

## CHAPTER 9

# NON-STOP AT LE JOCKEY Americans and Jazz in Paris

It is not certain that works of art have ever been expected. When they happen to be received favourably, one discovers that they were not the real object of the hospitality.

**Pascal Quignard, *Les Ombres errantes*<sup>1</sup>**

**E**xploration of the impact of jazz on French culture inevitably leads to broader reflection on the intercultural relations between France and America. In his brilliant survey *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II*, Richard Pells argues compellingly that there has never been a moment when the Old World and the New were not culturally intertwined, but acknowledges that deep bonds have almost always been accompanied by conflict, controversy and suspicion. Today, the negatives seem to loom larger than the positives, and cultural relations seem to be governed more by misunderstanding than by understanding. Cultural diplomacy has a longer history in France than in America, where it was developed overtly only during World War II. Since then, however, it has become an integral part of America's dominant presence in the world. Jazz itself was used for a while, after 1955, as a weapon in this cultural muscle-flexing, when the State Department sent the likes of

Benny Goodman, Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie and others on a series of European concert tours.<sup>2</sup>

And yet jazz retains its potential to play the role of a connector between the two cultures, both as an activity and as a symbol. The story of jazz in France is a story of how an outsider became an insider. In the history of French culture, this is not a new phenomenon—there are many similar examples of transformative influence, from the impact of the Italian Renaissance to that of German romanticism and philosophy in the nineteenth century. That jazz has been a force of similar scale, however, is itself significant. Its contributions to the renewal of art and thought have resulted not only in new forms of creation, but in an ethos of dynamism that has helped to prevent France from settling too comfortably into its centuries-old cultural traditions. The French love of jazz has also played a critical ongoing role in the elaboration and maintenance of jazz as an international language and culture. But it has done so as part of its own adaptation to the pluralisms of modern cultural identity and as part of a self-regenerative process.

At no time during this process was there any serious attempt on the part of the French to deny the essential American and African-American nature of jazz music. A few commentators anxious to defend the national integrity of French culture tried to find historical links between the new music and European and French traditions.<sup>3</sup> There have also been conservative and xenophobic forces in French society that interpreted jazz as a threatening invasion. Generally, however, the fundamental Americanness of jazz has not only been consistently acknowledged by French culture, but enthusiastically embraced. Between the wars, with very few exceptions—the Reinhardt-Grappelli combination is the most obvious—French jazz musicians modelled themselves on their American counterparts; French bands played American tunes and even sang American lyrics, with a sometimes delicious accent.

But it is important to stress that ‘Americanness’, in the development of a jazz culture in France, has almost always been perceived as something quite different and separate from the United States as a discrete sociopolitical or cultural entity. It was rather a more diffuse image of a ‘new world’. And this is why James Lincoln Collier, when he berates his fellow historians for overrating the importance of Europe (and particularly of France) to jazz in general, is missing the point.<sup>4</sup> He is talking about a cultural phenomenon entirely coextensive with the United States as a historical presence in the world. Americans often conflate jazz with ‘America’, and ‘America’

with freedom: Dave Brubeck, for instance, has explicitly stated that jazz, for him, is America. He went on to say that ‘all over the world jazz is accepted as the music of freedom’—thus amalgamating his idea of jazz with a kind of elementary patriotism.<sup>5</sup> For the French, as André Hodeir put it, jazz was something else: it was an ‘essence’ that, once assimilated, was no longer limited by its historical origins.

No doubt, when James Europe was directing the ragtime improvisations of his military band in the concert halls of Nantes or Aix-les-Bains, there was an unavoidable association in the ears and minds of French listeners with the presence on French soil of a liberating army. And when Darius Milhaud drew on jazz for *La Création du monde*, it was surely at least in part because of his admiration for the vitality and bustling energy that he had found when visiting America. The confidence and the economic and military power of the transatlantic world exercised real fascination and magnetism in the 1920s French imagination, and jazz was part of that, along with American cinema, which was making ever greater inroads into the French theatres. The real associative power of jazz, however, was as a vehicle of freedom: freedom of personal and immediate expression for anyone with access to an instrument; freedom to dance in ways that released both men and women from social and cultural habits; and more symbolically, freedom to refashion the world. The America of jazz, as received so positively into French culture, perhaps has more in common with the mythical non-conformism of America’s founding Pilgrims than with the realities of the contemporary United States. For the French, jazz was the music and the dream of possibility that echoed and re-enlivened the dreams and myths of their own long history of social and political restlessness.

