Kevin Whitehead

PLAY THE WAY YOU FEEL

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO JAZZ STORIES ON FILM

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In memory of Sally Whitehead and Paul Wernsdorfer

and

for Lesley Ann

I'd like to play like a bird flies—this way and that, up and down, winging and swinging through the air. No control—whistling, singing, shouting. Just music.

—William Washington as Johnny Williams in *Broken Strings*

But this other music makes you feel like the circus is comin' to town. Kinda turns you loose inside. You can stretch out and play what you feel.

—Ronnie Cosby as young Jeff Lambert in *Birth of the Blues*

You just swing on out and play the way you feel like.

—Kid Ory as himself in *The Benny Goodman Story*

I want to be in one of them bands where you could play free. What? Y'all not even up on two feet yet!

—Jaron Williams as Robert and Wendell Pierce as Antoine Batiste on *Treme*

Suppose it happens great one time and you'd like it to happen exactly the same way, what do you do then?

—Danny Kaye as Red Nichols in *The Five Pennies*

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INTRODUCTION

This book is an extended answer to a short question: How do movies tell stories about jazz and jazz musicians? Not just what they get right, or wrong, but how they tell it: jazzy, or not? And if so, how is that jazziness conveyed? *Play the Way You Feel* is partly about jazz movies as a narrative tradition with recurring plot points and story tropes, and we will trace their spread not just through the best-known films that deal with jazz—the likes of *Young Man with a Horn, Lady Sings the Blues*, or *La La Land*—but also overlooked and low-budget features and TV movies: any pertinent commercial release in English we could identify and view. There are also shorter discussions of some nonjazz features and a few television episodes that touch on the music, plus longer looks at jazz-related TV series *Staccato* and *Treme*.

Play the Way You Feel is also a practical guide: a music-loving movie-watcher's companion and reference. Within the text, principal films discussed get a heading with pertinent credits; films dealt with more briefly are identified in boldface. They are discussed chronologically, with occasional swerves for the sake of thematic clarity (and indexed in the back).

Jazz and the movies make natural allies. These signature twentieth-century art forms grew up side by side, building on extant traditions. Jazz slowly coalesced out of blues, ragtime, field hollers, spirituals, and brass band music just after 1900, around the time the spectacle of moving pictures was evolving toward storytelling. Early synchronized sound films in the late 1920s were likewise amalgamated from creative borrowings: part staged theatrical, radio play, and variety show.

Sound recording was around before silent movies geared up, but jazz wasn't caught on record until around 1917. Movies with sound would break through a decade later, with 1927's *The Jazz Singer*, a film famously light on jazz content. And both jazz and the sound film evolved amazingly quickly—the former in the mid-1920s, once jazz recordings become common, no less than the talkies by the early 1930s.

Jazz and film are performance arts that unfold over time. Making that time fly is all about rhythm, and patterns of tension and release. Jazz musicians liken improvising a solo to telling a story (maybe inspired by the story the song's lyric tells). These arts may employ parallel syntax, ways to make that story ebb and flow.

Movies cross-cut between simultaneous scenes to build tension. Jazz orchestras build similar tension via call-and-response: punchy phrases volleyed between brass and saxes, recalling the byplay of preacher and choir. Early talking pictures could resemble filmed plays, every actor on set in a master shot; early jazz was about collective interplay, each musician feeding the overall texture. In either medium, at first the pace might be stodgy as performers got their bearings. Then, quickly, those rickety rhythms faded away. In the 1920s outstanding jazz improvisers like Louis Armstrong developed the individual foregrounded (swinging) solo. Before long, independently, the cinema adopted its parallel to the solo, the close-up.[1] Both devices helped foster greater expression and a star system. Armstrong became the most famous jazz musician ever—in no small part because he appeared in so many films.

Jazz musicians would seem ideal movie heroes: artists whose moment of creation is a public, audible spectacle. Improvising on a bandstand is kinetic, photogenic, and romantic. And for a while anyway, jazz represented a kind of artistic and cultural sophistication. Spotlighting extraordinary individuals, jazz movies occasionally ponder where musical talent comes from. We will meet all kinds in the stories that follow: child prodigies, naturals who pick up the music the first time they hear it, hard workers with a painstaking practice regimen, talented players diverted into soul-killing commercial work, even non-improvisers taught to fake it.

The interactions among jazz musicians, on or off stage, are complex and multifaceted; how do films attempt to portray that dynamic? Jazz champions improvisation, but the old studio system, with its massive support structure and complex production schedules, was inimical to improvisation as a concept (even as a few directors found ways to harness improvisational genius and energy). How does the tension between extemporizing loners and team players work itself out?

Such movies are a key point of intersection between jazz and more broadly popular pop culture. And yet, generally speaking, these films get little respect. Cinephiles balk at the melodrama, recycled plots, and compromised roles for black actors, where they appear at all. Reputable film scholars may mangle plot details or confuse one film for another.

On the jazz side, their reputation is even worse. As a trumpeter friend put it, "Why would I watch a movie about Miles Davis when I can watch the real Miles on film?" Even meticulous biographers breeze past or ignore musicians' screen appearances, and tartly dismiss biopics with their gross fabrications. Jazz folk rue the musical inaccuracies and absurdities, the poor miming of playing instruments, and more importantly—as we'll see—how the movies whitewash jazz history. In film after film, African Americans, who invented the music, get pushed to the margins when white characters don't nudge them off screen altogether.

Musicians who appeared in jazz movies often disliked the experience: too much waiting around to deliver a few lines of dumb dialogue. Billie Holiday acted in one short and one feature, and hated making both. Shooting the first, she was knocked to the ground in take after take. In the second, she played an opera singer's maid.

I was already writing about jazz when I started reviewing films in the early 1980s, and jazz movies naturally drew my attention. I grumbled some myself, but the films I saw all had something to recommend them: elegant form (*New York, New York*); reverent atmosphere and on-screen improvising (*'Round Midnight*); some quirk of storytelling that mirrored improvised music's unpredictability (*Bird*). As a jazz chronicler, I was fascinated by how the larger culture (mis)perceived the music. Trained in close reading of literature, I minded jazz tales' seemingly throwaway details and began seeing patterns. As every filmgoer knows, even so-so pictures may contain transcendent moments, much the way a great solo might erupt during a blah nightclub set. And so in 1947's much-derided *New Orleans*—the one where Holiday plays a maid—there's a scene where a classical conductor/pianist credibly jams with and eloquently praises Louis Armstrong: "You're playing notes between flat and natural. It's like discovering secret scales just made for this type of music!" Exactly.

We look at these films from the perspective of jazz history and culture, and approach them with a glass-half-full generosity of spirit, and good faith, assuming each deserves attentive reading. Of course biographical pictures distort musicians' lives—but how, exactly? What salient facts are left in (or out), what's invented—and what other stories does this one echo? What gets mangled just because, as a writer of several jazz films explained, "It doesn't make any difference"? (That said, most biopics get a surprising amount right.)

We delve deep even when that requires keeping a straight face: Can a 1948 Danny Kaye farce tell us anything about the era's jazz scholarship? (Yes.) And it is often in the details that these stories resonate against each other in sympathetic vibration. Movies can call and respond to each other too.

In charting how movies tell jazz stories, *Play the Way You Feel* connects examples over time, spotlighting a few endlessly varied themes. Black musicians educate white ones, who then play their feelings, expressing themselves in subterranean venues; cats of any color would rather fight than compromise their art. Jazz occasionally clashes with classical music, rock, or pop. Where people or styles are in conflict, a climactic (Carnegie Hall) concert may help sort things out.

Looking at features and a few shorts, spectacles and cheap independents, the good, bad, notorious, and overlooked, we seek to illuminate how jazz and its people are regarded in American culture and how filmmakers depict jazz subculture.

Shorter discussions look at films with jazz musicians (or fans) as characters, although we don't pretend to cite all of those, nor many pictures in which famous bands perform standalone numbers. Neither do we discuss nonjazz films with jazz soundtracks, video-jukebox "Soundies," every film where jazz musicians appear as actors, nor films where a character's jazz connection is incidental to the story—such as, say, the 1944 mystery *Phantom Lady*, where Elisha Cook Jr. plays a leering showband drummer who gets overheated at a basement jam session or 2001's *The Score,* where thief Robert De Niro pulls one last job to pay off his nightclub mortgage. Where a film's plot is the point we annotate it; where it's immaterial we mostly leave details for viewers to discover on their own.

A brief preview of the plan: After a *Jazz Singer* prologue, in chapter 1 we chart early instances of jazz as story element in a few features and shorts, before the first real jazz movies emerge during the swing era, prior to the United States' entry into World War II. By the 1940s jazz-related features were coming fast, and we divide them into two streams. Chapter 2 looks at films that depict the music's formative years, paying particular attention to *New Orleans*. Chapter 3 examines stories of bands whose camaraderie is tested, by analogy with military squads.

