

mations in postwar Paris. "Pascal's restaurant on the Rue de l'Ecole-de-Médecine," wrote Wilson, "where once the medics themselves and their professors foregathered to listen to classical music and discuss grisly topics, is now a Chinese restaurant with chop-suey and a jazz band"—a juxtaposition that again emphasized the mixing of cultures during the era.<sup>82</sup> Jazz "has taken root a little bit everywhere," commented one author in the entertainment trade journal *Comœdia* in 1926. "It reigns in the music hall from whence it has deigned to come to us. It has become established in the suburb, in the hotels, in the *apéritif-concert*. It dictates the frolicking of the humble and of the more fortunate, throwing its frenzy everywhere, its solid rhythms, its biting and disparate timbres."<sup>83</sup> In truth, jazz was not quite everywhere, but it was in too many places around Paris to be ignored.

## 4

### THE

### MEANINGS

### OF JAZZ

#### America, Nègre, and Civilization

Jazz provoked controversy all around Europe. It drew the ire of the British monarchy and the pope, among many others. Italy banned jazz dancing in 1926, and German musicians protested the presence of U.S. musicians.<sup>1</sup> In Paris, the archbishop banned what he believed to be provocative dances.<sup>2</sup> According to the *New York Times*, the rector of the Sorbonne removed three black saxophone players and drummers when they appeared in a dance class not knowing that only the classical Greek style would be taught.<sup>3</sup> Even outside the French capital, police sometimes tried to keep a lid on the music. In 1923, law enforcement officials stopped the performance of a jazz band at a funeral in the town of Udine. The deceased had requested that one of his close friends conduct a jazz band for his funeral procession, but the police, "scandalized at the sight," as the *New York Times* reported, "descended on the band and ordered it to stop playing."<sup>4</sup> After the bandleader pleaded with the officers, they allowed him to continue, but only if he would play at a slower cadence.

If many listeners had difficulty coping with the shock of jazz, the task of the commentators who tried to interpret the music was even more challenging. For them, jazz was problematic because it symbolized much more than just a fad for crazy dancing or a loud, new sound. It also signaled a broader cultural shift. "Knee-length skirts, neck-length hair, women with men's coats and cigarettes," wrote journalist Lucien Farnoux-Reynaud, for example, in his 1926 article "The Epoch of the Jazz-Band,"

multicolored pullovers and the silk underwear of their companions . . . , crazy virgins . . . race cars . . . , and confusion of the sexes; the anguish of living and the feverishness in everyday pleasure; all of this starts again,

blends itself, with a suspicious cosmopolitan shiver, in the cadences born at the conjunction of a shady bar in Jackson City and an ancestral memory of Tombouctou [*sic*].<sup>5</sup>

Such a statement vividly captured the sense of upheaval that inspired the French to dub the 1920s "the crazy years." It also demonstrated just how easily jazz could be connected to other changes of the post-World War I era.

Farnoux-Reynaud's observations were particularly remarkable because they brought together some of the paradoxical ways in which French commentators described jazz as they tried to make sense of it. Most notably, as Farnoux-Reynaud suggested, jazz had come to represent the "modern" world of the twentieth century and, at the same time, the "primitive" culture of the music's purportedly African origins. Jazz was a fitting sound for an increasingly technological era ("race cars"), even while it recalled the presumed simplicity of the lives of "noble savages" in a nearly forgotten other time (the "ancestral memory of Tombouctou").

These connotations were not random, however, because they stemmed from two important and immediately clear facts: jazz was an American music and simultaneously, as the French called it, *une musique nègre*. In many ways, jazz was one of the best representatives of the often debated americanisation of France that began in the 1920s and then exploded after World War II. By the first decades of the twentieth century, more Americans now traveled and invested throughout the continent than ever before, and Europeans were beginning to buy new mass-produced consumer goods from the United States in larger quantities. With its seemingly endless mechanical rhythms and broad commercial success, jazz reflected the qualities of modern life in the United States that occupied the minds of many French writers and critics in the interwar years. Like other kinds of American consumer culture, especially films, jazz seemed to be pushing aside older types of French entertainment. As a result, it frequently served as a harbinger of life in the new century and signaled to many the loss of a more traditional French culture to the rising Americanism.

At the same time, jazz was *une musique nègre* whose immediate origins were African American, but whose ultimate roots French writers generally traced to the jungles of Africa. The African sensibilities, French critics stressed, had been preserved in jazz because of the common racial connection between its performers and their ancestors on the so-called Dark Continent. Even when white musicians played jazz, they were believed to

be performing a black musical style. At the height of its popularity, jazz music could suggest an "Africanization" of France—an ironic reversal of the colonial project simultaneously underway in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1920s and 1930s. Jazz rested at the intersection of these two powerful and controversial trends, thereby making it all the more meaningful and controversial.

