

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 227

### “The Jazz Age”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“As I understand it, it is not music at all. It is merely an irritation of the nerves of hearing, a sensual teasing of the strings of physical passion. Its fault lies not in syncopation, for that is a legitimate device when sparingly used. But jazz is an unmitigated cacophony, a combination of disagreeable sounds in complicated discords, a willful ugliness and a deliberate vulgarity.”

The Rev. Dr. Henry Van Dyck, Jr., professor of English literature, Princeton University.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 227. The Jazz Age.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the port of New Orleans received large quantities of imported produce, mostly fruit, from Sicily. Over the course of time, imports from Sicily led to immigration from Sicily, until by 1890 the city of New Orleans had a substantial Italian immigrant community. They were not welcome. The mayor, a man named Joseph Shakespeare, described his city’s Italian community as “filthy in their persons and homes” and “the most idle, vicious, and worthless people among us.”

Some of these Sicilian immigrants were involved in the produce trade. Some of them had previously been involved with the Mafia in Sicily and Italian-American gangs sometimes fought violently over control of the produce trade. An 1890 shoot-out left two men dead on the street in New Orleans and led to a vow by the city’s police chief, 32-year old David Hennessey, that the perpetrators would be brought to justice.

Chief Hennessey did not live to fulfill that promise. He was gunned down on his way home from work on the evening of October 15, 1890. The whole city mourned its police chief and vowed that his killers would be caught and punished. Nineteen Italian-Americans were charged with involvement in the crime. After the first batch prosecuted were acquitted at trial, a multi-racial mob of some 150 New Orleanians stormed the prison and killed eleven of the accused, including

some who had not yet been tried. No one was ever arrested or prosecuted for the lynchings, which the press and public in New Orleans largely praised. Mayor Shakespeare declared that the victims had deserved their fate.

This incident led to a diplomatic rift between the United States and Italy, which recalled its ambassador to Washington. The Harrison Administration agreed to pay reparations of \$25,000, split eleven ways among the victims' families, and in 1892, on the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Christopher Columbus' arrival in the New World, declared Columbus Day a national holiday in the United States, as part of the effort to patch up relations with Rome and, it must be said, with angry Italian-Americans.

Nick LaRocca was not involved in any of this, being an infant at the time, born in New Orleans to Sicilian immigrants. But he grew up in a city where the memory of the se terrible events still burned. Like many Italian-American children at the time, Nick was regularly taunted with calls of "Who killa da chief?" by the other kids.

Nick's father was a shoemaker. He had once made a little money playing cornet on the side, but he generally had a low opinion of the New Orleans music scene. He called professional musicians "bums" and wanted little Nick to become a doctor, but Nick, at the tender age of nine, discovered his father's cornet and began teaching himself to play. When his father heard, he took an axe to the instrument. Undeterred, Nick wrangled another one. His father chopped that one into pieces, too.

But when his father died suddenly when Nick was just twelve, that closed the door on any career in medicine. He learned to do electrical work, but he kept playing the cornet on the side, first for meals, then for money.

By 1915, jazz was becoming familiar in African-American communities everywhere in the United States, but was still largely unknown to white Americans, at least outside of New Orleans. That year, a white jazz band from New Orleans, led by a trombonist named Tom Brown, arrived in Chicago for a six-week engagement at a restaurant called Lamb's Café. They styled themselves "Brown's Band from Dixieland."

They were not well received at first. When they began to play, patrons at the restaurant covered their ears or walked out. But over time, and through word of mouth, they began to pack the house. Other venues in Chicago began searching frantically for white bands from the South that could play jazz.

Sadly, the very best jazz musicians of the day, such as the people I talked about in last week's episode, were excluded from this opportunity because of their race. But it was the opportunity of a lifetime for Nick LaRocca, who had just joined a band of fellow Italian Americans from New Orleans. They were summoned to Chicago to play at a seedy little club called the New Schiller Café. Being Italian-American did made them subject to prejudice, but a little less so than African

Americans, and that made the difference, plus the fact that LaRocca could spot the band the \$125 they needed to take the train to Chicago. That was enough to land them the gig.

Soon after, the New Schiller Café was raided one Saturday night by a gang of sixty women from the Anti-Saloon League. A reporter from the Chicago *Herald* covered the raid, describing the café as so crowded and noisy that the arrival of the women from the Anti-Saloon League could scarcely be heard. The *Herald* story turned out to be great free advertising for the café; soon the crowds were larger than ever. But the band broke up after the trombone player and the drummer got into a fistfight. Undaunted, LaRocca talked the other band members into forming a new group. They now called themselves The Original Dixieland Jass Band. That's jass, with two esses. At the time, that spelling was at least as prevalent as the one with two zeese.

