kind, but Europe himself "was a skilled musician and one of the first to take jazz out of the saloons and make it respectable."

"Jim Europe was one of the first to take jazz out of the saloons and make it respectable."

Plus, "all the men in his orchestra could read music, a rarity in those days." Perhaps without realizing it, the Castles, in teaming with Europe, became the first patrons of New York's early jazz style; with Europe's help, they also became a New York—and a national—institution.

Beginning on opening night at the Castle House, an affair which was attended by the Vanderbilts, the Goulds, the Harrimans, and even Diamond Jim Brady, New York's elite learned to stumble through the tango and the maxixe to the music of Europe's eleven-piece Society Orchestra, and to brave such original steps as the half-and-half, the innovation, and the foxtrot. The latter, the most famous of the Castle dances, was conceived by Jim Europe and Vernon Castle after an initial suggestion made by W. C. Handy.

By April 1914 the Castles had become so fashionable in New York that the entire company went on the road for a whirlwind tour of thirty-two major American and Canadian cities. At each stop, a dance contest was held following the Castle's performance, with the winners receiving a "Castle Cup" and an expense-paid trip to New York, where they would eventually vie with other winners for a "national championship." At the final contest in Madison Square Garden, when a distinguished, middle-aged couple with the memorable name of Mr. and Mrs. Sailing Baruch foxtrotted off with first prize, it was clear that the Castles had won their battle for respectability and that "nothing short of a war could slow the coming Jazz Age." (Sailing's brother, Bernard, was later to distinguish himself in quite a different field.)

As Jim Europe's star rose alongside the Castles, dissension and jealousy within the Clef Club increased, and in 1914 he broke with the organization and announced that he was president of a new group, the Tempo Club. Despite the predominance of Europe's name in the dance orchestra field, the demand for black musicians and orchestras was now so firmly established that the Clef Club was able to survive the defection of its founder. Europe's career can

New York's elite learned to stumble through the tango and the maxixe to the music of Europe's Society Orchestra.

hardly be said to have suffered either. He expanded his orchestra, performed with the Castles in a triumphant concert at the Casino, and that same fall, accepted a contract offered him by the Victor Recording Company, one of the first contracts ever given to a Negro musician and the first ever to a Negro orchestra. He was now such an important figure in the New York entertainment world that the *New York Herald* declared that Europe had "all but secured complete control of the cabaret and dance field in the city." Europe agreed: "Our Negro orchestras," he said, "have nearly cleared the field."

By 1915, Europe's Tempo Club, including more than two hundred members, was handling nearly \$100,000 worth of contracts annually. His recordings and compositions were also doing well, and everyone in New York seemed to want a Jim Europe orchestra. At one point, a dozen different cabarets were advertising a Europe orchestra simultaneously. Europe and the Castles could be seen performing everywhere—in dance halls, cabarets, private homes, on tour, and even on film. By the end of the year, they had not only made dancing a national pastime, they had helped revolutionize the nation's mores, and it is difficult to predict how much further their collaboration might have taken them if World War I had not dramatically intervened. In December 1915, with his homeland now locked in a war of attrition with Germany, Vernon Castle enlisted in the Royal Air Force. The following spring he was transferred to France, where he shot down his first

German aircraft and was himself injured. Though he and Irene did have an opportunity to dance together again briefly, a plane crash the following year ended his life.

On April 6, 1917, the United States declared war on Germany and in the first emotional wave of patriotism which preceded the casualty reports, thirty-six-year-old Jim Europe enlisted in New York's Negro regiment, the Fifteenth Infantry of the National Guard. Europe was commissioned as a line officer, one of a small handful of black officers, even in the segregated black

“Lieutenant Europe, I want you to organize for me the best damn brass band in the United States Army.”

regiments, and assigned to a machine-gun company. Shortly thereafter, however, as the Fifteenth was preparing to go into its first phase of training at Peekskill, New York, Colonel William Hayward, the regiment's commander, called Europe into his office and asked him to organize a good regimental brass band. “How good?” Europe wanted to know. “Lieutenant Europe,” said the colonel, leaning across his desk, “I want you to organize for me the best damn brass band in the United States Army.”

Europe assured his colonel that he was up to the task, but told him that such a band would need to be much larger than the regulation twenty-eight musicians; he would also need funds to hire soloists and to buy instruments. A few days later, after explaining the problem to businessman Daniel C. Reid, Hayward had the money, and Europe began organizing a band. Utilizing his contacts from the Clef Club-Tempo Club organizations and employing an aggressive advertising campaign,





Lieutenant James Reese Europe (with baton) and the "Hellfighters" band, conquered French, Belgian, and British audiences with the novel sounds of a syncopated native American music.