The 1950s was an age of jazz biopics and literary adaptations, and in the course of chapter 4 we'll examine some source material and note some true stories that biopics sidestep—making for some longer discussions. By the 1950s there are so many movies (and TV shows) that shed sidelights on jazz, we can cover only a sampling of those in chapter 5. In chapter 6, we look at the influence of low-budget independent filmmaking (and director John Cassavetes in particular) on 1960s jazz tales. The 1970s saw studio spectacles *Lady Sings the Blues* and *New York, New York*, plus a stellar low-budget classic featuring an interplanetary jazz hero, and a couple of thrifty TV biopics—this is all detailed in chapter 7, along with one last spectacle from 1984. The 1980s, per chapter 8, offered a similarly mixed bag of prestige pictures and low-budget indies.

Chapter 9 looks at the generation of younger jazz musicians who came up in the 1980s as represented on film in the 1990s. Here also we see a new trend gathering: stories with unreliable narrators—a "new" rationale for fanciful storylines. That theme carries over into chapter 10, which like chapter 5 surveys how jazz musicians and fans are portrayed in nonjazz movies; there we backtrack to scoop up a few films where jazz musicians perform in unlikely settings. Chapter 11 looks at twenty-first-century jazz tales (including the cable TV series *Treme*) and an outbreak of movies-within-movies. We end with *Bolden* in 2019, rounding off the first century of jazz on record.

In one important area, jazz films do get respect. In recent decades, they've received considerable scholarly attention, and I draw on much of that research, starting with Krin Gabbard's pioneering 1996 *Jammin' at the Margins*. Its viewpoint is more psychological than music-historical, but more than once I found myself retracing his steps. Another valuable book-length study, Morris B. Holbrook's 2011 *Music, Movies, Meanings, and Markets: Cinemajazzmatazz*, should be better known. My hope is to extend the discussion; books too can engage in a kind of dialogue.

I try to relate my findings in plain and lively language, using few specialized terms, the most cited being the verbs *sideline* and *ghost*, and adjectives *diegetic* and *nondiegetic*. Typically, an actor (or musician) on screen will mime playing an instrument to a prerecorded music track. Such miming is called sidelining. The musician heard on the soundtrack is said to be ghosting for that actor or character (by analogy with ghostwriting). Diegetic music exists within a film's action—the characters can hear it. Music on the soundtrack they can't hear is nondiegetic.

All images in the text are screen shots from the films themselves, not publicity stills. Short citations in the chapter endnotes are keyed to the bibliography.

Movies that tell jazz stories cut across diverse genres: biopic, romance, musical, comedy, and science fiction; horror, crime, and comeback stories; "race movies" and modernized Shakespeare. But they also make up a genre of their own, with narrative and stylistic conventions that rise up, recede, and maybe return, even as new ones arise to replace them. It was time someone tried to survey them all—even knowing down deep there's always one more out there.

PROLOGUE: THE “I GOT RHYTHM” OF JAZZ MOVIES, 1927 AND 1946

***The Jazz Singer* (1927; 88 minutes; director: Alan Crosland; story: Alfred A. Cohn, from a play by Samson Raphaelson). Cast includes: Al Jolson (Jakie Rabinowitz/Jack Robin), Warner Oland (Cantor Rabinowitz), Eugenie Besserer (Sara Rabinowitz), May McAvoy (Mary Dale).**
—Jakie Rabinowitz pursues a career as blackface entertainer Jack Robin, to the horror of his cantor father. Jack must choose between family and show business when he’s asked to substitute for his dying father at temple, the night of his own Broadway debut.

It’s a critical commonplace that entertainment dynamo Al Jolson—a son of Jewish immigrants who was noted for showily emoting as he sang, and who came to prominence performing in blackface, was no jazz singer, despite the title of the Jolson vehicle that brought synchronized dialogue to feature films. And yet *The Jazz Singer*, about a politely rebellious son whose appetite for modern music clashes with Dad’s conservative tastes, is a template for a half dozen jazz stories to come: stories that will ring changes on its familiar plot, the way jazz musicians make up their own melodies to the chords of George Gershwin’s “I Got Rhythm.” The *Jazz Singer* also points the way for other jazz films as the original backstage musical, broadly defined: a story in which the characters are performers who have reasons to break into song—on stage, in rehearsal, sight-reading—and where a performed song’s lyric may (often by happenstance) reflect a singer’s own emotions. Jolson’s Jack Robin sings “Mother of Mine, I Still Have You” on stage, as scheduled, after a surprise visit from mom.

The fact that Jolson was ever tagged as a jazz artist reminds us that in the 1920s, when jazz exploded into American culture, folks who invoked the word weren’t always sure what it meant. Was its defining feature improvisation? Syncopation? Was it modern pop, orchestral ragtime, deliberate noisemaking, or stunt work, with drummers bouncing sticks off the floor?

Jolson’s conversational emotionalism didn’t have the loose, compelling rhythmic momentum jazz folk call “swing,” but it wasn’t totally unrelated. Famous for rarely singing a

song the same way twice, Jolson would alter the melody, phrasing, or lyrics. His half-sung, half-talked routines suggest the influence of one early swinging vocalist, black music-hall comedian Bert Williams, whose line readings jump ahead of or lag behind a written melody with quasi-improvised snap. (Jolson covered Williams specialties "Nobody" and "Why Adam Sinned."[1]) But context matters. Jolson didn't record or associate with players now regarded as jazz musicians (overlooking Cab Calloway's appearances in Jolie's 1936 *The Singing Kid*).

We might think of Jolson, stylistically, as a music-hall performer who'd transitioned halfway to jazz, making him the right star for a technologically transitional part-sound, part-silent film that's about being caught between worlds: between tradition and innovation in music, between religion and the secular life, between the shtetl ways of the hero's parents and his own let's-try-anything attitude, between Jewish family and shiksa girlfriend, between dual identities as the Lower East Side's Jakie Rabinowitz and Broadway's Jack Robin. Of his progressive views, he tells his parents: "If you were born here you'd feel the same as I do."

He's also adrift between black and white visages. Late in the film, the first time he puts on blackface makeup—something Jolson's quick and sure application of burnt cork makes clear he's done many, many times—Jakie looks in the mirror and sees his cantor-father's face. Jack's/Jolson's blackface routines show how a mask can embolden a performer; paradoxically, it makes him more nakedly emotive. As Ted Gioia has noted, Jolson's blackface is divorced from shuck-and-jive racial caricature: "He truly had little knack for the ridicule, irony and sarcasm that racist humor requires for its effect."[2]

In *The Jazz Singer* blackface is one marker of how far Jack has traveled from Eldridge Street. In the most expressive silent scene, he has just blacked up for his Broadway dress rehearsal when his mother comes by his dressing room to talk. She looks at his painted face with utter incomprehension. The gap between their life experiences has grown too great.

Little as it's noted, *The Jazz Singer* does in fact boast one of the movies' earliest jazz solos and some (verbal) improvising. Besides singing and dancing, Jolson did an astonishing whistling bit, demonstrated on "Toot Toot Tootsie," a virtuoso set piece. Using fingers to help manipulate the airstream, he trills and rips like a bird, with piercing tone, and throws in slippery glissandi all his own, even as he paraphrases the melody and chooses pitches that follow the chords. It's a routine, but a real jazz solo just the same.

The verbal improvising comes later. Years after fleeing home to make his way in the world, Jakie returns to New York to rehearse for a Broadway revue and stops by his parents' flat where he finds his mother. (She's played by Eugenie Besserer, a virtuoso of reaction shots after making hundreds of silents.) Jakie leads her to the parlor where—as we switch from silence to sound—he previews one of his featured numbers from the show, Irving Berlin's "Blue Skies." Jolson inexpertly mimes the piano part; he strides across the keyboard with his right hand instead of his left.

He sings one chorus, then breaks off to ad lib dialogue for the microphone, telling Mama how much he loves her, and how great life's going to be once he makes it and they

FIGURE 0.1 Al Jolson, jazz whistler, in *The Jazz Singer.*

move to the Bronx. Besserer makes a feeble attempt to keep up, seemingly as knocked out by his prattling as the movie audience was going to be. Then he returns to an even more frenetic "Blue Skies"—"I'm gonna sing it jazzy," he says, throwing in a few scatlike *do-do-dos*—brought to an abrupt end when his father appears in the doorway, and yells "Stop!" to end the sound sequence. The cantor's command to halt progress turns back the clock: it returns us to the silent era, depriving the son of his voice. In that moment the film's form and content become one.

The Jazz Singer anticipates later jazz films in another way, by promoting the notion that for a performance to be valid, the artist has to really mean it—has to sing the way he feels with no faking. At the climax, when Jack debates blowing off his Broadway debut to sub for his dying father at temple on Yom Kippur, Mama advises, "Do what is in your heart, Jakie. If you sing and God is not in your voice—your father will know."

