



The Routledge Companion to Jazz and Gender



Edited by James Reddan, Monika Herzig, and Michael Kahr

THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO JAZZ AND GENDER

The Routledge Companion to Jazz and Gender identifies, defines, and interrogates the construct of gender in all forms of jazz, jazz culture, and education, shaping and transforming the conversation in response to changing cultural and societal norms across the globe. Such interrogation requires consideration of gender from multiple viewpoints, from scholars and artists at various points in their careers. This edited collection of 38 essays gathers the diverse perspectives of contributors from four continents, exploring the nuanced (and at times controversial) construct of gender as it relates to jazz music, in the past and present, in four parts:

- Historical Perspectives
- Identity and Culture
- Society and Education
- Policy and Advocacy

Acknowledging the art form's troubled relationship with gender, contributors seek to define the construct to include all possible definitions—not only female and male—without binary limitations, contextualizing gender and jazz in both place and time. As gender identity becomes an increasingly important consideration in both education and scholarship, *The Routledge Companion to Jazz and Gender* provides a broad and inclusive resource of research for the academic community, addressing an urgent need to reconcile the construct of gender in jazz in all its forms.

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Cover image: Radhe studio / Alamy Stock Photo

First published 2023

by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-0-367-53414-1 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-367-63032-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-08187-6 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003081876

Typeset in Bembo

by Newgen Publishing UK

This volume is dedicated to the memory of **Dr. Patrice Dawn Madura Ward-Steinmann (1952–2020)**. Dr. Ward-Steinmann was Professor of Music Education at Indiana University. She was also an accomplished pianist and vocalist and one of the leading researchers in choral music pedagogy and vocal jazz improvisation. Her book *Becoming a Choral Music Teacher: A Field Experience Workbook* (Routledge, 2018) is one of the field's essential textbooks. For the second edition, she added a special chapter on gender issues and LGBT awareness. She was in the process of synthesizing her 20 years of research on the identification of predictors of vocal improvisation skills into a model for teaching and learning vocal jazz improvisation for this volume at the time of her untimely death. She shared the following findings with us, the synthesis of numerous quantitative correlational studies and the synopsis of her model:

Effective vocal improvisation is motivated by significant others and a supportive environment; develops through immersion in the study of the musical style through extensive and specific practice strategies, listening experiences, private lessons, and ensemble participation; and manifests in strong musicianship, stylistic command, originality, and interactional synchrony. Gender does not appear to significantly limit or enhance one's ability to vocally improvise.

Unfortunately, her contribution was never completed and, on June 4, 2020, we lost our mentor and friend and one of the most dedicated and accomplished music teachers and researchers. I had the privilege of being her colleague and friend here at Indiana University and witnessed the deep impact she had on the students and on the field. Most importantly, she documented for us that gender and improvisational ability are not correlated and that the issues that inhibit equal participation, as discussed in this volume, are social and cultural constructs and subject to change. In her memory, may the knowledge presented in this book serve as a call to action towards inclusive participation in the creative process of jazz.

In loving memory
Monika Herzig

And Co-Editors
James Reddan, Michael Kahr



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PREFACE

The idea of this book was developed at the 2019 Documenting Jazz Conference in Dublin, Ireland. After many research presentations and meetings, it was clear that more research and resources about gender and jazz were needed in the scholarly literature. However, the intent of this collection of scholarship is not to merely fill a gap. The intent is to identify, define, and interrogate the construct of gender in all forms of jazz, jazz culture, jazz history, intersectionality of gender and race, and education in order to shape and transform the discourse on this important topic as it relates to changing cultural and societal norms across the globe. With the rise of the #MeToo movement, attention to gender inequalities in the workplace, culture, on stage, and much more, there is an urgent need to address gender and the construct of gender in jazz in all forms.

In the current world climate, the topic of gender is complex and fraught with controversy depending on who you talk to, individual perceptions and definition of gender, and value systems. Most of the discussions and advocacy efforts at this point focus on Classical music traditions with a strong emphasis on women in jazz and men versus women within such discourse. The definition of gender has changed and evolved in relation to societal norms, politics, social justice research, stereotypes, historical significance, and education. Furthermore, pre-colonial societies, specifically Native American and Hindu cultures, traditionally practiced a more gender fluid concept, rather than the artificial binary construct adapted later by Western cultures. To this end, we have sought to approach the topic of gender in jazz using a broad and global definition. This is to say that within this text, gender is not defined simply as male and female (i.e., biological sex). With over fifty terms currently used related to gender and gender identity, the term *Gender* (emphasis added) is meant broadly to include all possible definitions, including male, female, transgender, gender non-conforming, non-binary, cis-gender, and any other definition currently used in the vernacular. As gender identity becomes an increasingly important consideration in both education and scholarship, our approach to this volume was to provide a broad and inclusive resource of research for the academic community. However, we must also consider that to deviate from Gender outside of its typical binary definition can be difficult and is also important to consider in the larger conversation because gender itself is a controversial construct.

While reading the many contributions contained in this volume, it will be important to note how the term *Gender* and gendered terms are being used and applied. In many cases, contributing authors

Preface

have noted how they are using gendered terminology within the context of their article, while others have noted their own positioning within the larger discourse.