## AMERICAN MODERNITY

Americans were already a significant part of entertainment in Paris by the end of the nineteenth century. French circuses, music halls, and cabarets often attracted large crowds with the presence of performers from the United States. Parisian audiences especially appreciated U.S. military band music. In 1878, Patrick Gilmore and the Twenty-second Regiment Band performed one of the first big concerts of military music at the Universal Exposition, putting on thirteen shows in two days.<sup>6</sup> John Philip Sousa took Paris by storm when he played at the Universal Exposition of 1900. "Not an empty chair around the kiosk where the American flags fluttered," reported a Parisian newspaper describing one of Sousa's performances, "and great success as on all the days."<sup>7</sup>

Besides military bands, American dancing and dance music also entertained the French as the century turned. In the years just before and after 1900, Loïe Fuller and Isadora Duncan danced on Parisian stages, becoming famous for the freedom of their movements as they departed from more traditional ballet forms. New dance steps popularized by the team of Vernon and Irene Castle animated Parisians in the 1910s. After struggling at first with an act that did not strike a chord with French audiences, the Castles, who were already well-known in the United States, began to create their own versions of popular American dances based on newspaper clippings that Irene's mother sent to them in Paris. "Vernon decided that if we hadn't seen the 'Grizzly Bear,' the French hadn't either," she wrote, "so they wouldn't know whether we were doing it right or not."<sup>8</sup> The success of these dances turned their floundering Parisian debut at the Olympia music hall into a triumph, all to the tune of "Alexander's Ragtime Band." "The French audience was enthusiastic," Irene Castle wrote in her and her husband's autobiography. "They stomped their feet and clapped their hands and yelled 'Bravo.' They stood up at the end of the number and cried out 'greezly bahr' until we appeared again."<sup>9</sup>

In light of such precedents, the presence of another American music like

innovations in production being developed in the United States. Citroën pulled his country on being "a good second" to the United States in the number of cars on the road. He introduced an assembly line into his factory—"chain work," as he called it—and emblazoned his name on the Eiffel Tower as a flashy, American-style advertisement for his cars.<sup>22</sup> The Michelin tire company also adapted U.S. techniques and propagated the ideas of the scientific management theorist Frederick Winslow Taylor in its company publication, *Prospérité*.<sup>23</sup> Representatives from the ceramics, paper, and textile industries organized the Commission Générale de l'Organisation Scientifique du Travail in order to acquaint themselves with U.S. techniques. The secretary of the French Federation of Labor spent a year working and studying in the United States in hopes of learning more about how factories there worked.<sup>24</sup> French companies did not always adopt American ideas wholesale; they frequently modified them to meet particular French circumstances. French economic and technical elites were just as interested in preserving many older aspects of French business culture and protecting the psychological well-being of workers. Nevertheless, the trends in economic development clearly drew much of their inspiration and impetus from the U.S. model of business and industry.<sup>25</sup>

Many French critics, however, were not as excited about these kinds of changes as were Citroën or U.S. trade officials. They frequently objected to such transformations in production techniques as being harmful for French workers and consumers. Moreover, they saw developments in the United States as a warning for what France might become if it continued down such a path of intensive economic and technical evolution. The United States had entrapped itself in a "myth of production," alleged conservative cultural critics and opponents of *américanisation* Robert Aron and Arnaud Dandieu in *Décadence de la nation française* (1931).<sup>26</sup> Once a bastion of democratic ideals, the United States was developing a more intense form of industrialization that replaced freedom with Fordism—a new slavery to the machine and the assembly line. Taylorization, the reorganization of work according to scientific principles designed to improve efficiency, promised a more rational production method, but as many inquired, at what cost to the workers' moral and spiritual being? People in this kind of society, critics feared, would lose their individuality to the uniformity required and produced by the machine.<sup>27</sup>

Mass production also implied mass consumption, and from some customers' points of view that meant a dreary homogenization. Author André Maurois had great difficulty getting a black cup of coffee in New York,

he reported, because it was habitually served with cream. He could not get his typewriter repaired because the company that made the machine insisted that he purchase a new one since such mass-produced products were simply interchangeable.<sup>28</sup> Of American society, Aron and Dandieu complained that "if one produces for the sake of production and not for satisfaction, likewise one consumes for the sake of consumption, not for enjoyment."<sup>29</sup> The United States suffered as economic motives replaced human values, and Aron and Dandieu feared that France might become mired in the same situation. Likewise, many critics saw as threatening the growing popularity of the American-style *prix uniques* discount stores that seemed to encourage mindless mass consumption of shoddy goods that lacked any sense of taste.<sup>30</sup>