**T**he fact that jazz so readily found a welcoming home in France had as one of its important outcomes a constant flow of American—and particularly African-American—musicians to France, where their presence helped the local jazz scene to expand and evolve. The positive reception of jazz also demonstrates the significant degree to which French culture itself, for all its centuries of tradition and accumulated artistic creation, has been resilient enough and open enough to absorb some of the immensity of the jazz phenomenon. In short, the French encounter with jazz has been a kind of mutual seduction that has led to an enduring and largely happy relationship.

In the 1920s, as the jazz age was taking root in Paris, the mutually appreciative nature of this relationship was highly visible. At this time, France experienced a massive influx of American middle-class tourists: hundreds of thousands of them annually. As Levenstein points out, this was a new breed of tourist, far removed from the previous generations who had sought opportunities to explore France's prestigious culture. Those who crowded into the ocean liners bound for Europe in the 1920s had less noble motives. For the most part, they spoke no French, not even enough to order the alcoholic drinks made more attractive by the Prohibition laws that had been passed back home in 1920. They were in Paris for pleasure and fun. The cost of living was extremely low for the dollar-bearing invaders, and as well as the unchecked flow of champagne and spirits, the men could find ready sexual gratification among the city's 70-000 prostitutes. Women could do likewise with a willing throng of gigolos, and female hedonistic tourism was just as prevalent. For a decade, Paris was the ideal escape holiday. It was cheap, fast, prestigious and safe. The tourist hordes not only made nuisances of themselves in the famous cafés of Montparnasse, where the owners and waiters tolerated their clients' rowdy behaviour in the name of postwar economic recovery; they also flocked to the jazz clubs of Montmartre, where many of them encountered black jazz for the first time.<sup>6</sup>

The tourist bubble burst with the advent of the Great Depression, and the wave of American presence in France ebbed away to almost nothing by the late 1930s. Although the phenomenon was to some extent repeated after World War II, it must be doubted whether Paris's mass exposure to American consumerism made any long-term contribution to intercultural understanding, other than to reinforce the French stereotype of Americans as essentially barbaric, and the American view of France as fundamentally decadent. The tourists certainly had a role in jazz music's taking root in France, through their patronage of the bars, clubs and music halls where it was being played. Budding French musicians also benefited from the influx of money, as their lobby groups and unions fought for and obtained protectionist legislation to ensure that local talent was given a fair opportunity for employment.<sup>7</sup>

A far greater and more enduring impact came through another group, namely that 'lost generation' of American writers, painters and musicians who believed that France would provide them with a liberty of expression unavailable to them in their homeland. By the mid 1920s, 25-000

Americans had elected to take up residence in Paris: by the end of the decade this number had risen to 40-000.<sup>8</sup> This 'deep' Americanisation of Paris was unprecedented and would never again reach such proportions. (By comparison, from the late 1950s to the 1980s fewer than 8000 American expatriates lived in Paris.)<sup>9</sup> Paris was affordable for Americans, but above all, its established reputation of encouraging artistic independence made it an attractive alternative to many who found that their own country had become less welcoming to their work. Prohibition was only one symptom of what many saw as encroaching repression: Joyce's *Ulysses* was banned in America as obscene but could appear freely in Paris. Politically, the fears of the nascent communist movements in the world and the anti-Wilsonian isolationism dominating Congress militated against freedom of thought and expression.

The adventures and exploits of the American expatriates in the Paris of these years are legendary. Given the range and quality of the artists involved—composers such as Aaron Copland and Virgil Thompson, poets such as E.-E. Cummings, William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound, the sculptor Alexander Calder, the novelists William Faulkner, John Dos Passos, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and Henry Miller—it is not hard to understand why. One must also note the importance of Paris for black writers of the Harlem Renaissance—Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Gwendolyn Bennett, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Claude McKay. In fact, it is virtually impossible to think of a single significant American artist of that era who did not spend formative time in France.