***The Jolson Story* (1946; 129 minutes; director: Alfred E. Green [musical numbers directed by uncredited Joseph H. Lewis]; screenplay: Stephen Longstreet; adaptation: Harry Chandlee, Andrew Solt). Cast includes: Larry Parks (Al Jolson), William Demarest (Steve Martin), Ludwig Donath (Cantor Yoelson), Tamara Shayne (Mrs. Yoelson), John Alexander (Lew Dockstader), Evelyn Keyes (Julie Benson), Scotty Beckett (young Asa Yoelson).**

> **—Asa Yoelson pursues a career as (blackface) entertainer Al Jolson, to the delight of his cantor father. But the compulsive performer must choose between family and show business when his wife wishes he'd spend more time at home**.

Two decades later, the fanciful Technicolor *Jolson Story* would invent a rationale for *The Jazz Singer*'s title. Jolson (Larry Parks), a young apprentice with Dockstader's blackface minstrels, wanders out of a New Orleans theater before the show one evening, sans makeup, and into a black neighborhood where he discovers a spirited (and uncredited) early jazz band, playing for themselves and the neighbors in an outdoor carriageway. He is welcomed and watches them spellbound. Al returns to the theater eager to spread the news: "I heard some music tonight—something they call jazz. Some fellas just make it up as they go along—they pick it out of the air." He always describes it in race-blind terms.

Jazz gives Jolson fresh ideas about modernizing his own and the troupe's music, and finding ways out of the trap of singing songs the same way every time. Back at the minstrel show his ideas are curtly rebuffed—the real Lew Dockstader was in fact anti-syncopation, though he gave Jolson more exposure and creative leeway than he does here. Shortly thereafter, movie-Al describes working with songwriters to put that jazz feeling into the material he sings. But he never goes out to hear such music again or to seek out its performers. He takes their idea and runs in his own direction.

This fabricated origin myth is as old as minstrelsy itself. It's a retelling of how, in the 1830s, traveling entertainer from up north Thomas D. Rice observed a black singer/dancer performing for his own amusement at a Louisville livery stable. From that model (the story goes) Rice created the blackface caricature Jim Crow, the template for a zillion white minstrels into the twentieth century.

Like most biopics, *The Jolson Story* takes broad liberties with the truth. It also tweaks the *Jazz Singer* plot for the amusement of a knowing audience. To strengthen the parallels to Jack Robin's story, it eliminates young Asa Yoelson's siblings, and has his mother survive into his adulthood. *The Jolson Story* begins in a burlesque house, and is partly a burlesque of the earlier film itself. In *The Jazz Singer*, Jakie is discovered singing in a saloon by a tattling member of his father's congregation; in *The Jolson Story*, Asa's discovered in the showbiz sense, while singing along from the balcony, by vaudeville performer/composite character Steve Martin (*Jazz Singer* bit player William Demarest, exhaling greasepaint). That becomes their act. Steve and Asa replicate that balcony discovery in theater after theater: shtick masquerading as spontaneity. Cantor Rabinowitz renounced his entertainer son; in *The Jolson Story*, Al's cantor father reads *Variety* to track Jolie's success, decoding the lingo for his wife. "Sockeroo, mama? That's double socko!" (The real Papa Yoelson leaned more toward Cantor Rabinowitz.) And both films end with scenes where Jolson sings an ode to Mammy (here it's "Rockabye Your Baby") with his mother in the house.

Larry Parks is a sort of hyper-real Jolson, with better looks and more hair, doing an extended solo on the Jolson persona—much the way any biopic takes a few motifs from its subject's life, works variations on it, and cribs from existing material, developing the story in a manner akin to a jazz improvisation. Parks is a virtuoso lip-syncher in

close-up; he's ghosted by Jolson, singing his old hits with his later, lower, more leathery, and ever-so-slightly jazzier voice. So even the singing is hyper-real. (There's a self-reflexive 1949 sequel, *Jolson Sings Again*, where during a USO-tour montage Al briefly sings a jazzy chorus of "Chinatown, My Chinatown" with jamming GIs, and where Jolson, again played by Larry Parks, meets Larry Parks and goes to see *The Jolson Story*.)

In *The Jolson Story*, Al first blacks up to cover for a drunken colleague who can't go on, backing into the practice. He's never rueful or apologetic about it, though he phases it out as he gets more successful. Parks's blackface routines, also devoid of shamblin' stereotypes, are weirdly, creepily seductive, more than Jolson's own. Parks makes you see the appeal of late-phase minstrelsy to earlier generations of white (and black) Americans. The blackface signifier seems to float free of any meaningful relationship to actual black America, and thus free of racial animus. The sinister minstrel becomes just an eager-to-please white man in harlequin makeup.

There's a glimmer of some other possibility there, a less absurd and sordid marriage of black and white aesthetics. Something like jazz.

/// 1 /// DUKE'S DAY AND FIRST FEATURES 1929–1940

Jazz Singer knockoffs came quickly. The sobbing Jolson of the clarinet, Ted Lewis, starred in the (mostly) lost 1929 feature *Is Everybody Happy?* as Ted Todd, who trades in his violin for saxophone and starts a jazz band, alienating his Hungarian immigrant folks. The film mainstreams the *Jazz Singer* paradigm: the family reconciles on Christmas Day.

The fictitious Four Seasons in director Wesley Ruggles's ***Street Girl*** (1929), penned by prolific screenwriter Jane Murfin, demonstrate that period definitions of jazz could be squishy. This quartet of multi-instrumentalists play their bread-and-butter song "Lovable and Sweet" hotsy-totsy and also sing it in bland harmony. But the hot music gets deemphasized when they fall in with schmaltzy Mitteleuropean violinist Frederika Joyzell (Utah-born Betty Compson, who played violin). She makes them a hit, if only because the papers link her to a dashing prince from the old country. Yet Fredi only has eyes for the band's sulky, jealous trumpeter/pianist. At the end, she begins to assimilate, fiddling along with the boys on one last boisterous "Lovable and Sweet." That number and the Gershwin knockoff "Broken Up Tune," both by Gershwin chum Oscar Levant, inject what little spark and momentum *Street Girl* has. Even comics Jack Oakie and Ned Sparks come off as starchy.

The coming of synchronized dialogue actually made some early talkies less visually dynamic. As silent star Mary Pickford said, "Looking at the artistic evolution of pictures, you would think the talkies had come *first*."[1] To record live dialogue on set, directors might arrange actors in fixed positions around hidden microphones. A scene might resemble a tableau with sound more than a moving picture.

So it goes in 1929's ***The Vagabond Lover***, directed by Marshall Neilan, whose silent comedies were admired by Howard Hawks. It starred crooner and saxophonist Rudy Vallee, a post-Jolson singing sensation who occasionally hinted at hot rhythm. Hubert Vallée had gotten his nickname because he idolized reed virtuoso Rudy Wiedoeft. Vallee

FIGURE 1.1 Immigrant violinist Frederika (Betty Compson) tries on jazz in *Street Girl*.

was no great saxophonist, but he did get a pleasant sound. His alto playing on radio—that other medium that came of age in the late 1920s, and the one that made him a star—allegedly inspired 11-year-old Charlie Parker in Kansas City.[2]

The Vagabond Lover namechecks jazz, but fails to evoke its hectic innovations; it's the rare jazz-free jazz film. Fronting his own sweet octet, the Connecticut Yankees (plus a couple of actor ringers), Vallee plays amateur bandleader Rudy Bronson. He has recently stepped up his (modest) saxophone chops via mail-order lessons and a mail-order horn, both endorsed by Ted Grant (Malcolm Waite), "the greatest living bandleader—the man who made America jazz-minded," and "the greatest saxophone player in the world," in Grant's own estimation.

Bronson and company seek out this paragon at his posh Long Island rental and Rudy's band is mistaken for Grant's. They wind up playing under his name on a neighboring dowager's musical evening. Despite Grant's massive radio presence, no one notices till later that Bronson's an imposter—not even when he sings the new song "If You Were the Only Girl in the World" like a simpering Rudy Vallee.

There are dim glimmers of the star's biography in James Ashmore Creelman's script. Young Vallee had briefly corresponded with Wiedoeft, who'd given him some tips, and later they became friendly in New York. Around the time they corresponded, Vallee had bought a mail-order saxophone. And Bronson, like Vallee, breaks through via radio.[3]

We don't hear Ted Grant perform, but Rudy Bronson is no improviser, playing the same mildly variational alto chorus on "Nobody's Sweetheart" twice, minutes apart. Vallee always insisted he was no jazz musician, and there's no jazzy momentum in Bronson's music, or the movie, save for a brief dance interlude.

Perhaps a lack of jazziness is the film's point: snobby commentary on the music's ephemeral value. Everyone's into jazz for the wrong reasons. Ted Grant is a vain, touchy cynic, who sneers at fans and fakes interest in his nominal students—though he likes Rudy when he finally hears him, recognizing a monetizable success story. The dowager swears "I just adore jazz" but drafts the band in hopes of besting a social rival who champions opera singers. Bronson uses his saxophone mostly as a prop, like a sixties rock singer's tambourine.