The new band played for six months in Chicago at a place called The Casino Gardens. It was a notorious gangster hangout also patronized by other disreputable types like vaudeville performers. One such was a rising star on the vaudeville circuit, a singer-comedian named Al Jolson, who liked what he heard and got them a gig at the Paradise Ballroom in New York City, and just like that the not-yet-a-year-old band was at the top of their field.

It also took New Yorkers a while to warm up to the new style of music. At first, patrons left the dance floor when they began to play, apparently thinking they couldn't possibly be expected to dance to *that*. The master of ceremonies had to come out and explain to the crowd that, yes indeed, this was music meant to be danced to. One of the patrons called out, "Tell those farmers to go home!"

New Yorkers did indeed learn to dance to it, eventually. They even learned to like it. The ballroom put up one of those newfangled neon signs—invented in 1910—and plastered New York with posters. Once the naughty little boys of New York figured out that they could rub off the *Js* on the posters and make them read "Original Dixieland Ass Band," that forced the band to change the name to "Original Dixieland Jazz Band," with the zeese. Within two weeks of their New York debut, they were big enough news that the Columbia Phonograph Company tried recording the band, but the company found the result unsatisfactory and dropped the project.

A month later, on February 26, 1917, the very same day Woodrow Wilson appeared before Congress to ask for authority to arm US merchant ships, episode 138, The Original Dixieland Jazz Band tried again, this time for the premier recording label of the day: The Victor Talking Machine Company. This time, the engineers and the musicians worked harder to overcome the technical problems that had bedeviled the earlier attempt.

Phonograph records were recorded mechanically at this time; musicians played into a metal horn that focused the sound on a diaphragm that vibrated a needle that cut the wax master. The frequency response of this process was all over the place, which is why sound recordings of this era have that distinctive tinny sound we can still recognize today. The band rehearsed their two songs thoroughly. They made the music sound spontaneous, but in fact it was all carefully

planned out. The two numbers they recorded were “Dixieland Jass Band One-Step” and “Livery Stable Blues.” On the latter song, the band screeched their instruments in imitation of barnyard animals. They had to play extra fast, because phonograph records had strict time limits.

The project was intended as what later generations would call a “novelty record.” It was mostly meant for laughs, although the record was labeled and sold as a “foxtrot.” Victor released the 78 RPM record on March 7, 1917, at a price of 75 cents. To give you a basis for comparison, that amount of money in 1917 would have been enough to allow you to take all five members of The Original Dixieland Jazz Band out to lunch.

The record was a huge success. Previously, the best-selling recording stars had been Enrico Caruso, the operatic tenor, and John Philip Sousa, the bandleader. The Original Dixieland Jazz Band blew their sales figures out of the water; this recording became the first million-seller in the history of the industry.

This is one of those historical moments when art and technology mesh in perfect synchronization. Jazz might have remained a niche musical style for decades, as blues had done. Jazz has to be heard to be understood; you can’t learn it by studying sheet music, so the 19<sup>th</sup>-century world, in which music circulated on paper, would not have been able to comprehend jazz.

But the rise of the phonograph, of audio recording, made it possible for one musician or one band to teach jazz to an audience of millions.

[music: “Livery Stable Blues”]

In last week’s episode, I mentioned the African-American bandleader James Reese Europe, whose band played for the dance team of Vernon and Irene Castle. I said I’d have more to say about him this week, so here goes. He was born in Mobile, Alabama but lived his adult life in New York City, where he was one of the top names in African-American music. In 1912, he and his band became the first African Americans to play a concert at Carnegie Hall, which is why the jazz pianist Eubie Blake would later dub Europe “the Martin Luther King of music.” Like W.C. Handy, Europe was a trained musician who took up the cause of studying and popularizing the distinctive sounds of African-American music.

When the United States went to war, Europe landed a commission as a lieutenant in the New York Army National Guard and served with the unit that became the 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, the one that became known as the “Hellfighters.” Europe led the regimental band, which spent most of its time in France entertaining American, British, and French soldiers, and often French civilians as well, and along the way introducing all of them to the latest African-American music, including blues and jazz. Europe would begin his concerts with a rendition of “La Marseillaise,” which left baffled audiences seated halfway through the number, until the French at last figured out that the band was playing them their own national anthem.

British soldiers returned to Blighty, where the news of American jazz spread by word of mouth. But in France, civilians heard the music firsthand, and the French, despite their well-known reputation as zealous guardians of their native culture, embraced *le jazz hot* as warmly as if it had been born along the Champs-Élysées. Jazz cabarets and jazz festivals are still features of life in France in our time. And after the war, The Original Dixieland Jazz Band came to London and played at the Palladium, introducing the United Kingdom to the new sound.