If Paris achieved mythical status in the minds of the American expatriates it is because, with all its dirt and leaky plumbing, it was a reality more authentic and more attractive than what they had left behind. The people who gathered around Gertrude Stein, or Sylvia Beach and her Shakespeare and Co library-bookshop, or who met in salons like those of Natalie Barney, or attended the parties of Cole and Linda Porter in their lavish rue Monsieur apartment, or ate in the restaurants and bistros scattered around Montparnasse and Saint-Germain, were full of dynamic energy and unpredictable discoveries. Metaphorically, this amazing generation of men and women was an incarnation of the jazz that they heard all around them in the streets of Paris.

The jazz music that they encountered was not necessarily the best jazz—nowhere near what was being played in cities all over the United States. The music may not even have been good. With the exception of visitors

such as Bechet and Armstrong, not a single great musician graced the Paris jazz scene. When Budd Freeman went there in 1928, he returned home almost immediately, having found that ‘the music would be bad’.<sup>10</sup> Robert McAlmon, a publisher and a long-term Paris resident, described Gypsy’s Bar (frequented by Joyce, Wyndham Lewis, Djuna Barnes and A.-J. Liebling) as having a three-piece orchestra that ‘played American jazz very badly’.<sup>11</sup> It would, however, be wrong to denigrate all of the jazz being played in France. Louis Mitchell was no amateur, nor was Arthur Briggs. Furthermore, some of the early French players had already established a deserved reputation by the late 1920s, and the 1930s brought the entirely original sound of Django Reinhardt and the Quintet of the Hot Club de France.

**T**wo Americans whose lives and careers were most affected by the Paris jazz age were the photographer Man Ray (1890–1976)<sup>12</sup> and Josephine Baker. Their stories offer an illuminating illustration of a magical historical moment.

When Man Ray went to Paris in 1921, it was in order to seek a greater degree of freedom than he had been able to find in his native New York. Even though he had already been self-consciously active in the American avant-garde, first as a painter and then as a photographer, his encounters with Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia sharpened his appetite for a context in which he could radically renew his identity and his work. He loved jazz. He delighted in hanging out in the clubs where jazz was played, and rubbing shoulders with the black patrons, which was not an option in New York. Jazz was part of Paris, the same Paris where he could hear James Joyce read selections from the as yet unpublished *Ulysses* and where he could take his own photographic techniques into new artistic territory.<sup>13</sup> At the time of his death, Man Ray was more of a celebrity in France than in his native country, and if he did achieve lasting status as a pioneer of the American avant-garde, this could not be separated from his time in France, where he produced the great bulk of his best work. In an important way, Man Ray the *American* is a product of ‘jazz-age’ France.<sup>14</sup>

After her triumph in *La Revue Nègre* in 1925, Josephine Baker dreamed of becoming a French star. And she did. Like Ada ‘Bricktop’ Smith, she had her own club for a while in the late 1920s, but it was in the music halls that she consolidated her fame. She did not have much of a voice: it was light, without resonance, only just in tune, and in fact rather squeaky if surviving

recordings are anything to go by. Nor was her French particularly good: despite evident efforts to master the finer points of the French vowel system, her pronunciation remained erratic at best and at worst heavily anglicised. But the audiences loved her: her enthusiasm and dramatic presence on stage set her apart. In retrospect, the success of some of her most popular songs seems ironic. ‘La Petite Tonkinoise’, first sung in 1906 and performed by Baker in 1930, is a piece of the silliest colonialist sentimentality that recounts the delight and pride of a young Indochinese girl whose French lover has elevated her to legitimate companionship. Scarcely less vacuous is ‘Si j’étais blanche’, which has a punchy jazz backing, but whose lyrics avoid any serious social or racial comment: the narrator would like to be white in order to be able to choose a wider range of finery, and at the end of the song wonders if she needs to be white to be more attractive to her man. Baker’s signature tune ‘J’ai deux amours’ (I have two loves—my country and Paris), written for her in 1930, leaves any listener who has read her biography wondering why on earth she might have hankered for her native land, which was never kind to her. In 1936 she made a bruising attempt to return to America. She was massacred by the New York critics, and dismissed as ‘just a slightly buck-toothed young negro woman whose figure might be matched in any nightclub show, and whose dancing and singing might be topped practically anywhere outside of Paris’. She was also snubbed by both the white and black communities. Having become used to an environment where race was not an issue, she was shocked by the harshness of her American reception. After this, she adopted France as her permanent home, and as the core of her identity. When she died in 1975 it was as a French citizen and as a French Resistance heroine of World War II, with full military honours at her funeral.<sup>15</sup>