It would take a director with more sensitivity to timing and the gumption to move the camera a little, or fill the frame (and soundtrack) with activity, to do justice to the music—preferably better music. The proper jazz film gets off to a stronger start with a pair of 1929 two-reelers spotlighting Bessie Smith and Duke Ellington, written and directed by an early maverick of American cinema, Dudley Murphy. Born in 1897, Murphy started working as an extra in the fledgling Los Angeles movie business. Before long he started making his own arty shorts featuring scantily clad women in seaside locales. By 1923 he was in jazz-crazed Paris, where along with his new friends Ezra Pound and Man Ray he began work on an abstract, playful art film with jazzy energy. Painter Fernand Léger later became involved, and 1924's *Ballet mécanique* is often credited to him, but Murphy was the only real filmmaker among the four and the only one involved throughout. That 16-minute film makes conspicuous use of rhythm and repetition, recurring sequences, mirrored, inverted, or upside-down images, kaleidoscopic fragmentation, and double-vision effects.

Murphy made his own edit of *Ballet mécanique*, which he brought back to New York. For its first American run in 1926, some (unidentified) Harlem drummer improvised to the film every night, a reminder that some early meetings of jazz and movies occurred when improvisers like Fats Waller accompanied silents in theaters. (Jazz musicians had also appeared in silent films, going back to the Original Dixieland Jazz Band in a 1917 comedy.[4] And Eubie Blake and others had appeared in pre–*Jazz Singer* phonofilm sound shorts.) The post–*Jazz Singer* transitional period created demand for performance-oriented sound shorts to fill out theater programs. Murphy's were among the more ambitious, fusing story and song—anticipating the video-jukebox Soundies he'd make with African American talent in the 1940s.

***St. Louis Blues* (1929; 16 minutes; director/writer: Dudley Murphy). Cast includes: Bessie Smith (Bessie), Jimmy Mordecai (Jimmy), Alec Lovejoy (building supervisor), Hall Johnson Choir**.
—Wronged by her two-timing gambling man, Bessie sings the blues, and a barroom full of onlookers joins in.

St. Louis Blues showcased W. C. Handy's song of the same name, by 1929 one of the great hits of the century. (Today there are literally thousands of jazz recordings.) Handy and Murphy would each claim to have come up with the idea for the film and for casting as its star the Empress of the Blues, Bessie Smith.[5] She had recorded a memorable "St. Louis Blues" in 1925, with Louis Armstrong tartly answering her voice on cornet over Fred Longshaw's country-church harmonium.

African American blues compiler, composer, and publisher Handy made liberal use of melodies and lyrics he heard in his travels, incorporating them into his copyrighted tunes; he was among the first of countless composers to lay claim to traditional blues. That practice—and calling his 1941 autobiography *Father of the Blues*—made him easy to denigrate. (We return to him in chapter 4.) But this 1914 song is a marvel of construction, with the formal variety of ragtime, the heartfelt quality of downhome blues, and three memorable melodies.

"St. Louis Blues" figures in several jazz films, and is itself a three-scene short subject in rhythm, with contrasting slow and fast blues themes in G major flanking a G minor tango. Handy said later he put in that interlude ("St. Louis woman, with her diamond rings") because the tango was all the rage in the 'teens and for the sheer pleasure of breaking out of straight 4/4 into Latin syncopation. (Technically, with its delayed second-beat rhythmic hiccup, that tango is a Cuban habanera as heard in countless Chicago blues mambos and booting rock-and-roll sax riffs.)

The third-section blues is jumpier than the opening strain, the chords sometimes changing with every beat. It draws on sources sacred and profane. The insistent rising-falling three-note pattern—"Got the *Saint*/Lou-ie *blues*"—came from the chant of an Alabama preacher, rattling the collection plate. And Handy had overheard one line of the lyric—"My man's got a heart like a rock cast in the sea"—muttered by a woman on a St. Louis street in 1893. The song's story is a template for the cry-in-your-beer brand of blues. The singer's man has left her, his head turned by a hussy's diamond ring and off-the-shelf wig. And the pain gets worse at sunset.

Though Bessie Smith was by all accounts magnetic on stage, *St. Louis Blues* is her only film, despite the range she demonstrates in it. Her first two minutes on screen are a virtual demo reel. As the character Bessie arrives at her rooming house to find another woman with her scornful man, she's by turns happy, puzzled, anxious, anguished, belligerent, violent, pleading, and desperate. That's all before she sings a note—before the grand symphonic "St. Louis Blues" that makes up the second half.

Like Handy's blues, the story unfolds in three scenes and settings. *St. Louis Blues* begins in an upstairs boarding-house hallway where a crap game is in progress. Bessie's peacock of a boyfriend Jimmy makes a typically grand entrance. He knows he cuts a fine figure: a trim handsome man in a flashy three-piece suit, tan shoes, and perfect fedora. His nameless outside woman, with her store-bought mop of hair and a flashing ring containing what may not be a real diamond, rubs the dice for luck, to good effect.

But that's just the foreground action. Director Murphy values texture both visual and sonic. Down the hallway, straight behind the crap game, women come and go, busying

themselves for the camera. The soundtrack has a similar deep focus—a stunning aspect of the film seldom noted. Behind the dialogue, fragments of music are heard: a primitive blues wail played on a reedy harmonica, what sounds like Bessie Smith singing unaccompanied, a few scattered notes of guitar.

That reedy mouth harp continues in the background when Jimmy and his mistress adjourn to Bessie's room and the dialogue starts moving toward song. Speaking of his woman's way with the dice, Jimmy tells her, "Whatever you did it was tight like that"—singing the last three words, as in the current hit "It's Tight Like That." They start messing around, and Bessie bursts in, halfway through that gamut of emotions that began in the hallway when she arrived and was advised to check her room. She and the woman squabble; the building super comes in to evict Bessie over the ruckus.

Bessie begs Jimmy not to leave in spite of it all, but he's already packed: "Woman, I'll be gone before the evening sun goes down." And as he delivers that paraphrase of Handy's opening lyric, that same harmonica whines and a few guitar notes are plucked in the background, as if a performer were checking the tuning before a song. These scraps of background blues appear to be diegetic—music of the boarding-house environment. The soundtrack subtly introduces some of the raw materials Bessie is about to put into her musical cry of pain.

Jimmy knocks her down, primps in the mirror, and laughs on his way out the door, shaking her off as she grabs at his leg. Alone, on the floor, she starts to moan a line that takes her a few tries (and a shot of gin from a nearby bottle) to get all the way out: "My man's got a heart like a rock cast in the sea"—the very line Handy had heard in St. Louis when *he* was absorbing the song's raw materials. It's as if Bessie reenacts its creation.

We cut from a medium shot to a close-up and she sings the complete line four times, shaping the melody into two abbreviated blues choruses. As she sings, between those choruses the scene shifts to a barroom. Bessie's at the rail by the service area with a mug of beer, mulling over her predicament. She worries that lyric and melody, as if musing how to develop them further—how to turn her hurt into music: how to sing the way she feels.

This saloon is the film's grand set, a Harlem nightspot re-created on a midtown Manhattan soundstage, with real beer on the tables. There's a bandstand against the left wall, opposite the bar; in back, right-angled stairs lead up to the street. (Jazz movies have loved subterranean venues from the first.) As a traveling camera walks us past the 10-piece band, the pianist (esteemed James P. Johnson) strikes up a proper intro at a slow drag tempo. Bessie at the bar sings how she hates to see that evening sun go down, and all the folks sitting sedately at tables join in—they're the Hall Johnson Choir, including Handy's daughter Katherine. Their answerbacks variously echo Bessie's line, exhort her to continue, or wordlessly fill in the texture with stringlike chromatic runs as the band plays softly. The choir is so worked up by the second strain they all but drown out the rhythm section's bumping tango. By the third strain the singers are more percussive and abstract—rebels in the amen corner. But they never look her way.

The film slices the blues several ways. Bessie ostensibly spins her lyric off Jimmy's exit line, and then the choir takes it up. So the blues is both an utterance from the

FIGURE 1.2 Bessie Smith feels a song coming on in *St. Louis Blues*.

heart and a collective composition, a lone voice amplified and refined by everyone who has a go at the same material. On the one hand, the collective wisdom of the community gives the music its cumulative power. On the other hand, all the instrumentalists have sheet music in front of them; this particular blues is available for sale from Handy Brothers Music Co.

After Bessie sings the third strain, something curious happens—the choir goes off book, taking the lead—and now Bessie answers them, the only time she acknowledges their presence. They sing one of those floating blues verses that seems to have been around forever and that turns up in countless songs (like Carl Perkins's "Matchbox"), though not in "St. Louis Blues": "Let me be your little dog till your big dog comes (2x)/ Then tell your big dog what your little dog done."