The loss of uniqueness created by the mass production and consumption of goods extended into other aspects of life as well, some argued. Georges Duhamel was a prolific social critic and author of the biting critique of life in the United States titled *Scènes de la vie future* (1930)—when translated to English, it became *America the Menace* (1931). On a grisly visit to the Chicago stockyards, he observed other tourists marching "in single file, led by guides in uniform caps, who shouted through a megaphone in order to be heard above the noise of the machinery and of the victims."<sup>31</sup> In the industrial wasteland, individuals had become indistinguishable to him, but his most frightening observation was that "America . . . represents for us the Future."<sup>32</sup>

The economic attraction to Europe, both as a field for investment and a market for new goods, brought individual Americans to the French capital in ever larger numbers. Unlike the tourists, though, these Americans came for a much longer period of time. According to one set of admittedly conservative statistics, the U.S. colony in Paris, which had numbered around five thousand during the Second Empire and eight thousand by 1920, soon reached thirty-two thousand by 1923.<sup>33</sup> U.S. businesses brought executives, office staffs, technicians, and their families to Europe, and provided Americans with a network of business and employment opportunities in Paris. One could move to France with a reasonable assurance of finding a job in one of the U.S. companies or the growing number of service sector enterprises that catered to these expatriates.

But this colony did not simply consist of U.S. citizens residing in Paris. It was also a miniature United States that had grown up within the French capital. One could be born in an American hospital, attend American schools, shop in U.S. stores, and read U.S. newspapers and magazines

published in Paris. An American library, churches of various denominations, a YMCA, and organizations such as veterans' groups and women's clubs all connected Americans living abroad to one another and to home. An American could even eat ice cream sodas, buy chewing gum, and receive milk processed the way it was in the United States.<sup>34</sup> Americans were not only bringing goods and money to France but an entire way of life.

Nevertheless, French reactions to Americans and their ways were ambivalent in the 1920s. Americans remained the source of amusement for many Parisians who dressed in their fashions, including sometimes as cowboys.<sup>35</sup> Parisians were famous for hailing the U.S. pilot Charles Lindbergh for his daring crossing of the Atlantic.<sup>36</sup> And the love of jazz was an important part of the French fascination with things American. Yet at the same time, the presence of Americans and their culture could be worrisome. As jazz grew in popularity, it came to represent for some a particularly troubling example of everything that was wrong with the New World. It also threatened to bring those problems to France. In his visit to the United States, Duhamel did not see mechanization and industrial standardization only in workplaces. He also heard these forces in the sounds of jazz because the music could be easily associated with other noises from the era. Duhamel linked the new "modern" music with the age from which it came in a fascinating passage in his diatribe against the decay of American culture:

The music suddenly burst forth from a corner. It was the falsest, the shrillest, the most explosive of jazz—that breathless uproar which for many years now has staggered to the same syncopation, that shrieks through its nose, weeps, grinds its teeth, and caterwauls throughout the world.<sup>37</sup>

For Duhamel, the "shrieks" and "grinds" of the music were part of the mechanistic world that he deplored. He heard this "explosion" of jazz in a club in Chicago, but to him, the intonations of the machinery that he witnessed at the stockyards possessed a similar quality:

And all the time the scream continued, ever renewed at the start of the chain—that scream, so strong and so alive that the packers will make something of it some day. It is absurd that that enormous sum of energy should thus evaporate and lose itself in space. They will make music of it, pretty tunes for the jazz band.<sup>38</sup>

Writer and diplomat Paul Claudel echoed Duhamel's sentiments in one of his essays on the United States when he wrote of "the rhythmic pulsation

and nervous uniformity of the pistons of a steam engine interrupting the cyclical roaring of the dynamo that one feels across all of American life and of which jazz is the supreme expression."<sup>39</sup> Jazz, maintained one music critic, "is the music of . . . mass-produced men."<sup>40</sup>

Other French listeners rejected jazz because it reflected the encroachment of a more general American way of life that went far beyond the machine culture. "Jazz is not made for us," insisted journalist Jacques Janin. "Everything in us rejects it: spirit and tradition." This U.S. export was not welcome, he concluded sarcastically: "Let us not put up the Monroe Doctrine for discussion. America for the Americans."<sup>41</sup> Others were even more outraged in their responses to an imported music. Stressing its foreignness in an article called "The Infernal Rhythm of Jazz," one essayist ended by calling for the prefect of police to take action. "Will you let the strangers who come to France," he demanded, "import this abominable vision from their countries?"<sup>42</sup>