Jazz as an art form has a troubled relationship with gender. In order to understand the issues and work towards solutions in education and practice, we decided to include a breadth of perspectives from discussions of Gender in jazz education (K-college), music, improvisation, art, policy, advocacy, history, identity, sexuality, race, and more. Scholars focused on issues of gender identity, male and female gendering within the jazz world, jazz appreciation, pedagogy, and theory in addition to many other important areas and offer discussions and possible solutions. It is our hope that this edited volume will be an essential resource for students and scholars alike for classes in research methodologies, jazz history, musicology, ethnomusicology, gender studies, jazz pedagogy, and psychology and other areas of inquiry.

As we considered the topic of Gender in jazz, we contemplated what issues needed to be addressed and what would be the best way to understand the topic as broadly possible. The authors represent a diverse group in terms of geographics, backgrounds, approaches, race, and gender and provide us with a wide range of perspectives. While every attempt was made to invite authors as diverse as possible, the final selection is also influenced by individual availability, time constraints, interest, and experiences. Essays in the current volume were proposed by contributors based on invitation from the editors because of their current knowledge and differing points of view about Gender and jazz. Moreover, we have tried to be careful to honor the ground-breaking research published by many scholars in this field. In that spirit, this text offers many new ideas built upon the contributions of scholars in the field prior to this text as a next step to continued discourse and change. More importantly, we hope that the essays presented herein will serve as a stepping stone for change where needed, for new advocacy, and revised pedagogy towards a more diverse approach to the creation, teaching, and presentation of the art form jazz.

Finally, all viewpoints presented throughout the volume are solely by the chapter authors and their interviewees and may not reflect the views and opinions of the editors. We would like to express our gratitude to Routledge and Taylor & Francis for believing in this project and its importance. We would also like to thank all those authors who have contributed their time, expertise, and wisdom to this important edition.

James Reddan, Monika Herzig, and Michael Kahr

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Completing this volume has been no small undertaking. There are many people the editors would like to thank and acknowledge who have helped to make this volume possible.

First, we would like to extend our deepest thanks and gratitude to Natali Rimoun Jouzi and Elaine Lee, graduate assistants supported by the Indiana University O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs for all their help with communications, organizing, and tracking all the contributions throughout their process. Their help was crucial in bringing this volume to fruition over the past two years.

Second, we must extend our thanks to Constance Ditzel and Routledge/Taylor & Francis for her belief in the success and importance of this volume. Her help and encouragement have truly been inspiring.

Third, we thank the many contributors, reviewers, and scholars who have supported the development of this work and its importance to our field and profession.

Furthermore ...

James Reddan would like to thank his colleagues in Music, Creative Arts Division, and College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Western Oregon University for their support and encouragement to produce this work. Thank you to Jason Stieber and Fern Reddan for all your love, encouragement, help, and support during this process.

Monika Herzig would like to express her gratitude for the support of the Indiana University Arts Administration program and her family, Peter Kienle, Zackary and Jasmin Herzig.

Michael Kahr would like to thank the institutional and personal support at Jam Music Lab University and extends his gratitude to Rainer Kahr, Maryam Sadr-Salek, and Kimiya Lilien Kahr.



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PART 1

Historical Perspectives



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1

“THE FRIVOLOUS, SCANTILY CLAD ‘JAZZING FLAPPER,’ IRRESPONSIBLE AND UNDISCIPLINED”

Jazz as a Feminine Domain

Bruce Johnson

Introduction

Relative to overall jazz practice and discourse, the role of women has been neglected. David Ake, writing as recently as 2019, noted the “pervasive sexism that continues to surround neotraditional aesthetics and practices,” and that there has never been a female member of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, describing it as a “locker-room mentality” (Ake, 2019, p. 82). This gendering has led to some significant occlusions in jazz historiography: Patrick Burke refers for example to the argument that Asian-American musicians have been excluded from the US-centric jazz *mythos* through a form of “feminization,” lacking “the masculine creative force supposedly essential to jazz” (Burke, 2019, p. 192). In the twenty-first century there has been a growing body of literature on women in jazz (Burke, 2019, p. 189), including such studies as Williams (2007), which critiqued the jazz/masculinity nexus. Much of this literature is reviewed in Rustin and Tucker (2008, pp. 10–19), who also include significant essays pertinent to this one in their collection (see for example Taylor, Hairston, Baade, McMullen). With increasing numbers of exceptions (see for example Arvidsson, 2014), largely driven by a growing interest in the global jazz diaspora, the bulk of the literature on women in jazz has been primarily focused on African American women, and is also framed by a postwar “high art” aesthetic, which is itself overwhelmingly a masculinist construction already saddled with gender politics, the result of which is rather like trying to argue the case for “jazz-as-art” by deploying a discourse written for a Eurocentric high art tradition in which jazz starts out at an insuperable disadvantage (see Johnson, 2011).