Once the war was over and the peace treaties had been signed, there was a great yearning, across Europe and the United States, to put the agony of war behind and celebrate the rewards of peace. The decade of the 1920s is known in Germany as *Die Goldene Zwanziger*, “the golden twenties,” in France as *les années folles*, the crazy years, and in the United States as the Roaring Twenties. Jazz was the perfect music to capture the mood of the Western world: cheerful, daring, carefree. And so was this time also known by what I submit to you is the fittest name of all: The Jazz Age.

The rise of jazz is also significant in that the world saw for the first time a new art form, a cultural innovation, traveling east across the Atlantic, from the New World to the Old. The United States is no longer the cultural backwater that it was just ten or twenty years ago, waiting breathlessly to learn what was the latest trend in Europe. From now on, the US will be a contributor to, not just a consumer of, Western culture, and an increasingly important contributor as the rest of the twentieth century unfolds.

Alas, James Reese Europe would not live to see any of this. After the Hellfighters’ triumphant victory parade on their return to New York City, which I described to you in episode 204 and during which he and his band provided the music, Europe returned to civilian life. He was directing a concert in Boston just months later, when he got into a quarrel with one of his drummers during intermission. The musician stabbed Europe in the neck with a pen knife. The wound was not thought to be serious at first, but no one could stop the bleeding. They took him to a hospital. They couldn’t stop the bleeding, either, and Reese passed away on May 9, 1919, at the too-young age of 39, a terrible loss to the African-American community and to anyone who loves music. We can only guess at what great music will never be heard because of this tragic turn.

But jazz lived on. In the United States of the 1920s, a number of great jazz performers emerged as jazz became the dominant musical form. I could rattle off a list of names. Besides Jelly Roll Morton, I would be remiss if I didn’t mention at least Duke Ellington, Kid Ory, Bix Beiderbecke, and King Oliver. I should also give a shoutout to at least two of the great women jazz vocalists of this era, Ethel Waters and Bessie Smith, but there’s one name that stands out above all others, not only as the greatest jazz musician of the 1920s, but quite possibly the greatest of all time.

Louis Armstrong was born in New Orleans, Louisiana on August 4, 1901, although he always believed his birthday was July 4, 1900. It was only after his death that his baptismal record was

discovered. His mother was just sixteen years old at the time of his birth; his father left the family when he was still an infant. He was raised by his grandmother during his early years.

Louis got his first job at the age of seven, working for a Jewish Russian immigrant named Morris Karnofsky. Karnofsky made a modest living by drawing a wagon through the streets of New Orleans, delivering coal and picking up bones and used rags, which he could resell. Young Louis's job was to ride the wagon and hop off at each stop to deliver the coal or pick up the bones and rags. He brought along a tin horn, which he would blow to announce the wagon's arrival. The streets of New Orleans were full of the sounds of the time, and sometimes little Louis would linger in the club or bar or whorehouse where he was making a coal delivery to listen to the music. Soon he was copying the sounds he heard on his tin horn, as a sort of musical advertisement for the Karnofsky wagon, until Morris advanced him the money to buy a real cornet.

The Karnofskys knew Louis had no father and was living a hard life, so Morris would bring him back home at the end of the day, where Mrs. Karnofsky would insist he take a seat at their dinner table and not leave until he was stuffed full. The Karnofskys became something like a second family for young Louis, who marveled at the anti-Semitism they had to deal with. For the rest of his life, Louis Armstrong would wear a Star of David pendant as a token of his gratitude to the Karnofskys, and his pantry would always be well stocked with matzoh.

On New Year's Eve 1912, eleven-year-old Louis took his mother's lover's pistol without permission and fired it into the air to celebrate the coming new year. A policeman arrested him and he was sentenced in juvenile court to what was called the New Orleans Colored Waif's Home, where he lived for eighteen months. The Home was run like a military school and life there was hard, but Louis got cornet lessons and he joined the school band. They made him the bandleader when he was 13.

Louis was too young to serve in the war, so he spent the war years playing in bands in New Orleans, where he became known to a number of other rising stars in the New Orleans jazz scene. He moved to Chicago in 1919 and played in King Oliver's band there for five years, before moving to New York. Armstrong was now playing with the top bands in the country. By 1925, he had his own band, Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five, and was getting billed as "the world's greatest trumpet player," much to his embarrassment.