Jazz was only one part of the changing entertainment trade in the 1920s that included such new phenomena as the flashy, stylized music hall and, more recently, the cinemas that were growing in number as well as popularity. Both of these entertainments partly depended on the presence of Americans in Paris, the former because of tourist dollars and the latter through U.S. film companies. But along with jazz, motion pictures became one of the clearest arenas of struggle over the seeming *américanisation* of France that began in the 1920s. Financial reasons were just as important in the debate over film as the medium's cultural impact. Audiences for films grew enormously throughout the interwar years, increasing box office receipts from over 85 million francs in 1923 to over 230 million in 1929.<sup>43</sup> The prospect of profit sometimes even persuaded music hall owners to convert their stages into movie screens. The motion picture business also signaled the further spread of industrial methods associated with the United States to which so many objected.

As we have seen, American movies had come to France during the war as an alternative to French patriotic propaganda films, and they met a growing public desire for more lighthearted and entertaining features. After the war, as American films proved to be more and more profitable, theaters showed them in greater numbers than French films. Outraged, French producers lobbied the government to regulate the flow of films from abroad, but to little avail.<sup>44</sup> Movies from the United States—which were created by big studios that had lots of money and were able to produce films quickly for worldwide audiences—threatened to replace the

domestic, small-scale French cinema craft. European pictures had traditionally been the creation of artisan filmmakers working in small studios making films for narrow audiences. In the 1920s, French filmmakers began to abandon their craft, adopting U.S. methods to compete.<sup>45</sup> As historian Victoria de Grazia has argued, such changes threatened France's traditional coupling of cultural and political sovereignty—the construction of a national identity based in part on an artistic tradition that came from within its borders, and reflecting something essential and important about its character.<sup>46</sup> And jazz, many feared, could do the same. “An independent jazz music?” asked critic Jacques Heugel. “It exists in America. But does the whole world have to be American?”<sup>47</sup>

Movies and jazz along with the changes they represented were often attacked by critics, but they had their defenders and celebrators as well. For many intellectuals, the modern spirit that these innovations brought to France were precisely their value. The Surrealist writer Philippe Soupault, for example, looked to new kinds of entertainment like films and jazz precisely because they were American. Following the suggestion of Guillaume Apollinaire, who had asserted that “the epic poet would express himself with a film,” Soupault saw in American films and jazz a celebration of life.<sup>48</sup> Soupault had fought in the war and became disgusted with the culture for which he was supposed to have been fighting: “Those who in early youth were witnesses of nothing but death and destruction . . . , turned with a kind of fever toward life.” He found that life impulse in modern entertainment. Soupault demonstrated his appreciation for the pace and style of U.S. culture, particularly in films, in his brief book *The American Influence in France* (1930). “We rushed into the cinemas, and realized immediately that everything had changed,” he wrote of the era when films were becoming popular in France. “We were living swiftly, passionately. It was a very beautiful period.”<sup>49</sup> Soupault’s swiftness came through in his writing and living, as the American Matthew Josephson remembered in his memoir, *Life among the Surrealists*. Soupault sought to express the modern life he lived, and as Josephson recalled, “Soupault’s fast pace was also related, no doubt, to his having adopted what he regarded as the ‘American tempo.’”<sup>50</sup> “The American cinema brought to light all the beauty of our epoch,” Soupault declared, arguing that it influenced French poetry, theater, and painting.<sup>51</sup>

Soupault was fascinated with the United States, but as Josephson remarked, “Soupault and his Dada friends now wanted to discover the true America, represented by our common soldiers in Europe, our Negro jazz

bands, and, above all, by our silent cinema.”<sup>52</sup> For Soupault, jazz was indeed a crucial part of American culture and a way to get at the more authentic essence of the United States. Jazz “has helped us finally to discover and to understand the United States,” he wrote.<sup>53</sup> But for Soupault, to understand the United States and its art was part of his larger intellectual quest of blending art and life. European music had been long divided into “popular music (songs, marches, operettas)” and “highbrow music, that is to say, concert music,” Soupault claimed. Yet American music had no such distinctions within it. Instead, he argued, “One of the most definite qualities of the American influence resides in the close relationship between art and life.”<sup>54</sup> Like film, jazz expressed something about life that Soupault found irresistible in the wake of the war’s destruction—the energy, the breaking down of barriers.