(Courtesy Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

he quickly recruited fifty excellent musicians, but after a few rehearsals, he found the clarinet section disappointing. The kind of clarinetists they needed, he told Hayward, were unavailable in New York or Chicago, and they would have to look elsewhere. When someone suggested Puerto Rico, Hayward immediately ordered Europe there as the Fifteenth's "recruitment officer," and three weeks later, Europe returned with eighteen clarinet players. With the addition of Harlem's best known dancer, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, as drum major and Noble Sissle as tenor soloist, Europe had assembled more than a great brass band; it could march, for sure, but it could also break down into several dance orchestras and theater bands, and its personnel could sing, dance, and do comedy. It was unquestionably "the best damn brass band in the United States Army."

Throughout the summer of 1917, as the Fifteenth Regiment continued basic training and watched as first the Twenty-seventh and then the Sixty-ninth Division paraded down Fifth Avenue prior to departing for France, Colonel Hayward agitated for the Fifteenth to be sent into war service. When he begged for the regiment's inclusion in the multi-national "Rainbow Division," he was told flatly that black was not one of the colors of the rainbow.

Finally, his persistence, coupled with the increasingly critical nature of the European war, paid off, and the Fifteenth received orders to proceed to Camp Wadsworth in Spartanburg, South Carolina, where they would undergo final training for front-line duty. The War Department's orders for the Fifteenth, however, came at a most inauspicious time: the nation was still reeling over a bloody affair in Houston, Texas, where members of the black Twenty-fourth Infantry—incensed at their treatment by the local population—broke camp and "shot up" the town, killing seventeen citizens and wounding scores of others. The mayor and councilmen of Spartanburg, where no black regiment had ever trained before, were fearful of a similar incident.

On August 31, Spartanburg's mayor was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying that he "was sorry to learn that the Fifteenth regiment had been ordered" to his city. "With their northern ideas about race equality," said Mayor Floyd, "they will probably expect to be treated like white men. I can

"With their northern ideas about race equality," said Spartanburg's mayor, "they will probably expect to be treated like white men."

say right here that they will not be treated as anything except negroes." Sending black troops to Spartanburg, he said, "is like waving a red flag in the face of a bull, something that can't be done without trouble." Colonel Hayward pleaded with his troops not to respond to provocation, even to violence, and he instructed Jim Europe to have the band ready to perform immediately as a good will gesture.

Lieutenant Europe and the "Hellfighters" band outside Hospital Number 9 in Paris, September 4, 1918: Following their Paris performances, the demand for black musicians in that city dramatically increased, as the French acquired a taste for "le jazz" that has remained strong to this day.

(Courtesy Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

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Amidst rumors that local whites planned to protest their arrival, the Fifteenth left for Spartanburg on October 8.

Fortunately, the mayor's hostility by no means reflected the feelings of all of Spartanburg, and most of the city leaders and townspeople worked with army officials to avoid trouble. The troops were well disciplined and well behaved, and Europe's extremely popular regimental band, which performed frequently at the camp and in the public square, was a major factor in

lessening tensions. Despite these positive signs, when reports of several minor incidents reached Washington, the army high command decided that the situation in South Carolina was too volatile and ordered the Fifteenth to complete their training in France. As anxious as the men of the Fifteenth were to get to the battle, these new orders were received with mixed emotions. They knew they were being sent abroad (where there was no color line) because the color line in their own country prevented them from being

trained at home; a sad commentary on the state of American society at the time.

On New Year's Day, 1918, the Fifteenth marched ashore at Brest as an official unit of the American Expeditionary Force under the command of General John Pershing, and for three months they served as a labor unit in support of supply and engineering projects for the American forces at St. Nazaire. Shortly after the regiment's arrival, however, the band received orders—its fame and that of its leader having preceded them—to entertain the first U.S. soldiers on leave at Aix-les-Bains. Although First Lieutenant Europe was a line officer whose work as a band conductor was officially considered secondary to his regular duties, Colonel Hayward succeeded in convincing the army brass that Europe alone was qualified to lead the band. With Jim Europe as its conductor, then, the Fifteenth Regimental Band performed at St. Nazaire and, between February 12 and March 20, 1918, traveled over two thousand miles performing for French, British, and American troops and for French civilians in some twenty-five cities. Everywhere they played they were enthusiastically received, and reports of their success spread throughout the Expeditionary Force and to the papers back home. The American commander at Aix-les-Bains, recognizing the band's value to the morale of this troops, succeeded in extending their assignment there for two weeks, and pleaded for Europe's band, or one like it, to be assigned to him permanently.

But on March 14, Europe and his fellow musicians were directed to rejoin their unit, which had been renamed the 369th U.S. Infantry Regiment and assigned to the Sixteenth Division of the French Army at the front near Givry-en-Argonne. Jim Europe took

great pride in the fact that the men of his band served not only as musicians but also as combat soldiers who fought in the trenches for nearly four months of the Great War. Prior to this time, the American Fifteenth Regiment's reputation had rested primarily on the fame of its band and its celebrated leader, but during the summer and fall of 1918 the new 369th distinguished itself as a courageous and effective fighting outfit, earning the nickname "Hellfighters" and emerging after the Allied victory in November as one of the most highly decorated American units of the war.