But it was probably true. He played with the top names. His trumpet work was unmatched. He began writing and recording his own songs, notably "Potato Head Blues." He also sang, in an unmistakable gravelly voice that soon became recognized everywhere. By 1925, mechanical recording had given way to electronic recording which gave a superior frequency response, and Louis Armstrong became one of the most recorded musicians in America.

Armstrong was undoubtedly the biggest name in jazz in the 1920s, and a tremendous influence on the field and on the next generation of musicians. Jazz would change over the course of the

twentieth century, but Armstrong would not. His style of jazz, the jazz of the 1920s, would come to be known as “hot jazz.” It’s also called “Dixieland,” apparently due to the name “Original Dixieland Jazz Band,” and perhaps the mistaken impression that name gives that the music they played was therefore “Dixieland jazz.” The name “Dixieland” is problematic though, tagging a music developed by African Americans with the nickname of the Confederate States of America, a nation dedicated to the enslavement of African Americans. Even worse, that nickname comes from the song “Dixie,” which was composed by a white guy from Ohio who sang it in blackface, pretending to be an African American who just loved being a slave...

Yeah, let’s just call it “hot jazz.”

Speaking of the vocabulary of jazz, jazz musicians have enriched the English language with their slang terms, many of which made their way into general usage. Like the word *gig*, which I’ve already been using, meaning musicians getting a temporary job at a nightclub or some such venue. Or *square*, which first meant to play music in 4/4 time without any *swing*—there’s another jazz word—and later meaning old fashioned or conformist. How about the word *jam*, meaning a group of musicians improvising together? *In the groove* meant a musician completely absorbed in the music; the music a musician plays while in the groove is therefore quite likely to be *groovy*. And then there’s *cat*, a word that may have been coined by Louis Armstrong, at first meaning a fellow jazz musician, later, anyone who is *cool*. Jazz musicians added to the word *cool*, which already had many connotations, the sense of in the know, sophisticated. Later in the century, we will encounter *cool jazz*.

As for hot jazz, it would go out of fashion by the 1930s, but Louis Armstrong never did, even though he never stopped playing it. Having come up in the age of vaudeville, he also had great stage presence, and knew how to pepper his singing and trumpet playing with jokes and anecdotes and whatever it took to entertain the audience.

Armstrong was perhaps the first African-American entertainer to be fully embraced by white America. During the Cold War, he toured other countries as an American musical ambassador. His vaudeville skills served him well all over again during television appearances in the 1950s and 1960s.

His records were top sellers, even into the 1960s, when he recorded “What a Wonderful World” and “Hello, Dolly,” two of his most famous performances. The latter one earned him a Grammy Award for Best Male Vocalist and got all the way to number one on the Billboard Hot 100 in 1964, displacing The Beatles, at least for a little while. He was my age when he did that.

Louis Armstrong died in 1971, at the age of 69.

[music: Gershwin, *Rhapsody in Blue*]

My own background and interest in music leans more toward what is usually called classical music. That's the common name, though it's not entirely satisfactory. There's a particular subset of classical music from the classical period, roughly 1750-1825, that's called classical, so that can get confusing. Some people want to call it art music, but that's a little pretentious. It's also imprecise; jazz music is art, but it's not classical. Leonard Bernstein proposed calling it "exact music," because in classical music, composers put down on the sheet music the exact notes they want, with the exact instruments and detailed notations about how loud or soft to play, how fast or slow the tempo, and so on. No other form of music is recorded on the page in as much detail as is classical music, so maybe Bernstein was on to something there.

In that regard, jazz is perhaps the form of music that's farthest away from classical. Jazz gives the musicians so much more leeway; maybe I should say it demands so much more creative input from its musicians. It is not uncommon for a jazz group to play from what's called a lead sheet, which is just the melody of a song and a set of chords. The musicians provide the rest.

You might think that the world of classical music would be largely unaffected by the development of jazz. You would be wrong. Classical music has always incorporated new ideas from folk songs, troubadours, shows, musical reviews, from any and all forms of popular music. Popular music has always returned the favor by borrowing themes and ideas from classical music, and this cross-fertilization continued through the twentieth century; indeed, it continues in our own time.

Classical composers began incorporating elements of jazz almost at once. Alas, not friend-of-the-podcast Claude Debussy, who passed away after a long struggle with colorectal cancer in March 1918, at the age of 55. This was just the time when the Germans were on the offensive on the Western Front and Paris was subjected to bombardment from the Paris Gun, meaning Debussy never got the big public funeral that surely would have been held for him in peacetime.