Writer Paul Morand also saw and felt the energy and drive of the United States as the herald of a new age.<sup>55</sup> In his book *New York* (1930), Morand took readers on a tour of Manhattan from one end to the other, commenting on the scenery, people, and customs that he observed. Not everything was praiseworthy for Morand, such as the predilection in the United States for eating quickly and poorly. But his account was filled with wonder and respect for the new power and influence of the United States, and of New York as one of its best representatives. “I like New York,” he declared, “because it is the biggest city in the world, and because it is inhabited by the strongest race in the world—the only one which has succeeded in organizing itself since the war; the only one which is not living in its past reputation.”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, this newness and sense of motion was one of the things that drew his attention: “To have America, you need only to put the adjective ‘New’ in front of Rochelle, Jersey, London, Utrecht or Brighton, repaint these old European signs, and add twenty floors.”<sup>57</sup> Inventions like the car liberated Americans for the modern age since the “American car spreads out over the world, an instrument of escape, the tool of speed, which after freeing the United States, is shattering Puritanism, volatilizing savings, demolishing the family, reversing the law, leading the world toward catastrophe and the glory of adventure.”<sup>58</sup> For Morand, jazz was also part of the landscape of New York, particularly in Harlem. There, he heard a blending of sounds since “jazz is the Negro melody of the South arriving at Pennsylvania Station and suddenly maddened by adorable Manhattan, where everything is noise and light.” Jazz reflected the modern mixture of black and white America, of both rural and urban settings. Jazz was “the Mississippi’s dream become a nightmare, cut across by motor-horns and sirens.”<sup>59</sup>

Morand's mixture of black and white in his description of jazz was not unique. It pointed to the overlapping categories that jazz evoked in many minds, even in its connection with the United States. Soupault saw no real distinction between the blackness of jazz and its Americanness, saying that "I know, of course, that it is said to be not American, but negro. This point of view I refuse to discuss, first because it is silly, and second because it seems to me radically false."<sup>60</sup> Although this statement was unclear and received no further elaboration, it suggested that jazz had become such a fixture of modern life in the United States that to separate the two no longer made sense for Soupault. For others like Morand, jazz was neither purely black nor white, nor was it purely American because it contained something more essentially African, but the two had become intertwined. His depiction of blacks in Harlem was of people "so very un-African, of Negroes in sweaters and woolen helmets, cutting the ice with their swift, dark arabesques."<sup>61</sup> These black people had been "Americanized," Morand maintained, and so had their music. Listening to the music in the African Room of the Harlem Club on Lenox Avenue was somewhat disappointing to him because "for all the syncopated murmurings of the Africano's company, the place was just like all the rest."<sup>62</sup> Jazz had become so much a part of American culture that it had lost something of its purity. Others agreed, suggesting that the United States had robbed jazz of its distinctly primitive qualities and had tamed it, thus making the jazz they heard something less than the "real" thing.<sup>63</sup>

As the sound of the United States, jazz was also the sound of a broader set of cultural changes in the way that people lived, worked, and played in Paris. It could be the sound of the machine or stockyard—frightening and foreign images that suggested the impending brutalization of a French tradition. But the United States was a land of promise and renewal, as people like Soupault and Morand noted, and new kinds of art, like film and jazz, were at the forefront of that hopeful image that was attractive precisely because it was foreign.<sup>64</sup>

#### AFRICAN PRIMITIVISM

Like music from the United States more generally, African American entertainment was not new to Paris in the 1920s.<sup>65</sup> Black performers had been traveling to France for many decades, and Parisians had become familiar with black choirs, minstrel shows, and especially with the cakewalk and ragtime—respectively, a dance and a music created by African

Americans in the nineteenth century that music historians often describe as the immediate precursors to jazz and jazz dancing in the United States.<sup>66</sup> The cakewalk originated as a strutting dance performed by slaves on U.S. plantations as a way to mock their owners. Not understanding the sarcasm, the owners instead offered a cake to the best dancer. After working its way through black variety shows and vaudeville revues, cakewalking became an enormous hit in the United States by the 1890s, and it inspired popular musicals performed either by blacks or whites in blackface. In high society cakewalk contests, the winner would "take the cake" as a prize. Dancers usually performed to marching tunes, but they sometimes substituted the syncopated beat of ragtime music. Ragtime's popularity grew as the cakewalk's accompaniment, yet it also succeeded in its own right as a dance and marching music. Soon, its enticing rhythms could be purchased as sheet music, on player piano rolls, and eventually on phonograph records.