French newspapers called them the "jazziest, craziest, best-tooting outfit in France."

Lieutenant Europe and the "Hellfighters" band were not with their regiment during the final push to the Rhine and victory, however. With the tide of battle turning in the Allies' favor, Colonel Hayward finally acceded to a French request that the band be sent to Paris for a single concert. Although Europe was worried about the band's readiness because he hadn't conducted them since early spring, their Paris concert was received with unrestrained enthusiasm. His comment later that "we had conquered Paris," hardly exaggerated the French reaction. Newspapers called them the "jazziest, craziest, best-tooting outfit in France," and French officials insisted that the band remain in the capital for eight additional weeks. "Everywhere we gave a concert," wrote Europe, "it was a riot." Although the band relied upon good musicianship and well-written arrangements in a variety of styles, their "jazz" numbers (a word that had succeeded "rag" or "ragtime" as a description of the more uninhibited

rhythmic music pioneered by black Americans) had the strongest impact on Parisians. The French military band, *Garde Republicaine*, was so taken with the "Hellfighters" that they borrowed Europe's orchestrations and attempted to duplicate their sound. When they failed, they insisted on inspecting the Americans' instruments, believing they must be of some new design.

Following Europe's concerts, the demand for black musicians in Paris dramatically increased, as the French acquired a taste for "le jazz" that has remained strong to this day. The success of the band also spurred on other American regiments. Tim Brymm, an old Clef Club rival of Europe's, organized a band for the 350th American Field Artillery, which was dubbed the "70 Black Devils," and which caused a sensation of its own playing for President Wilson at the Versailles peace conference.

On Christmas Day, 1918, Europe and his band were reunited with the 369th at Belfort, as the regiment prepared for its departure from France. At Brest, the band gave its last concert on the evening of January 31, 1919, the day before the troops boarded their ships for home. And on February 17th, the Fifteenth National Guard Regiment of New York, known in France as the 369th United States Infantry, marched up Fifth Avenue to the cheers of a million New Yorkers and on to Harlem where they were received with a frenzy of pride and joy by a quarter of a million members of their own race. As Major Arthur Little later wrote, the men of the 369th had been "recruited as fighting men, in ridicule; trained and mustered into Federal service, in more ridicule; sent to France as a safe political solution of a volcanic political problem; loaned to the French Army as another easy way out," but they came home heroes.



A month after their triumphant return, Jim Europe and his much expanded "Hellfighters" band embarked upon a world-wide tour with two concerts in Manhattan. Pathé Record Company soon announced an exclusive recording contract for the "jazz king" and his "famous overseas band," and the first recordings began to appear by the end of April. The crowds were enthusiastic in every city they visited, and the newspapers remarked on Europe's warmth and geniality. For a man who had worked so hard and accomplished so much in his thirty-eight years, the world must have seemed, indeed, to be his. And then suddenly, and tragically, the career of James Reese Europe was over. During a performance at Mechanics' Hall in Boston on May 19, Europe was stabbed by a mentally disturbed member of the band. The

wound seemed minor at first, and Europe calmly instructed the assistant conductor to proceed with the evening's program. At the hospital,

During a performance in Boston, Europe was stabbed.

however, doctors discovered that his jugular vein had been severed, and despite their efforts, he died several hours later.

The entire country was shocked by the tragedy. In the fifteen years since his arrival in New York, Jim Europe had completely changed the musical life of the city and had brought new prestige and new opportunity to New York's black musicians. He had been instrumental in gaining national acceptance for a new kind of social dancing

and a new style of native American music that both stimulated and reflected a major transformation in American culture. He had overcome the attacks of those who claimed that the new music was demeaning to the dignity of black Americans and those who feared that jazz and jazz dancing were inherently corrupt and immoral. He had achieved a popular acclaim unequalled by any Negro musician up to that time, and he had given his race and his country something in which they could take pride. Funeral services, held at St. Mark's Methodist Church in New York on May 13th, were attended by a throng of both the prominent and the less so, and people wept openly as his bier was carried slowly through the streets of Harlem. He was buried with full military honors in Arlington National Cemetery the following day.

Huge crowds line Fifth Avenue as the "Hellfighters," the Fifteenth Colored Regiment of New York's National Guard, return home in triumph from World War I. At the time of America's entry into the war, the U.S. Army had 20,000 black soldiers—10,000 in four units of the regular army and 10,000 in various national guard units. Blacks were not accepted in the Marine Corps or the Coast Guard and were permitted only menial assignments in the navy. By the war's end 200,000 blacks had served in the army in all ranks from private to captain and in every type of assignment except that of pilot.