As William Shack has pointed out, Josephine Baker was not acknowledged by other musicians as a jazz performer, and it is true that her voice was in no way a jazz instrument. But Shack also rightly notes that Baker was the subject of a prodigious public cult. Her hairstyles and eccentricities were adulated and mimicked by the fashionable Parisian classes.<sup>16</sup> The direction of Baker’s reputation had been set at the time of *La Revue Nègre*, and whatever musicians may have thought about her singing, her dancing was received unequivocally as a jazz *phenomenon*, in its freedom and in its strongly sexualised physicality. Even today, in any discussion of the history of jazz in France, Josephine Baker’s name is always in lights.

A.-E. Hotchner in his biography of Ernest Hemingway recounts a late-in-life return to Montparnasse by the author of *A Moveable Feast*. Hemingway reminisced about Le Jockey: ‘the best nightclub that ever was .-.-. Best orchestra, best drinks, a wonderful clientele, and the world’s most beautiful women.’ He went on:

Was in there one night with Don Ogden Stewart and Waldo Peirce, when the place was set on fire by the most sensational woman anybody ever saw. Or ever will. Tall, coffee skin, ebony eyes, legs of paradise, a smile to end all smiles. Very hot night but she was wearing a coat of black fur, her breasts handling the fur like it was silk. She turned her eyes on me—she was dancing with the big British gunner subaltern who had brought her—but I responded to the eyes like a hypnotic and cut in on them. The subaltern tried to shoulder me out but the girl slid off him and onto me. Everything under that fur instantly communicated with me. I introduced myself and asked her name. ‘Josephine Baker’, she said. We danced non-stop for the rest of the night. She never took off her fur coat. Wasn’t until the joint closed she told me she had nothing on underneath.<sup>17</sup>

This episode captures just about everything that made Paris such a fertile and liberating place for Americans. The simplest aspect of this story—a white man dancing with a black woman in a public place—so natural and uncomplicated (apart from the macho joust between the two males) would have been impossible in the America of the time. The outrageously blatant sexuality of the naked body wrapped in fur is another symbol of a freedom no doubt desired, but totally repressed in the United States. But what most deeply affected Hemingway here has less to do with Paris as a place where it is possible to escape taboos and limitations, than with something more positive: Paris as a place where wonder-provoking things can happen without being sought, and where such unanticipated happenings can turn, at least for a time, the whole of life into an extended dance.

These two Americans dancing together in Paris are not just any Americans. They are certainly not the middle-class consumer-tourists evoked by Levenstein. They are more striking even than the scandalous couple Nancy Cunard, the steamship heiress, and Henry Crowder, the black jazz pianist who was her trophy lover. Josephine Baker and Ernest Hemingway symbolically draw together the emancipative force accompanying the

African-American birth of jazz and its arrival in France, and the surge of white American creativity that characterised the work of the 'lost generation'. Arguably, it is this combination that established America as a cultural superpower after World War II.

The French–American intercultural exchange retained much of its amicability and potency during the second wave of the French jazz age. It was during World War II that New York displaced Paris as the undisputed epicentre of Western culture, and it is therefore not surprising that the American expatriate phenomenon of the interwar years did not repeat itself in Liberation France. When Chester Himes and James Baldwin took up residence in Paris, they were exceptions to the general norm. On the other hand, the enthusiasm of both black and white American musicians for France continued unabated, and the French reception of American jazz became even more ardent than it had been before the war. Well into the 1950s, French love of jazz could legitimately be conflated with a broader attraction to American cultural energy. The flow of American films into the theatres of a nation that had been largely starved of images for five years nourished a new generation of 'cinéphiles'. Many of the highly creative and entrepreneurial people who had found haven in New York during the war—scientists, artists, writers, publishers, intellectuals, political thinkers—returned with the determination to reinvest their positive experience of America in the renewal of their own social and cultural landscape.<sup>18</sup>