Extraneous verses with no connection to the rest of the song are a venerable blues and folk tradition; they're often used as placeholders when a performer can't think of anything better. But what to make of this interjection? It's not as if the choir were coming on to her. (They've barely turned their heads in her direction.) Are they taunting her with some past indiscretion? Whatever the reason, it marks a radical change of tone, with another directly ahead. As soon as that verse is finished, the trumpets take the lead, the band modulates to a brighter key and tempo, and the players swing into a disarmingly merry "St. Louis Blues" as heard under the opening credits.

The room's mood instantly shifts from commiseration to mockery, as folks jump out of their chairs to start dancing—as if Bessie's anguish had become too much to bear without release. The blues laughs at miseries, and 1920s horn players who accompanied blues singers like Smith could take a heckling stance. That mockery turns explicit when Jimmy enters, dressed as before and reacting as if all this jubilation were on his account. The crowd greets him as if he were right.

Jimmy preens for the room and does a self-congratulatory two-step, a few feet from Bessie who fails to notice till he hails her by name. She turns, and her face lights up for the only time in this long sequence—her smile is a blinding flash of warmth. They embrace, the band goes into a slow-drag version of the second blues theme, and they start a clasping, slow reunion dance. But it's all a sham, an opportunity for Jimmy to filch the money secreted in her stocking-top. Once he's got it, he flings her away and she lands back at her spot at the bar. (This cad who puts on airs, takes Bessie's money, and keeps a flashier woman on the side is a stand-in for Smith's no-good husband Jack Gee; they'd split up only months before.) Jimmy grandly exits with her cash in hand as the band sarcastically quotes the grand opening of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. Bessie all but literally cries in her beer as the choir takes up Handy's blues with a vengeance, a meanness to it now. Bessie joins in for the ending, still crying over the lout.

Murphy's visual scheme reinforces this emotionally messy dynamic. Bessie's deep connection to the song is at the heart of the sequence, but while singing she stands at the bar, in profile. Aside from staggering a little to signal she's drunk, she barely moves; her singing conveys it all.

Murphy used four cameras synchronized to music recorded live on set (a feat in itself), and photographed Smith from 20 feet out, using a long lens, so as not to distract her. But she's not always alone in the frame. A bartender steps in and out of view, his face a series of reactions—pity, worry she might be trouble, amusement at Jimmy's antics, an all-business demeanor. His silent obbligatos are in counterpoint to the often off-screen choir. Customers and waiters sometimes pass between Bessie and the camera, reminding us that her isolation is public. A waiter tries to amuse her, twirling a tray. *St. Louis Blues* is a male director's woman's picture; the heroine suffers for our entertainment. And so the bar's carefree crowd mirrors the one in the movie theater. The only person who displays any sympathy? That disapproving bartender, ruefully shaking his head at her low condition, if not the way she's been treated.

The film refines the *Jazz Singer*'s authenticity principle: A performer's (improvised) music is a display of untempered emotion. In the movies, jazz artists play or sing the way they feel—unlike, say, actors, who know how to fake it. You've got to suffer if you want to sing the blues—in contrast to Smith's records, where she might keep more aesthetic distance. Hear how pitilessly she handled a similarly worthless man on "Aggravatin' Papa (Don't You Try to Two-Time Me)" back in 1923.

When all's done, the real star of *St. Louis Blues* is Handy's song itself. We hear it as vehicle for sorrow, joy, derision, and dancing pleasure: a composition suitable for all occasions. Also in 1929, it turns up in King Vidor's dynamic black-cast musical

melodrama *Hallelujah*; backsliding reformed woman Nina Mae McKinney sings it shortly before her demise.

> ***Black and Tan* (1929; 19 minutes; director/writer: Dudley Murphy). Cast includes: Duke Ellington, Fredi Washington, Arthur Whetsol (themselves), Alec Lovejoy (piano mover), Irving Mills (stage announcer), Five Blazers (dancers), Hall Johnson Choir.**
> **—Duke Ellington rehearses his new "Black and Tan Fantasy." His girlfriend Fredi pursues a dancing career, despite a weak heart, and collapses on stage. Her dying wish is to hear Duke's new composition in toto.**

Bessie Smith enjoyed making *St. Louis Blues*—when shooting was finished, she dropped by Murphy's place with a celebratory case of gin. But her singing aside, she didn't exert creative control. The director's follow-up *Black and Tan* was a very different case; Duke Ellington's fingerprints are all over it.

Starting in the late 1920s, when Ellington was making his reputation at Harlem's Cotton Club, he, manager Irving Mills, and their press agents effectively shaped Duke's image as a serious American composer not to be lumped in with mere jazz bandleaders or entertainers. Every aspect of Ellington's presentation underscored it: the focus on original and highly distinctive material, his impeccable dress and aristocratic manner. (Edward Kennedy Ellington had picked up the nickname Duke early.) Putting him on film in the right vehicle fit the publicity plan. Most likely Mills made the deal; he handled all the business decisions.[6]

As Murphy biographer Susan Delson points out, the director's penchant for African American themes didn't stem from passion for social justice or racial equality.[7] He was attracted to the music's excitement and the stylish people. The high degree of stylization in his own art made a good fit with Ellington's. The 1927 composition "Black and Tan Fantasy" by Duke and his pioneering wah-wah trumpeter Bubber Miley is a case in point. Its first theme, played over a blues chord sequence, paraphrases the chorus of the Protestant hymn "The Holy City." Twice during that theme, a single pitch is sounded four times in a lightly syncopated *dum-dum-da-dum* rhythm, as in the signature motif of Chopin's "Funeral March." That allusion sets up a quotation from the same work at the end of the piece, a dramatic finale that earned the composition much acclaim and a key spot in Ellington's repertoire.

The film *Black and Tan* is built around that very piece. As it opens, Ellington is playing (a fictionalized version of) himself at an upright piano in his boarding-house room. Dressed for work in vest and shirtsleeves, he runs down the first two strains of his new "Black and Tan Fantasy" for visiting bandsman Arthur Whetsol—he's still got his hat on—who reads the wah-wah muted trumpet line off the page. That the song was two years old makes *Black and Tan* a biographical picture, which in classic biopic fashion invents dramatic situations and writes a key figure out of the story. By 1929, co-composer Miley was out of the band, and is unmentioned here; Whetsol hadn't yet joined when it

was first recorded. (Duke probably picked Whetsol for the role, finding him presentable and reliable.)[8]

Whetsol and Ellington play live on camera. The composer is portrayed throughout as a dignified figure, in stark contrast to two comically illiterate movers who arrive to repossess Duke's piano until girlfriend Fredi Washington gets home and buys them off with a bottle of gin. (Washington also plays a fictionalized self; she and Ellington were involved for a time.) Ellington's body language during this transaction is revealing; one gathers he was directed to look at these piano-moving buffoons with amusement. In a medium shot he plants a placid smile on his face but leans away like a Pisan tower, managing to look both amused and askance. (The chatty mover is Alec Lovejoy, the building super in *St. Louis Blues*.) As they're leaving, we see where Whetsol disappeared to; he sits in a corner, reading a magazine, occupying his mind. The contrast between musicians and movers highlights the film's internal contradictions.

Fredi announces she's secured a featured dance spot at a club, with Duke's band in support. He reminds her of her doctor's warning—her heart is too weak. But she's determined, and changes the subject by asking to hear that new tune they're working up; she steps on Duke's line, but he rolls with it. Duke and Art reprise the opening of "Black and Tan Fantasy" before the fade.

In the next scene Ellington's orchestra is on that job, playing "The Duke Steps Out" at a fancy (but not Cotton Club–like) venue with a mirrored dance floor in front of the stage, playing for a quintet of male dancers, the Cotton Club's Five Blazers. When the band goes into the lovely "Black Beauty," the Blazers go into their "one man dance," a soft shoe in unison and close formation, one in front of another, a tightly packed queue, quintupled. Even the loose drape of their trousers falls in unison. We see this spectacle from all angles as the formation rotates on stage. The effect is made doubly bizarre by that mirrored floor; all those visual repetitions suggest trick photography. It's a visual analogue to what Ellington does in "Black and Tan Fantasy," superimposing "The Holy City," Chopin, and the blues.

But Murphy is just getting started, as he cuts away to a skimpily clad Fredi in the wings, looking wan and unsteady as she waits to go on. The director gives the viewer no cues to signal a leap back in time, but what we see next is those same two Blazers numbers (almost three minutes of action) repeated from what is and isn't Fredi's point of view: a doubling of the action in time, and also in space. There are a few shots of Duke and the orchestra from her sidestage perspective, and cutaways to Fredi, but mostly we see the Blazers from the audience's viewpoint, with one crucial difference. To convey her fragile state, they're refracted through a quasi-kaleidoscopic fly's-eye lens, repeating the basic image as many as seven times, so that at one point during the one-man dance 35 Blazers (and four Ellingtons) crowd the frame. Murphy has replicated *Ballet mécanique*'s avant-garde flourishes—rhythm and repetition, recurring sequences, inverted or upside-down images, kaleidoscopic fragmentation, and double-vision effects—in a naturalistic story setting.

