

Jazz in Europe

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ABSTRACT

The recent arrival of jazz (around 1900) was originally connected to a territory (the United States) and a community (African-American). It nevertheless quickly spread throughout the world during cultural migrations that should be examined in order to determine in particular whether Europe was a genuine home for jazz and whether it was adopted without changes, was born in a more or less independent way, was adapted to local conditions, and was possibly even transformed in the process.



The James Reese Europe military band playing for the wounded at the temporary auxiliary hospital located at 9 rue des Batignolles in the 17th arrondissement, 1918. @ Bibliothèque du Congrès. Source : [wikimedia commons](#)

Jazz is the product of the specific historical situation of African slavery in North America, which brought together slaves from all regions of Africa (and not just West African as is often said) and populations originally consisting of colonists (primarily of European origin). While the “peculiar institution” of slavery provided the cultural and part of the musical basis for what would become jazz, it was its abolition on December 18, 1865 that established the conditions for the birth of this new music. During the ensuing period known as Reconstruction, many types of music (black and white, religious and secular, utilitarian and for leisure, of African, European, and American origin) would combine to produce an original precipitate that was initially referred to as ragtime or syncopated music, and later as jazz (a term that appeared in written form in 1913). Between approximately 1895 and 1917, jazz underwent a “gray” period in which it began to spread, but was not documented by sound recordings. The first recording establishing its existence as a music in its own right, distinct from all those that contributed to its birth, was made in 1917 in New York.

From this period onward, American musicians both black and white travelled a great deal, and were promoted in many parts of the world including Western Europe, Russia, Australia, China, and Japan (but paradoxically not a great deal in Africa). With the United States joining the war in 1917, many African-American military bands would play music on French territory that is today classified as ragtime, but that was indisputably a novelty for the European public, all the more so as it was played by people of “color,” according to the expression used at the time.

While the journey of the James Reese Europe military band (the Harlem Hellfighters) was doubtless a major landmark in the introduction of jazz in France, it is important to point out that it was preceded by many musical performances, especially in the world of the music hall, which had prepared the way for the adoption of this new music. The same phenomenon can be seen even more clearly in the United Kingdom, which through its geographic position and community of language, maintained closer cultural ties with the United States. In both of these countries as well as Germany and elsewhere, communities of African-American musicians became established, which gave life to this music and shared it with Europeans (in France people thus spoke of a “Black Montmartre”).

European audiences

From 1918 to the late 1920s, “jazz”—at the time a vague term that designated a number of highly diverse types of music—sparked a genuine fashion in most Western European countries. One of the most important aspects of this vogue was that it also reached musicians from learned circles, such as Igor Stravinsky, Darius Milhaud, Maurice Ravel, and Georges Auric in France, who saw it as a source of renewal for their practice. For instance, in 1927 the Austrian composer Ernst Křenek composed a “jazz opera,” entitled *Jonny spielt auf*.

It was at the Hoch Conservatory in Frankfurt that the first jazz class was created, at the initiative of the composer Mátyás Seiber. It is also believed—something that should considerably be tempered—that commentary on this music was born in Europe, especially with works such as Alfred Baresel’s *Das Jazz-Buch* (Leipzig, 1925), André Schaeffner and André Cœuroy’s *Le Jazz* (Paris, 1926), Robert Mendl’s *The Appeal of Jazz* (London, 1927), Emil Frantisek Burian’s *Jazz* (Prague, 1928), Alfredo Casella’s series of articles on American music published over the course of 1929 in the Italian periodical *L’Italia letteraria*, and later Hughes Panassié’s *Le Jazz Hot*, which was published in 1934 in France and in the 1936 in the United States. However, the trend began to flag beginning in the late 1920s, leaving room for genuine “worlds of jazz”: in France, the network of hot-clubs was created in 1932, one of the very first periodicals specializing in jazz, *Jazz Hot*, in 1935, and the world’s first label entirely dedicated to this music, *Swing*, in 1936. Comparable movements were present in most countries of Europe, where they integrated the now well-identified music of jazz into the cultural landscape.

During the Second World War, jazz was banned in countries under the domination of Nazi Germany, although in practice it was often tolerated at the price of a few minor arrangements, for instance by changing the titles of the

songs played. The Allies used it as a weapon of war, for example with the *V-discs* specially recorded to maintain the morale of GIs engaged at the front. The situation changed radically after the war, as jazz was not formally banned within the Soviet bloc, but its practice was severely controlled. It served as a cultural marker for a youth revolting against the regimes of the East: on the American propaganda radio station *The Voice of America*, Willis Conover's show *Voice of America Hour*, which was created in 1955, drew 30 million listeners across the Soviet sphere.

European jazz?

In Western Europe from the 1950s onward, European musicians no longer wanted to be considered as secondary actors in comparison to their American colleagues, and began to assert their influence on the global scene. The first of them was no doubt the guitarist Django Reinhardt. Others followed, such as his friend Stéphane Grappelli, the pianist Martial Solal, and the composer André Hodeir in France, the pianist Tete Montoliu in Spain, the guitarist René Thomas and the saxophonist Bobby Jaspar in Belgium, the violinist Sven Asmussen in Sweden, and the guitarists Gábor Szabó and Elek Bacsik in Hungary. Major labels were created, such as Vogue, Mercury, BYG Actuel, Futura, Marge, and Label Bleu in France, MPS, FMP, ECM, Enja, Winter & Winter in Germany, SteepleChase in Denmark, Fresh Sound in Spain, BVHaast in the Netherlands, Hat Hut in Switzerland, and Ogun in the United Kingdom. In the wake of the free jazz that emerged in the early 1960s, some musicians began to call for an emancipation from jazz. What was referred to as *Nouvelles musiques improvisées* (New Improvised Music) or *Musiques improvisées européennes* (European Improvised Music) during the 1970s represented a trend that emerged most often from jazz, but that asserted a new direction and even distinctive European features. Among the most notable representatives were Derek Bailey and Evan Parker from Britain, Peter Brötzmann and Albert Mangelsdorff from Germany, Han Bennink and Misha Mengelberg from the Netherlands, Mario Schiano and Gian-Luigi Trovesi from Italy, Michel Portal, Louis Sclavis, and Marc Ducret from France, and Tomasz Stanko from Poland. Others who practiced forms that were more specifically jazz enjoyed global renown by settling in the United States, such as John McLaughlin and Dave Holland from Britain, Jozef Zawinul of Austria, Miroslav Vitous of the Czech Republic, and Jean-Luc Ponty and Michel Petrucciani from France.

The discussion surrounding the possibility of a European jazz was also lively due to the indisputable fact that jazz had, like a number of cultural practices, become globalized. In 2005 the American author Stuart Nicholson could thus entitle his book *Is Jazz Dead? Or Has It Moved to a New Address*, in which he explicitly raised the question of jazz's displacement outside of the United States, notably toward Europe. The label ECM, founded in Munich in 1969 by the producer Manfred Eicher, has over the last fifty years documented an essentially European production, offering an illustration of a genuine European jazz represented by the Scandinavians Jan Garbarek (Norway), Bob Stenson (Sweden), and Jon Christensen (Denmark), among others. In any event, Europe remains a favored region for the practice and reception of jazz. A number of American musicians draw a significant portion of their income from the European continent through concerts and disc sales. As a result, today Europe is, along with Japan, one of the global regions where jazz is the most taught, practiced, and listened to, possibly even ahead of the United States.

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