In France, as in the United States, the terms *cakewalk* and *ragtime* were often interchanged given their close relationship, especially by the American entertainer John Philip Sousa, who popularized them in Paris. Traveling across Europe, Sousa's band played a variety of popular American dance tunes along with the marches that had made him famous, and according to numerous accounts, French audiences listened enthusiastically to these songs.<sup>67</sup> Playing at the 1900 Exposition in Paris, Sousa "bewitched" audiences, in the words of one writer, who were "reveling in the musical message he has brought them."<sup>68</sup> Not only were the cakewalk and ragtime on his playlist, so were other kinds of African American music. In a 1903 concert in Paris, for example, Sousa's final act included what he called "songs from the American plantation," and he was already known for performing "'coon songs' and his own negro melodies" on various tours of France.<sup>69</sup> Sousa illustrated what would become one of the important facts about jazz in the 1920s and 1930s: white performers were just as likely to succeed with their versions of black American music as black musicians themselves.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, French commentators still defined the cakewalk, ragtime, and jazz as something created and best played by black Americans. Early on, some also saw the potential effects that this *musique nègre* could have. A 1908 article noted that "the cakewalk is a dance of savages: it is made from a savage music. There is nothing that can act more effectively on our civilized souls," thus already expressing the belief that black American music posed the kind of racial challenge to civilization that soon came to be associated with jazz.<sup>71</sup>

Sousa's influence, and the early availability of the cakewalk and ragtime in recordings, fostered a growing popularity of these tunes in Paris around the turn of the century. The theater producer Gabriel Astruc, who (incorrectly) claimed he introduced la musique nègre to France, saw the cakewalk in Chicago at the World's Fair in 1893, and then wrote articles to popularize it and predict its great success in France. Once French musicians applied their "French sauce," to it, he declared, this "exotic dance . . . that persists with its crazy gaiety will become established in Paris."<sup>72</sup> One place in which that establishment began to happen was in the show *Joyeux Nègres* (1902), by Le Nouveau Cirque. It presented a variety of scenes including, according to one description, "a burlesque dance, the cakewalk, which is unlike anything we know and which people have demanded to see again."<sup>73</sup> The revue ran for almost a year, and on its hundredth performance, one newspaper reported that when the show came to an end, members of the audience danced the cakewalk for many hours.<sup>74</sup> This kind of music impressed musicians as well as audiences, and French composers adopted some of these styles of music into their own work. Debussy, for example, penned "Golliwog's Cakewalk" (1906–1908, from *The Children's Corner*) and "Le Petit Nègre" (1906). Erik Satie incorporated African American music into the score of his important modernist ballet *Parade* (1917). And the Russian composer Igor Stravinsky, living in Paris, wrote a piece called "Ragtime" (1917).<sup>75</sup>

Other kinds of black American music crossed the Atlantic in the years before and after the war, including choirs that sang spirituals and other songs from the black American folk tradition.<sup>76</sup> Traveling to Paris usually as part of a European tour, choral groups like the Fisk Jubilee Singers went to France in the late nineteenth century and continued to journey there in the 1920s. Black minstrel groups, musical productions, and vaudeville companies also toured the continent, and black performers were often part of otherwise white troupes. Some African American players stayed behind when their companies returned to the United States, and they continued to perform in Europe.<sup>77</sup> Black theater and musical groups that incorporated jazz into their acts followed in this well-established tradition, becoming important to the spread of jazz during the 1920s and 1930s.

The French were not just receptive to black Americans as performers, however, but to African Americans as people. A long-standing belief that France was a color-blind nation led many black Americans to perceive an atmosphere of openness in Paris that they could not find at home. That assumption gained credence during World War I, when many black sol-

diers felt more at liberty among the French. In the 1920s, that sense of freedom continued since overt racial discrimination was not part of the regular Parisian way of life. "Paris affords to black men," remarked the U.S. writer Robert Forrest Wilson, "an equality of treatment unknown in the United States even in the North. . . . We see black men walking with white girls and white mothers leading mulatto children."<sup>78</sup> This seemingly more generous French attitude played a critical role in encouraging many jazz musicians and other entertainers to relocate across the Atlantic. Josephine Baker described the relative freedom, saying, "Why did I leave America? Because one day I realized that I lived in a country where I was afraid to be black. In Paris, I feel liberated."<sup>79</sup> Henry Crowder, a trumpet player who became the lover of the white, British heiress Nancy Cunard, echoed Baker's sentiment when he wrote of his departure from the United States, "France! No color bar there. No discriminations! Freedom! A chance to live as every other man lived regardless of his color. No taboos. Not a single sigh escaped my being because I was leaving. Only unbounded joy existed."<sup>80</sup> Baker and Crowder were not alone, nor were they unique as performers. Whether opening successful businesses—including Montmartre nightclubs—working as laborers, attending school, or engaged in the arts, blacks from the United States created an exile community in interwar Paris that existed in relative harmony with its French neighbors.<sup>81</sup>