FIGURE 1.3 Duke Ellington and the unison-dancing Five Blazers, in kaleidoscopic view, in *Black and Tan*.

Ellington later performed "Black Beauty" as "Portrait of Florence Mills." The 1920s stage dancer had died of tuberculosis in 1927 at 31, weakened by an exhausting work schedule. She may have inspired the character Fredi. Soon after, Fredi comes on doing her shimmy-shake-hula-strut high-kicking routine to an uptempo "Cotton Club Stomp"—some of it shot from below, as if through the mirrored floor. Fredi collapses; a trouper, she holds on till the song's final bar.

The emcee (Duke's manager Irving Mills) instantly tells some stagehands to drag her off. "Sit down Duke and play something," he directs the alarmed bandleader. "Play the girls' number. Get the show on. Keep the show on." Ellington takes his orders, and a line of feathered Cotton Club chorines hit the stage to the tune of "Hot Feet." But when Duke overhears Mills tell a stagehand, "Don't tell him now, wait till after the show," the band-leader cuts the music off and walks out in anger. (There's also a 15-minute edit of the film that eliminates the sequence after Fredi's collapse—everything that reflects badly on the Irving Mills character.)

Finally we are back in Duke's and Fredi's room where she lies in bed. The Hall Johnson Choir has gathered, vainly attempting to sing Fredi back to health. Dying, she asks to hear the assembled Ellington band play "Black and Tan Fantasy"—the first and only time we hear it complete, with the choir chiming in as best they can. Fredi expires just as the

orchestra gets to that Chopin funeral-march ending. She gazes at Duke, who slides out of focus. But then (as the music winds down), Murphy briefly doubles down on that earlier doubled-time gambit. We now see Fredi's death once more, from her subjective point of view. In a lingering reprise, Duke's sad face again goes out of focus and then fades to black, fleetingly resembling a death's head.

Give Murphy credit for the striking images and the weird unsignaled turns—he makes up his own grammar and syntax. The mix of the refined and the vulgar, along with striking effects, is avant-garde art Ellington could relate to. (The real Fredi Washington kept dancing, and came back to the movies with Murphy's 1933 Eugene O'Neill adaptation *The Emperor Jones* with Paul Robeson.)

When artistic genres are young, when rules aren't set and forms are in flux, you get such oddities: novels like *Tristram Shandy*, silent films like Georges Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon*, and jazz like Jelly Roll Morton's "Dead Man Blues," low and stately at once. So it went with some early talkies. Their crude, uneven quality contributed to their invigorating effect. Filmmakers would soon polish away such rough edges.

King of Jazz **(1930; 98 minutes; director: John Murray Anderson; writer—comedy sketches: Harry Ruskin). Cast includes: Paul Whiteman, Bing Crosby, Harry Barris, Joe Venuti, Eddie Lang. New songs: "Music Hath Charms," "A Bench in the Park," "I Like to Do Things for You," "Happy Feet," "Song of the Dawn," "Has Anybody Seen Our Nellie?" (words Jack Yellen/music Milton Ager), "My Bridal Veil" (Yellen and Anderson/Ager).**
—Paul Whiteman and members of his orchestra appear in a series of musical and comic vignettes.

Paul Whiteman (like W. C. Handy) might be remembered more favorably now if he'd had a different publicist. The first successful big-bandleader of the 1920s, Whiteman commissioned *Rhapsody in Blue* from George Gershwin and later scooped up top white musicians including Bing Crosby, Bix Beiderbecke, Joe Venuti, and Jack Teagarden. Yes, but: Whiteman's band was a sometimes lumbering behemoth where such talents got limited exposure. His promotional moniker "King of Jazz" helped business in the short term but has plagued his posthumous reputation. How could this betuxed white man with a baton wear the crown in the same decade that Armstrong and Ellington emerged?

Calling Whiteman's 1930 early Technicolor revue film *King of Jazz* exacerbated the problem, as did its infamous (and seemingly interminable) "melting pot" finale, introduced this way: "America is a melting pot of music, wherein the melodies of all nations are fused into one great new rhythm—jazz!" Dwarfed by what looks like an enormous copper fondue cauldron, or perhaps steaming toilet bowl, musical hordes assemble: Scottish pipers, Spanish guitarists, Viennese violinists, Russian balalaika players. No one from the continent south of Europe appears, tacitly acknowledging that melting-pot metaphors often exclude African Americans. The cheesy musical goop we hear extends the fondue metaphor, and makes the absence of African pepper more glaring.

We get this monstrous whiteout despite the curious introduction Whiteman has already given to (an eight-minute abridgement of) *Rhapsody in Blue*, which the orchestra premiered at New York's Aeolian Hall in 1924—an event that echoes through numerous jazz films. "The most primitive and the most modern musical elements are combined in this *Rhapsody*, for jazz was born in the African jungle, to the beating of the voodoo drum." (Whiteman had put it more bluntly in the opening to his 1926 book *Jazz*: "Jazz came to America three hundred years ago in chains.")[9] This spoken intro leads not directly into the Gershwin but to a solo "African" dance performed on a giant drumhead; hoofer Jacques Cartier wears a fanciful headpiece, short shorts, and glistening, full-body black makeup.

Rhapsody aside, there isn't much jazz in the *King of Jazz*—mostly short vignettes from violinist Joe Venuti and guitarist Eddie Lang, along with limber singing by the Rhythm Boys: Bing Crosby, Harry Barris, and Al Rinker. The film was originally conceived as a biopic, with Whiteman playing himself. But he was no actor, and the writers came up empty. For want of a better idea, they settled on an episodic cavalcade of free-standing vaudeville-ish episodes: music, dance, comedy, and sentimental numbers, and bizarre digressions like that African dance. It's united mostly by a few recurring melodies and a fascination with oversize props. The episodes themselves ostensibly derive from the pages of Whiteman's 20-foot-tall journal; the orchestra emerges to play *Rhapsody* from under the lid of a giant grand piano. The gigantist motif helps give the film the air of a hallucination (and anticipates *Batman* comics' preoccupation with oversize objects, starting a decade later).

As the skits accumulate, that dreamlike effect is reinforced by double-exposed spectral presences; a singing painting; a living rag doll; giant dancers overrunning (a Lilliputian) Times Square; Wilbur Hall following up his double-take–inducing trick violin work by squeaking out "Stars and Stripes Forever" on a bicycle pump; a smirking mustachioed infant in a cradle who delivers a naughty punchline; Whiteman himself confronting his own dance double. The film's early use of Technicolor—where the blues are decidedly greenish—might have helped suggest a dream state to viewers, as when *The Wizard of Oz* shifts out of black-and-white Kansas.

A rationale for all that soundstage surrealism may lie in *King of Jazz*'s opening sequence, which confronts its/Whiteman's presumptuous title head on. A short cartoon (produced by animator Walter Lantz, pre–Woody Woodpecker) is presented to explain how Paul came to wear the jazz crown. (Portly and jowly, with a widow's peak and comic mustache, Whiteman was ripe for caricature.)

Tired of big city living, Paul goes big-game hunting "in darkest Africa." On the veldt, our great hunter pursues and is then pursued by a fearsome loping lion, who's closing in fast when Whiteman pulls out a fiddle. His hot playing (well, Venuti's, on the on-the-nose "Music Hath Charms") instantly soothes the beast's savage breast. The lion starts dancing to the tune (interjecting a Jolson "Mammy"), as do a pair of stealthy natives, a derby-wearing snake, and cartoon-franchise star Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. Even a coconut tree breaks into a hula. This outbreak of dance fever sets the butterfly wings of chaos into

motion. An elephant drawing water, moved by the music, lets loose a mighty spray that alarms a gyrating monkey, who launches a retaliatory coconut. But his wild pitch strikes Whiteman in the head, where he promptly grows a crown-shaped lump, and the bandleader sees stars.

So Whiteman's reign as monarch of syncopation is a delusion—he's King of Jazz the way a cartoon mental patient is Napoleon. Even as the film's title confirms his royal status, he gracefully slides out from under the crown. That concussive coronation raises doubts about the reality of all that follows. As in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* or *Naked Lunch* a half-century later, you can't tell what's real and what's the projection of a disordered brain.

In the early 1930s, Duke Ellington appeared in three nonjazz features. They include *Check and Double Check* of 1930 with Amos 'n' Andy (comic taxicab entrepreneurs, played by the white team who created them for radio, blacked up). After arriving by our heroes' fresh air taxi, Duke and his orchestra briefly perform at a dance, insulated from the unabashedly racist main action and a tedious society subplot.