It was not a one-way process. During this same period, many Americans continued to display an almost deferent curiosity about French cultural productions. Sartrean philosophy, De Beauvoir's feminism, the challenges of the 'absurdist' work of Camus, Ionesco and Beckett, the bold techniques of French New Wave cinema—all of these things were the subject of serious discussion and debate in universities as well as in wider cultural forums. We have seen how the postwar renewal of French culture drew on the inspirations of the jazz experience. Indeed, the whole fertile transatlantic cultural exchange was infused with the spirit of jazz.

Unfortunately, those levels of shared excitement and passion no longer exist. The amicability that allowed different kinds of spontaneity and creativity to mingle and play off each other seems almost absent from the highly politicised cultural relations between France and America today. What has happened? Is it pure coincidence that the meteoric decline in the popu-

larity of jazz since the heady days of the 1930s corresponds to the paradigm shift which has seen the United States become simultaneously the centre of consumer-capitalist ideology and a global military superpower? Ken Burns' monumental celebration of jazz, like his earlier panegyric on baseball, is a fine document, but it is redolent with nostalgia for an earlier, seemingly less complicated American way of life. Over the same period, France, in its pursuit to maintain some vestige of its former power and influence, has shut itself into a defensive and caricatural anglophobia that threatens to stifle its own creative channels.

Would it be an exaggeration to portray jazz as a common language or common cultural space in which France and America could understand and better accept each other's cultural identities? That was certainly more the case up until the 1960s than it is today.<sup>19</sup> Jazz was born out of the toil and pain of a subjugated people, but from its first cries, it protested its right to be different and free. As such, it had a universalism and an integrity that found ready echo in French culture's traditional celebration of diversity and of its own particularities. If the French continue to promote their own reception of jazz as something special and different from jazz cultures in other places, including other European countries, it is perhaps partly because their own need to be different is endemic. More profoundly and more paradoxically, jazz as it has been experienced and mythologised allows France to continue its cultural love affair with an America that—for the time being at least—has been eclipsed by a United States that threatens not only political but also cultural hegemony.

The complexity of this relationship was neatly illustrated in an event that occurred in 1997 at the Paris La Villette jazz festival, when the festival's major attraction, the African-American free jazz exponent Ornette Coleman, invited the philosopher Jacques Derrida to share the stage with him for an improvised jazz-text music duo. In fact, it was an anticipated happening that did not happen, not quite a fiasco perhaps, but one of those unfortunate circumstances in which symbolic expectation is thwarted by reality. The audience, or at least a small part of it, intolerant of this unaccustomed form, did not even allow Derrida to get into his stride. Those trying to shout him down were met with invective treating them as a 'shithouse audience', and the slanging match among the 1000-strong crowd finally drove Derrida off the stage, his part of the performance pathetically foreshortened and

unfulfilled.<sup>20</sup> While the incident shows that the French jazz fans were not yet ready for such hybrid creativity,<sup>21</sup> the *intention* of the Coleman–Derrida performance is revealing.

Coleman and Derrida, culturally, are not only both major figures, but archetypes of controversy, whose standing has been established at least as much in the international arena as within their own communities, and perhaps more so. They are ‘outsiders’ who, paradoxically, have come to be seen as highly representative of the cultures they have attempted to reform. Coleman, as the principal voice of the free jazz, ‘New Thing’ movement, had reclaimed for jazz its territory of radical creativity. Derrida was not just France’s leading revolutionary philosopher, but a thinker whose theories of deconstruction and difference had helped to redefine, globally, the parameters of epistemology in the humanities and social sciences.

By coincidence, the two men were the same age, born in 1930. More significantly, in their conversation, both defined themselves by their difference from the mainstream cultures of their respective countries, and by their choice of radical means to express their alienation. Coleman was a product of the oppressed black minority of Fort Worth, Texas, and seems to have been driven to extremes of originality by some inner force. These extremes had often led to his being considered an object of ridicule by fellow musicians and the public alike. Derrida, as an Algerian Jew, had a similar experience of exclusion, and just as Coleman had taken the well-trodden path of jazz as a form of expression and escape, completely changing the path as he did so, Derrida chose the stereotypically French path of philosophy, but also in a manner that subverted the pathway itself.