Maurice Ravel composed his most famous work, *Boléro*, in 1928 for Ida Rubenstein's ballet company. I don't detect any jazz influence there, but the second movement of his 1927 Violin Sonata No. 2 is titled *Blues*, so that's a giveaway. In 1930, Ravel composed *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand*. It was commissioned by Paul Wittgenstein, an Austrian pianist who lost his right arm in the Great War, and it shows a clear jazz influence; enough of one that Wittgenstein was not happy with the piece at first. Ravel's French colleagues, Darius Milhaud and Erik Satie were by this time also incorporating jazz into their work. So was Igor Stravinsky. Likewise Austrian composers Alban Berg and Anton Webern.

In Germany, composer Kurt Weill in collaboration with Berthold Brecht, produced *Die Dreigroschenoper*, *The Threepenny Opera*, in 1928, which included the song "Die Moritat von Mackie Messer." This song, with translated English lyrics, would become popular in the United States in 1956 as "Mack the Knife," after it was recorded by Louis Armstrong.



Many American composers were seriously jazz-influenced in the twentieth century, but none more so than George Gershwin and Leonard Bernstein. We'll come back to Bernstein later in the century, a couple hundred episodes from now, but today is the perfect time for me to say a few words about George Gershwin.

He was born Jacob Gershowitz in 1898 in Brooklyn, New York, the son of Jewish immigrants from the Russian Empire. They were a musical family, and George was playing piano by age ten. He quit school at fifteen and got a job as a song plugger, meaning he was hired by a sheet music company to play and sing the company's songs as a form of advertising for the sheet music. By the age of 18, he was working for a player piano company, cutting piano rolls, which was a form of music recording very much in competition with phonographs at the time. He published his first song a year earlier, at the age of 17. It was titled, "When You Want Em, You Can't Get Em, When You've Got Em, You Don't Want Em."

In 1919, at the age of 21, George Gershwin published "Swanee," a song that was taken up by Al Jolson and became his first big hit. In the 1920s, Gershwin wrote many songs in collaboration with his brother Ira as lyricist for a string of musical comedies. A number of these songs would become jazz standards, like "Fascinating Rhythm" and "Embraceable You."

Gershwin also had classical music aspirations. He spent some time in Paris in the 1920s, and sought to study composition with Maurice Ravel. Ravel asked him, "Why become a second-rate Ravel when you're already a first-rate Gershwin?" Another story, perhaps apocryphal, has Ravel so astonished when he learned how much money Gershwin was making from his songs that he asked whether Gershwin would be willing to teach him. While he was in Paris, Gershwin composed one of his best-known works, *An American in Paris*, which definitely contains jazz elements, but even before that, in 1924, when Gershwin was just 26 years old, he had premiered his first serious classical piece, still one of his most famous: *Rhapsody in Blue*.

*Rhapsody in Blue* premiered February 12, 1924, before an audience that included such musical luminaries as Igor Stravinsky and John Philip Sousa. Gershwin himself played the piano. It was an immediate success. This is the work that put Gershwin on the map as a classical composer. In our time, it's one of the most famous and most popular American classical compositions, and its introductory clarinet solo, which calls upon the clarinetist to produce sounds most of us never knew a clarinet could make, has to be one of the most famous openings in the classical canon:

[music: Gershwin, *Rhapsody in Blue*]

You can think of it as a one-movement piano concerto.

[music: Gershwin, *Rhapsody in Blue*]

Most classical compositions are named simply by their musical form. We typically add in a number and the composer's name as a way of telling them apart, as in Beethoven's *Fifth*

*Symphony* or Tchaikovsky's *First Piano Concerto*. The title of this piece, *Rhapsody in Blue*, is Gershwin's bold statement of intent. It's a classical piece, but it's also jazz. It's all right there in the title.

There's a lot more to say about jazz, and at some point we're going to have to have to talk about vaudeville and musical theatre, but we'll have to stop here for today. We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Steven and Angelo for their kind donations, and thank you to Stefan for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Steven and Angelo and Stefan help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to everyone else who has pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we return to US politics. Last month we looked at the Washington Naval Conference, which was the high point of the Harding Administration. Now we begin the task of plumbing the depths of its low points. That's a story that begins at a little green house on K Street, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I began last week's episode with a dive into the meaning of the word *band*. It seems appropriate to end these two episodes by circling back to where I started, to note that in the year 1900, the word band typically meant a large number of musicians in uniforms with gold braid marching in a parade or playing at a football game. With the introduction of jazz, by 1925, this same word could just as easily mean four or five shabbily-attired musicians in a smoky speakeasy.

By 1950, bands were bigger again, typically a dozen or more. Now they wore jackets and ties and played in ballrooms. And by 1975, the definition had changed once again. Now it was four guys in jeans: three on electric guitars, one behind a drum kit.

Band. The twentieth century put this word through so many gyrations.

[music: Closing Theme]