The Ellingtonians' appearance in director Mitchell Leisen's theater revue–mystery ***Murder at the Vanities*** (1934) is similarly silly but thematically richer. The orchestra functions as a collective trickster imp, in a sequence that begins as pure kitsch. A genteel soloist sits at the piano and sings "Hungarian Rhapsody," in the persona of Franz Liszt himself: "Some day/The finest orchestra will play my rhapsody." That travesty gives way

FIGURE 1.4 Paul Whiteman wears the crown in *King of Jazz*.

to a symphonic version of the piece, disrupted (to the conductor's dismay) as Duke's brassmen abruptly pop out from behind the longhairs to interject wah-wah commentary. More of Ellington's men emerge; there's a brief sonic tussle between swingers and squares till the latter yield the bandstand to the rebels, who toss the no-longer-needed sheet music in the air. (It's all part of the show—the Ellington orchestra is listed in the program, for what's called "The Rape of the Rhapsody.") As the band jazzes up the Liszt, showgirl Gertrude Michael steps forth to sing the limbered-up "Ebony Rhapsody" (adapted by Sam Coslow and Arthur Johnston): "Instead of playing music like you do/They supply a little classical voodoo." The lyric anticipates Hoagy Carmichael and Johnny Mercer's "Old Music Master" and Chuck Berry's "Roll Over Beethoven."

The band then gets two minutes to themselves, with close-ups taking in Johnny Hodges on alto sax beside Barney Bigard on tenor, Sonny Greer at the traps, Wellman Braud twirling his bass, and Duke working the keys, looking twice as dapper as that ersatz Liszt. His piano lines dance more energetically than the black chorines who emerge, dressed in bandanas and aprons. To cue the curtain, the classical conductor returns to tommy-gun them all down, using blanks—that's listed in the program too. This episode is an early skirmish in the war between jazz and classical music at the movies, and not the last time Ellington would find himself in the crosshairs. He didn't really buy into the 1930s fad for jazzing the classics, but (like other bandleaders who introduced new songs on film) he did record a spirited version of "Ebony Rhapsody," with Ivie Anderson on vocals.

Symphony in Black: A Rhapsody of Negro Life **(1935; 10 minutes; director: Fred Waller). Cast includes: Duke Ellington and the Orchestra (themselves), Billie Holiday (spurned woman).**
—Duke Ellington composes, and his orchestra performs, a suite inspired by African American culture.

In 1935 Ellington made a (short) film fully worthy of his talents. The classic *Symphony in Black: A Rhapsody of Negro Life* contains a bit of manufactured drama, but not enough to upstage the music. As it begins, a letter arrives for Duke, from an official at the National Concert Bureau: "Just a reminder that the world premiere of your new symphony of Negro Moods takes place two weeks from today. I trust that work on the manuscript is nearing completion so that you may soon start rehearsals." There is a whiff of panic in this request, understandably. Ellington was notorious for working best under the gun: "I scarcely do anything without a tight deadline. I work to the last minute."[10]

So here, for the first time on film, is the real Ellington—not one who falls behind on his piano payments, or piles his players onto Amos 'n' Andy's taxi to go to Westchester. Instead, this screen-Ellington realizes two already stated goals: to present an ambitious suite depicting scenes from African American life and to perform at a major New York concert hall.[11]

FIGURE 1.5 Duke Ellington composes on deadline in *Symphony in Black*.

As in *Black and Tan*, we first see Ellington at work, at the piano—though now he has a grand. Duke makes pencil corrections to a manuscript, and then reads through the first section of the suite. We see a purported score from his viewpoint; the opening movement is called "The Laborers." (The bars of "dummy" music seen in inserts come from Brahms's Fourth Symphony, second movement.) After a four-bar intro, we crossfade to the concert stage, where the full orchestra (padded out with extra players in some shots) takes up the music, for a white audience in a hall often shot from the balcony. A heavy, coordinated, recurring beat suggests a work song—taking us back before the birth of jazz, to the synchronized hits used to focus the muscle power of longshoremen, railroad builders, and stone-hauling slaves. (We think of such heavy accents in African American music as falling on even-numbered offbeats—the backbeat—but this one falls on the first beat of every other bar.) The work-song effect is reinforced by Joe Nanton's trombone in field-holler mode and moaning commentary from Johnny Hodges's alto. Now as the music continues the scene shifts again, to industrial-age laboring in rhythm: Olive-skinned men in short sleeves or stripped to the waist (but wearing snakeskin boots or loafers) shovel coal into the maw of a giant furnace. One wonders if Duke supplied even this music at the last minute, because the tempo of the filmed action doesn't match the tune; the discrepancy calls for artful, mostly unobtrusive film edits between those heavy slams. We also see workers straining under what look like sandbags.

As "The Laborers" concludes with a Hodges flourish, we're back with Duke in his studio, moving on to Part Two: "Dance/Jealousy/Blues," and then to the concert stage again. With deadline pressure looming, the real Ellington sometimes recycled previously written material into a new piece, as he does here. For the first section of this movement Duke has rearranged his dance number "Ducky Wucky"; the new version has more drive and spirit than the lone 1932 Brunswick recording. (The band had been playing it on the road; its title is a term of endearment from the *Amos 'n' Andy* radio show, invoked in *Check and Double Check*.)

Then the scene shifts again, to show what such music is made for and what inspired it: dancing. Duke said that after a concert tour, the band was rejuvenated by playing for dancers again, feeding off their energy.[12] We see a small apartment where a man and woman dance to the gramophone—spinning "Ducky Wucky," presumably—and cast shadows on the curtains. Their undulating silhouettes are observed by a woman in the street below, leaning against an el-train stanchion. It's Billie Holiday, 19 when the film was made, who'd barely recorded at that point.

Primed for a night out, the man and woman bolt down the stairs. In the street Billie confronts the man, who knocks her to the pavement before moving on. (Holiday said in her autobiography *Lady Sings the Blues* that she got badly bruised from multiple retakes, and you can see her dead-cat bounce off the studio floor.)[13] For a moment, we are back with Ellington in his garret, playing a stormy rubato intro—and then with the band on stage as Barney Bigard picks up the theme on clarinet, before we return to Holiday. Sprawled on the sidewalk, propped up on her elbows, she sings the rewritten vocal couplet from Duke's decorated blues "Saddest Tale": the fanfare that gets them in and out of the original. She sings, "The saddest tale on land or sea / Is when my man walked out on me"—losing the 1934 original's Gertrude Steiny bite: "Is the tale they told when they told the truth on me." (Duke had stage whispered that one himself.)

Then Billie collapses, and back on the concert stage Nanton's wah-wah trombone picks up the story, as (in faint double exposure) she gathers her strength to stand up to sing a proper, newly added blues chorus. You'd think the tune was called "Lost My Man Blues," the way the lyric harps on the phrase. Never content to leave his sources exactly as he found them, Ellington adds a twist. The form is a 12-bar blues frame, but the stanza squeezes in six short lines rather than the usual three, though it doesn't feel rushed. This early film appearance helped feed the misconception that Billie Holiday, who sang dozens of standards and very few blues, was really a blues singer—even in the title of her book.

Holiday doesn't look at the camera as she sings that stanza, her eyes closed in concentration. The setting and some particulars differ, but we've encountered this scenario before, in *St. Louis Blues* where Bessie starts singing from floor-level. That film portrayed blues performance as a spurned woman's spontaneous utterance even as the musicians backing her played from sheet music. *Symphony in Black* teases those layers apart, shifting as it does among three levels of time, two specific—Duke at work in his studio, the orchestra performing on stage—and one more general: the quotidian world in which hard

FIGURE 1.6 Billie Holiday, bounced to the pavement in *Symphony in Black*.

labor and heartbreak (and, as the suite continues, death and celebration) are eternal verities.

When Ellington writes his songs of Negro Moods, he gives voice to the feelings of his people and at the same time gives them vehicles to express those feelings. In those conjoined levels, Ellington the man is fused with his music and his community. *Symphony in Black* is a vivid portrait of Duke sketched in nine minutes—a sort of biopic in pantomime. Lovely as his voice is, he doesn't speak.

That trifurcated action continues in the last two segments as well. "A Hymn of Sorrow" is a plaintive melody for straight-muted trumpet, over a cushion of reeds. It takes us to a dimly lighted, plain church, where a leonine patriarch presides over a small child's funeral—there's an open coffin draped in a sheet before the lectern—and leads the congregation in somber prayer. From Sonny Greer's rack of orchestral chimes, a church bell tolls. (It's a shorter segment, under two minutes, and a lovely, overlooked Ellington melody.)

In Duke's vision, this was the conclusion of the suite—echoing the funereal ending of *Black and Tan*. But in the editing it was decided to flip the order of the final movements and go out with a bang on the even shorter "Harlem Rhythm," actually the floor-show flagwaver "Merry-Go-Round" from the year before, tightened up a bit. That melody sets off an uptown montage: dancer Earl "Snakehips" Tucker (whose image is briefly doubled

and superimposed, in a faint echo of *Black and Tan*), grass-skirted chorus girls walking the bar, barflies in silhouette, flashing electric signs. Musically, the suite plays well in either order.