During their dialogue, Coleman recounted an anecdote in which, as a young man, he had expressed to his mother his distress about having to make his living by playing in gaming houses and brothels; her response—‘Do you want to be paid for your soul?’—struck him with the power of a second baptism. From then on he had felt liberated: to make music with and for his soul, and without reference to the world of commerce and corruption. It was this incident that Derrida set at the heart of the meditation intended for his duet performance with Coleman. In doing so, he articulated, in his own medium of the spoken word, the essence of the affinity he felt with Coleman—the quest for an authenticity and uniqueness free of the trammels of power and commercialism:

Soul and the music of the soul, what is it? What does it mean? How do we recognise it, soul? Beyond all the psycho-theologico-spiritualist discourse? By the fact that it can't be sold or turned into capital pre-emptively; it's the failure of capital, it's the ultimate revolution, it's unsellable from birth, when it happens, when it's created, and when it's not calculated, and when it suddenly shifts its ground in a blast of saxotelephone of which neither the eye nor the ear had warning, even though so much work, as with Coleman, had gone into writing .-.<sup>22</sup>

Derrida's conviction that all individual speech acts are bound to be a form of repetition within the context of existing verbal language coincides with Coleman's belief that within the flux of musical language there is no fixed frontier between jazz improvisation and written composition. Coleman defends—with Derrida's wholehearted accord—an idea of the musical act as a form of discovery as well as of personal expression, a notion of invention that resists hierarchical distinctions between improvisation and inscription, but on the contrary highlights the dynamics of creativity inherent in the tension between composition and improvisation.

In his conversation with Derrida, Ornette Coleman expressed his impression of Paris as a particularly welcoming place:

.-. [W]hat I like in Paris, is that you can't be both a snob and a racist here, because it's not cool. Paris is the only city I know where racism never exists in your presence; it's something you hear about.<sup>23</sup>

Despite Derrida's quick rejoinder underscoring the realities of French racism, however concealed, it remains evident that, for Coleman and for other African-American musicians before him and since, France is experienced as a place where one's art can be practised without reference to skin colour or social oppression.

It is, of course, drawing a long bow to portray this encounter between Coleman and Derrida as a historical representation of France's relationship with jazz. On one level, these two men are simply a couple of 70-year-old revolutionaries exchanging, with the help of an interpreter, the stories of their trials and conquests. Moreover, within their respective societies, both are marginalised, and even within their areas of specialisation—jazz and philosophy—each is far from being considered as representative. The fail-

ure of their artistic encounter as a public event is a measure of the danger of positing any idealised synthesis between jazz and French culture. And yet the affinities are undeniable. Derrida's voice has established itself across the world as one important expression of a philosophy of difference: the promotion of the value of diversity in politics and social organisation as well as in culture. It is a voice of resistance to forms of globalisation based on commodification, ungoverned capitalism and market-driven economics. For his part, Coleman has created his story and his art from a different position of resistance, one that draws its strength from the broad American traditions of liberty, as well as from the history of African-American struggle against racist oppression.

The conservative reactions of an audience of so-called jazz lovers at La Villette—in reality a group entrenched in the comforts of its listening habits—provoked an interruption of intercultural dialogue mirroring the suspension of Franco-American understanding on the larger scale. On the other hand, the willingness of Derrida and Coleman to engage their creativity, their freedom and their vulnerability in an adventurous exchange signals something much greater and much more hopeful than an off-the-cuff indulgence.

For Ted Gioia, the history of jazz is at a point where 'the music's past threatens to dwarf its present'.<sup>24</sup> The same, alas, is true of cultural relations between France and America. The Derrida–Coleman duet underlines the difficulty of meaningful intercultural dialogue in the complex and fraught realities of today's world: we could hardly be further from the enchanting image of Hemingway dancing with Josephine Baker in *Le Jockey Bar*. But it is also evidence that, in the spirit of the jazz that generated it, dialogue can always begin anew—provided that there is the courage to go to the heart of-things.