If the French seemed to give black Americans a warm welcome, white Americans in Paris, by contrast, often spread racial intolerance and encouraged discrimination, according to many accounts. The black writer Walter White, who identified both the Americans and South Africans as encouraging prejudice, recounted an incident in a restaurant where he was having lunch with "a distinguished Negro musician and composer, a graduate of the London Conservatory of Music." Shortly after beginning their meal, "above the conversation and the subdued clatter of the dishes I heard the word 'nigger.' Looking in the direction from which this word came I saw a man, obviously an American, who seemed on the verge of apoplexy."<sup>82</sup> Josephine Baker remembered a similar incident when a white patron from the United States in the same restaurant in which she was dining demanded that Baker be ejected. Instead, the management asked the complainant to leave.<sup>83</sup> Although as in Baker's case, the French did not usually go along with such intolerance, U.S. tourists sometimes carried enough clout in entertainment and dining establishments because of their strong dollars to affect the experiences of people of color. In one notorious

incident in Montmartre in 1923, white Americans successfully convinced a nightclub to exclude two black men who started to enter the establishment with two white women. Both of the men happened to be princes of Dahomey, and one was a leader of the Pan-African movement in Paris who had recently praised the city for its lack of racial prejudice at the 1919 Pan-African Congress. The nightclub owner eventually faced retribution from the government, including denunciations from President Raymond Poincaré and Prime Minister Aristide Briand, for bending to the wishes of what one report called "his rich and noisy clientele," and his business was shut down.<sup>84</sup> The president declared that the same fate would befall any other bars with racially discriminatory practices.<sup>85</sup>

Still, simply because the French did not discriminate against black Americans in traditional U.S. terms, such as Jim Crow-type laws, did not mean that the French were truly color-blind in the 1920s. Rather, they operated with a range of assumptions about what blacks, including those from the United States, were like. The French understanding of race, especially as it related to jazz, was different than definitions of racial characteristics in the United States. "Blackness," in other words, meant something different on each side of the Atlantic. The French perception of *les nègres* had been shaped under quite different circumstances than attitudes about blacks in the United States, and that understanding, along with France's own set of racial stereotypes about people of color, influenced views about jazz.

In the United States, jazz emerged from a large domestic black population. But because of the nation's racialized history, many Americans viewed "black culture" as something distinct from "white culture," even though the two had been intertwined since colonial days.<sup>86</sup> Black and white entertainment in the United States had frequently intersected in significant ways throughout the nineteenth century. The cakewalk, as we have seen, emerged as a kind of resistance by blacks against white, southern plantation owners. Moreover, blackface minstrelsy was an important genre of performance that brought black entertainment to white audiences in a more acceptable form—one that historian Eric Lott has described as tinged both with "racial insult and racial envy"—and thus reflected a historically ambiguous relationship between whites and blacks in the United States.<sup>87</sup> Taking another perspective on the relationship between whites and blacks in minstrelsy, historian Michael Rogin has discussed blackface and "blacking up" as a way for Jews to negotiate the transformation from "immigrant" to "American" by embracing a uniquely American

style of performance.<sup>88</sup> In other words, as these and other scholars argue, black performance in the United States cannot be separated from domestic cultural politics that includes questions of slavery, racism, and definitions of national identity.

French audiences were certainly familiar with U.S. stereotypes of African Americans, and those views were perpetuated by many of the jazz-accompanied shows of the interwar years. Images of black America, particularly of antebellum plantation life, were not uncommon in interwar Paris, and they served to reinforce a view of African Americans as only partially civilized and working in a "primitive" agricultural setting. For example, *La Revue Nègre*, in which Josephine Baker starred, featured scenes of southern U.S. plantations, and this show was not unique. A 1927 exhibition at the Jardin d'Acclimatation called *Charleston City* even claimed to re-create an authentic southern plantation for display. It "is the exact reconstruction of a black village in the southern United States," proclaimed one newspaper. "We have before our eyes, like words come to life, the life of blacks, we know their customs, their work, their hobbies, and notably their dances. . . . The dancers are those of the Garland troupe made of ten women and four men accompanied by the famous Palm Beach jazz band."<sup>89</sup>

Many French critics translated common stereotypes of African Americans into musical terms, taking note of what they described as a pronounced emotionalism within jazz along with a kind of sadness and melancholy in the music due to the history of black Americans. Critic René Dumesnil, for instance, portrayed black American choirs like the Fisk Jubilee Singers, black "plantation songs," and jazz as all illustrating a characteristically black way of singing or playing music in which the innate emotional qualities of *les nègres* combined with the tortuous past of African Americans. Born out of oppression, as Dumesnil put it, black American songs "are examples to vanquish the oppressor or reasons to hope for liberation."<sup>90</sup> Playing jazz, observers like Dumesnil argued, offered a form of emotional freedom from the lives that blacks had led in the United States.