(Courtesy Department of American Studies, University of Alabama)

JIM EUROPE KILLED IN BOSTON QUARREL

**Drummer in "Hell Fighters" Band
Alleged to Have Slashed
Leader with a Knife.**

WON FAME BY "JAZZ" MUSIC

**Recruited Negro Band and
Played for Gen. Pershing
and President Poincare.**

BOSTON, May 9.—Lieutenant James Reese (Jim Europe) of New York died at a hospital here tonight as a result of a wound in the neck alleged to have been inflicted by Herbert Wright, also of New York, and a drummer in the "Hell Fighters" (369th Infantry) band, of which Europe was leader. The two engaged in an altercation at Mechanics' Hall, where the band has been giving a series of concerts.

The *New York Times* reported Europe's death on May 10, 1919, on page one, as did many other newspapers in the country, including the *Chicago Tribune*, which noted the irony that Europe had gone "through hell in France" unscathed only to meet death "at the hands of a fellow soldier." The man who stabbed Europe, Private Herbert Wright, a 24-year-old drummer in the "Hellfighters" band, was later judged mentally ill.

It is tempting to speculate upon what further accomplishments Jim Europe might have attained had he lived; clearly, he was not one to rest on his laurels, and he most certainly would be better known today than he is. Europe's reputation has suffered in part because he was a truly transitional figure and, therefore, has been difficult for historians to place. In their effort to establish the unique artistic qualities of American jazz, jazz historians have concentrated upon the Jelly Roll Mortons, the Fletcher Hendersons, the Louis Armstrongs, and the Duke Ellingtons, and have tended to dismiss Europe's eclectic music as having little relationship to jazz. Historians of "serious" American music have disregarded Europe as merely a popular entertainer, and folklore specialists have had to find their untutored heroes elsewhere.

In recent years, however, Europe's music has begun to receive the serious attention it has long deserved, and his pioneering role as the initiator of a number of important directions in American and Afro-American musical history has begun to be recognized. Many historians now see him as an important influence on countless musicians of the Jazz Age, as an original catalyst in the development of orchestral jazz, and as a primary force in countering the return of white minstrelsy to the American stage and in preparing the way for the full emergence of American musical comedy.

Along with Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, Europe had dreamed before the war of bringing black performers into white theaters, with dignity, through a combination of music, dance, and com-

edy which they themselves would write and direct. On May 23, 1921, two years after his death, Europe's dream of restoring authentic black artistry to the mainstream of the American theater was realized when Sissle and Blake's *Shuffle Along*, the epoch-making musical written, performed, produced, and directed by American blacks, opened at the Sixty-third Street Theatre. Without the triumph of *Shuffle Along*, much that has been individual and original in American musical theater might never have happened. Few people, at the time, thought it possible, but as Blake later recalled, Sissle "said we'd get there, somehow, and we did. I think Sissle still felt Jim Europe's hand guiding us."



Contributors, Sources, and Suggested Reading

Feuds, Factions, and Reform: Politics In Early Birmingham

by Leah Rawls Atkins

Leah Rawls Atkins, a Birmingham native, holds a doctorate in history from Auburn University. She has taught at Auburn, at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and at Samford University, where she was a member of the history faculty for thirteen years. In 1985, Atkins returned to Auburn University as director of the Center for the Arts and Humanities, housed in the historic nineteenth-century cottage, Pebble Hill.

Atkins' illustrated history of Birmingham and Jefferson County, *The Valley and the Hills* (Woodland Hills, California: Windsor Press, 1981), traces the history of the area from settlement to the present. For more information about Birmingham's political history, see also:

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Leah Rawls Atkins

The Conquests of Europe: The Remarkable Career of James Reese Europe

by Reid Badger

Reid Badger, associate professor of American studies at the University of Alabama, holds an undergraduate degree from the United States Naval Academy and a doctorate from Syracuse University, where he specialized in the study of late Victorian and early twentieth-century America. A member of the University of Alabama faculty since 1974, he has taught courses in American popular music and jazz for several years and is currently studying the impact of the South on the national culture in the 1920s.

The author wishes to thank Mr. James Reese Europe, Jr., for his assistance in compiling information for this article.

For more information about James Reese Europe, the "Hellfighters" band, and Vernon and Irene Castle, see:

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Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).

Eileen Southern, *Readings in Black American Music*, 2nd. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983).

Terry Waldo, *This is Ragtime* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1976).

Alec Wilder, *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).

Recorded examples of Jim Europe's music can be heard on two albums in the *New World Records* series: "Steppin' on the Gas: Rags to Jazz, 1913-1927," and "Shuffle Along." The liner notes by Lawrence Gushee and Robert Kimbal, respectively, are especially recommended.

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