Ellington never performed *Symphony in Black* as heard in the film, and the score was lost. Eight years later, in January 1943, Duke presented his "tone parallel to the history of the American Negro," the 40-minute suite *Black, Brown and Beige*, at Carnegie Hall. It began with "Work Song" with its grunting accent on the first beat, and moved on (via Greer's churchbell chimes) to the solemn hymn "Come Sunday." The "Brown" movement started with a Harlem-festive "West Indian Dance" and included a (Betty Roché) vocal on "The Blues" that isn't a straight blues, expanding the stanza form. This monumental suite Ellington had planned for years was written on deadline, ready at the last minute, and included a bit of recycled material.

So we might look at *Symphony in Black* as Duke's prospectus for *Black, Brown and Beige*. Prospectus, and maybe prediction too: With this film, he steps up to the plate and points his bat at the center-field fence. Many jazz films draw on incidents from real life; this time the movie version came first, with Ellington visualizing his goals.

> ***Sweet Music*** **(1935; 100 minutes; director: Alfred E. Green; screenplay: Jerry Wald, Carl Erickson, Warren Duff; story: Wald). Cast includes: Rudy Vallee (Skip Houston), Ann Dvorak (Bonnie Haydon), Allen Jenkins (Barney Cowan), Ned Sparks (Bill "Ten Percent" Nelson), Joseph Cawthorn (Sidney Selzer), Al Shean (Sigmund Selzer), Helen Morgan (herself). New songs: "Sweet Music" (words Al Dubin/music Harry Warren), "Ev'ry Day," "There's a Diff'rent You in Your Heart," "The Good Green Acres of Home," "Selzer's Cigars" (Irving Kahal/Sammy Fain), "I See Two Lovers," "Fare Thee Well, Annabelle" (Mort Dixon/Allie Wrubel).**
> **—Squabbling entertainers Bonnie and Skip develop warm feelings for each other and find success on radio, despite anarchistic outbursts from his combative band**.

Duke Ellington's African American rhapsody wasn't the only forward-looking movie music of 1935. It isn't exactly a jazz film, but the Rudy Vallee vehicle *Sweet Music* boasts some shockingly dissonant music integrated into the story, even if played only for laughs. It's worlds more kinetic than *The Vagabond Lover* six years earlier, a sign of how quickly filmmaking had evolved. Vallee (as singer and violinist Skip Houston) again fronts his (ever larger) Connecticut Yankees on the lugubrious ballads.

But in some scenes, Skip's Merry Mad Men aka Mad Merrymakers are played by a forgotten late-period vaudeville act, the Frank and Milt Britton Orchestra—musical Dadaists of the first order, and precursors to gag bandleaders Spike Jones and Willem Breuker. Frank Wenzel and Milt Levy had teamed up (and changed their names) in the 'teens, and were still on the road two decades later. The band's level of interpersonal violence makes the Three Stooges look sedate. They smack each other's faces, squirt one

another with seltzer bottles, and dump pails of water on heads or smash violins over them. (Their props budget must have been staggering.) Charles Ives's gleeful cacophony is in there too; when Skip plays the sentimental "Souvenir" on violin, the band drowns him out with eight bars of "Stars and Stripes Forever."

The Brittons were then featuring trick trombonist Walter Powell, doing things that would be considered avant-garde 30 years later. It's a quirk of music history that vaudeville and early jazz shock effects—such as a percussive, slap-tongue saxophone attack—would be revived decades later as progressive "extended techniques" in jazz and concert music. In *Sweet Music* Powell plays plosive pitchless gasps, and sings through the horn as he plays—getting the thick multiphonic burr that Germany's Albert Mangelsdorff would later be acclaimed for. Powell swings the bell around in the air to exploit the pitch-shifting Doppler effect, and uses his hand as a mute to shape the tone quality. But he's not trying to be avant-garde: He's doing impressions of a steam engine pulling out or a plane taking off. There's a fine line between comic and subversive noise music. (In comedians Conlin & Glass's 1928 Vitaphone short *Sharps and Flats*, future character actor Jimmy Conlin's keyboard clusters and rolling-hand attack anticipate 1960s and 1970s free jazz.) In the late 1920s, Vallee himself would imitate a droning airplane on saxophone during a stage skit. He wasn't avant-garde either, but he sometimes cued key changes with a system of hand signals during performances or played two saxes at once, long before Rahsaan Roland Kirk did.[14]

The Brittons/Merrymakers intervene in the nonjazzy story, which is about singing tap dancer Bonnie who can't stand Skip's (Vallee's) blandly toothy persona, at least not until they fall for each other. When Bonnie, Skip, and his publicist Barney spar at a rehearsal, the band punctuates their barbed repartee—like a drummer backing a comedian—with trombone raspberries or a free-jazzy hubbub. When the musicians rehearse with a toneless out-of-tune singer, his violin accompanist responds in kind.

The Merrymakers antagonize Skip, but also do his bidding. When Houston lands a weekly radio show, its (stereotypically Jewish) squabbling-brother sponsors keep making contradictory demands: Make the music more hot *and* more sweet! So Skip unleashes the band to push back against the meddling money men. Their blaring overture pulls out all the stops: They fire pistols and tear each other's clothes, the pianist lunges at the keys from across the room for a fat atonal cluster, there's more smashing of violins—and guitar, and drums, and music stands—and finally a swan-dive onto a grand piano that brings it and the music to a crashing finish. "The boys are very temperamental, they can't stand business talk," Skip explains. Nothing in teen-rebel pics like *Blackboard Jungle* tops this tantrum.

This conventional story with radical details anticipates a couple of films a half-century later. Dissonant music as anticapitalist weapon returns in 1988's *Stormy Monday*. And the finale—an impossibly elaborate, barely coherent train-station number with dancing red caps (and a blackface gag), prelude to Skip's and Bonnie's actual departure for Hollywood—looks ahead to 1984's *The Cotton Club*. Director Alfred E. Green would edge closer to jazz in the 1940s, with *The Jolson Story* and *The Fabulous Dorseys*.

Nineteen thirty-five was also the year Benny Goodman's success begat the swing era, when hot and sweet big bands came to dominate popular music. Before long, such bands started making brief film appearances. Goodman pops up as himself to play with his orchestra in 1936's *Big Broadcast of 1937*, for example, and with that band and his racially mixed quartet in Busby Berkeley's *Hollywood Hotel* in 1937. Musicals such as Raoul Walsh's 1938 *College Swing*, with songs by Frank Loesser, began incorporating jazz rhythms. Some featured a bandleader hero—like James Cagney, who helms a New York swing-and-strings ensemble until Hollywood comes calling in 1937's *Something to Sing About*. Mickey Rooney leads a similarly mixed high-school outfit in *Strike Up the Band* in 1940—in which Paul Whiteman cameos as an arbiter of taste, hosting a nationwide band contest. But jazz rarely figures in the storyline.

> ***Champagne Waltz*** **(1937; 89 minutes; director: A. Edward Sutherland; screenplay: Don Hartman, Frank Butler; story: Billy Wilder, H. S. Kraft). Cast includes: Fred MacMurray (Buzzy Bellew), Gladys Swarthout (Elsa Strauss), Fritz Leiber (Franz Strauss), Jack Oakie (Happy Gallagher). New songs: "Paradise in Waltz Time" (words Sam Coslow/music Frederick Hollander), "When Is a Kiss Not a Kiss" (Ralph Freed/Burton Lane), "The Merry Go-Round" (Ann Ronnell).**
> **—American bandleader Buzzy Bellew brings jazz to a Vienna dancehall, dooming business at the adjoining waltz palace. Buzzy falls in love with the waltz king's granddaughter, who doesn't know he's the enemy**.

Fred MacMurray plays a bandleader hero in 1937's *Champagne Waltz*, where jazz invades the main plot. Mostly set in Vienna, it isn't all that good, stiff with languorous interludes when top-billed mezzo-soprano Gladys Swarthout sings or ballroom dancers Veloz and Yolanda hold the floor. There's also some business about the scarcity of chewing gum in Vienna, a flashback to Johann Strauss's day, and a comic B-plot about an aristocratic con woman preying on gullible Americans.

But it sowed seeds for jazz films to come, with narrative turns we'll see again. A welcoming committee turns out to greet a jazz musician at a European train station; an empty dance floor shows that a style of music has lost its audience; the venue where musicians play conveys their social status. The ending is the template for a stock jazz-film finale: a big New York concert that brings estranged lovers and/or seemingly incompatible musics together. That finish declares a temporary truce in the war between jazz and classical that broke out in *Murder at the Vanities*. The germ story was cowritten by jazz fan and ex-Viennese Billy Wilder, seven years before he'd direct MacMurray in *Double Indemnity*.

Champagne Waltz acknowledges the impact jazz had in Europe, where the music had been welcome from the moment it showed up in the late 'teens and where black musicians got more respect than they did in the States. The filmed record supports this last assertion. The 1934 Danish revue *København, Kalundborg Og -?* presents Louis Armstrong as a jazz