Unlike in the United States, however, there was never a very large black (African or American) population in France, even in the 1920s.<sup>91</sup> And French observers were never particularly clear on the distinction between Africans and African Americans, who they often believed had more in common than not.<sup>92</sup> Because many listeners assumed that jazz expressed certain essential racial qualities that transcended specific historical circum-

stances or experiences, jazz easily turned the minds of French critics from antebellum America to sub-Saharan Africa and the colonial project at its height in the interwar years. For the French, jazz was "jungle music" more often than "plantation music."

As many scholars have pointed out, the French response to Africans was contradictory at best. The image of Africa in the French imagination already had a long and convoluted history by the 1920s, much of it based on misunderstanding.<sup>93</sup> For centuries, ideas about Africa were created through myth, rumor, and legend without much direct contact between the French and Africans. As colonial interests expanded at the end of the nineteenth century along with an increasing attention to economic exploitation, scientific research, and political experimentation on the African continent, knowledge of its people became more widespread, even if that understanding was not always more accurate. Those within France who hoped to exploit Africa for its resources frequently presented Africans as "noble savages" and the Dark Continent as an unspoiled territory waiting to be explored. But this attitude changed in the wake of African resistance to French colonial advances in the late 1800s. Africa soon began to seem like a territory with a vicious race of people that needed to be conquered and controlled.<sup>94</sup>

During World War I, relations between the French and Africans from the colonies became increasingly complicated. France welcomed colonial soldiers to its soil because they were seen as valuable members of a Greater France and were fighting on behalf of the nation and its values. At the same time, though, many French workers feared that laborers from the colonies could threaten their jobs, and the resulting resentment sparked race riots, which themselves helped to bring about more highly politicized perceptions of race in the 1920s.<sup>95</sup> Unrest within the colonies from educated Africans demanding French citizenship after the war added to the French desire to keep a reasonable distance between themselves and their colonial subjects by employing a policy of "association."<sup>96</sup> Also in the wake of World War I, eugenics, social hygiene movements, and pronatalist concerns about declining birthrates all stressed a more clearly biological conception of racial categories, including those in the colonies, and emphasized the need to protect the French "race" by preventing racial decline or dilution.<sup>97</sup> Therefore, by the time of jazz's arrival, foreigners in general, and Africans in particular, could seem at least as dangerous as they were exotic.

The most basic fact about jazz to most French listeners was that even though many white musicians played it, the music was still *la musique*

nègre. Writing in *La Revue musicale*, musicologist Blaise Pesquinne, for example, argued that "in spite of its popularity in Europe and in all the countries of the white race, one must not forget that jazz is, for us, an essentially exotic product. . . . Jazz is by no means an internal phenomenon from within Western music, it is the artistic manifestation of a race that is different from our own."<sup>98</sup> Underlying this common idea of a distinct *musique nègre* was the notion that it was an expression of a universal category of blackness—an essential set of qualities common to all people of color—that transcended the individual experience of each musician. "*Les peuples nègres* are particularly known for being endowed with a musical aptitude," remarked musicologist Julien Tiersot in the introduction to his collection *Chansons nègres* (1933), which brought together the music of folk tunes from black America, Africa, and Oceania. Even though the musicians from these diverse locations were not "*de race pure*," he argued that "*négritiques ou métissés, mullato or creole . . . their songs have taken a different shape than those that Europe has produced.*"<sup>99</sup> *La musique nègre*, as many French saw it, contained certain special qualities peculiar to all black people because of its beginnings on the Dark Continent. Music critic Émile Vuillermoz put it simply in 1923 when he wrote that "the black race possesses a musical sense of a rare subtlety and an instinct of rhythmic suppleness of which we have the right to be jealous."<sup>100</sup> Many commentators made the music an emanation of the black soul—"l'âme nègre," in the words of music critic René Dumesnil and others.<sup>101</sup> The rhythm that distinguished jazz was linked directly to its African past because, some asserted, rhythm was part of life in Africa and therefore ingrained into black musicians throughout the world. The "imitative nature" of Africans was "endowed with a highly sharpened musical sense, sensitive to the least percussion in the middle of a thousand noises in the forest," according to one author, and now this element had seemingly reemerged thousands of miles away in the sounds of jazz music.<sup>102</sup>

One supposed proof of this link with Africa that many French critics offered was the sense of nostalgia that they perceived in jazz, the musical expression of a longing for a world that had been lost. Nostalgia had been, since its conception in the seventeenth century, a medical diagnosis describing a feeling of intense homesickness, but by the nineteenth century, it also came to explain in France a more general "crisis of civilization" that people underwent as their lives changed.<sup>103</sup> Modern technology and the movement of populations from the countryside to cities took people away from home and familiar surroundings and "civilized" them, but it stripped