My focus here is on gender politics that underpin a global and therefore transracial phenomenon—the “Modern Woman”—and in relation to an interwar conception of jazz as a highly corporeal form of popular culture rather than intellectualized form of “high art”. And I also wish to enlarge the idea of “actant,” beyond that of a musician. That is, someone who plays a significant role in a social practice or formation. The “jazz world” is not brought into existence solely by musicians, a model derived from the “great artist” *mythos*. It is also created by a range of actants that include the communities of promoters, the media, pundits and commentators, and what we now think of as audiences.

And, I argue, this was far more significantly the case during the period I am discussing—the 1920s—when jazz was not only a music for dancing, but was regarded as much as a dance as an instrumental performance. Today we understand jazz to be a genre of musical performance, produced by (mainly male) musicians in a dedicated performance space, what is in effect a stage. But this was not how jazz was understood in the early decades of its history. Apart from on-stage vaudeville performance in its very earliest diasporic formations, jazz was produced by dance bands but also by the bodies of the dancers, just as, say, a tango is “produced” by those who dance it (see further Johnson, 2000, pp. 64–66; Johnson, 2020, pp. 146–148). To dance to jazz was to “perform” jazz.

Today’s idea of a dedicated “jazz venue” or jazz club is very much a development from the late 1930s, and to a great extent this itself has been masculinised by another shift. The range of venues in which jazz might be performed in the 1920s was much broader than is now implied by the term “jazz venue.” If I tell you that I am playing a prestigious jazz gig tonight, the image that comes to mind is of a musical event entirely devoted to jazz, a music performed by a group of performers identified as jazz musicians, located on a dedicated performance space, for an audience that is close to static. Few such scenarios existed during the 1920s, partly because, as a music for dancing—an audience in motion—jazz would be just one “hot” component of a modern dance or cabaret band’s repertoire. In addition, the range of venues in which such a band would perform was far broader than is the case for a “jazz group” today. Vaudeville, for example, was particularly associated with the earliest jazz, and was also not so rigidly masculinised. To attempt to imaginatively inhabit the 1920s conception of jazz is to discover that, in gender terms, and especially outside the United States, it was primarily women who were the conduit through which the music was seen as entering the local cultural landscape. Jazz was racialized (emanating from black US musicians) but also feminized.

Yet the perception of jazz as a perennial site of masculinity persists, and even the introduction to a very insightful collection of essays on gender in jazz asserts categorically that, “From its birth, ... jazz history and criticism has [sic] been couched in the language of nation, race, and masculinity” (Rustin and Tucker, 2008, p. 16). The masculinization of jazz has become axiomatic: “jazz has remained, since its earliest days, an overwhelmingly male domain” (Ake, 2002, p. 64). This chapter is based on a challenge to that assumption, arguing that during the interwar period, and particularly the 1920s, jazz was feminized, the domain of the independent-minded “New Woman” or “Modern Girl.”¹ The terms describe the emergence of a newly independent young female eager to occupy a place in the public sphere, who threatened received notions of the proper place of women in society. It was a phenomenon not only of a leisured class fashion *du jour*, but which traversed the class spectrum, reflecting also changes in the situation of the working and serving class of women that had been gaining momentum since the late nineteenth century (see Schwartz, 2019).

This chapter takes as a case study a scandal in Australia in 1928, where the Musicians’ Union of Australia (MUA) had long resisted the importation of foreign musicians on the grounds they were depriving local musicians of employment. This posture was hardened by racism in the case of a visiting US African American revue, “The Colored Idea”. In collaboration with various state agencies and the yellow press, the MUA succeeded in securing the deportation of the Revue’s band, not, however on grounds of protectionism, nor even primarily of race politics, though the latter were harnessed. The lever for the deportation was a public “moral panic” exploitation of the widely perceived association between African American jazz and the modern girl, of women as the conduit through which jazz entered and threatened the local culture. In the 1920s, jazz was a feminine domain.

On 21 January 1928, the African American revue The Colored Idea opened the Sydney season of their Australian tour. The revue’s band, Sonny Clay’s Plantation Orchestra, was a jazz group whose members included alumni and future members of US bands led by such luminaries as Jelly Roll Morton, Kid Ory, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. The reviews of the first performance in the Tivoli theatre set a pattern in which the band was the star of the Revue: “Sonny Clay’s Idea burst

like a ray of colored sunshine on the patrons of the Tivoli yesterday afternoon. The band is all your dreams of jazz come true” (Egan, 2020, p. 171). To the reviewer in the lifestyle journal *Everyones*, the band demonstrated that “jazz as played by a European and jazz as played by a real Negro are entirely different. It is all in the Syncopation” (Sutcliffe, 1997, p. 8). The revue was such a success that it was booked for a return season after their commitments in Melbourne, where they enjoyed the same level of acclamation: A review of their opening night on 20 February in the city’s main daily newspaper, *The Age*, enthused over “the unrestrained, exotic quality to be expected of the originators of jazz” (Sutcliffe, 1997, p. 10).

Thus far, the band had performed as part of an imported stage revue under contract on an international touring circuit. But their popularity led to a widely publicised invitation to perform in their own right for the Australia Cup midnight dance in late March at the city’s premier dance palais, The Green Mill, a highly sought-after gig that would normally have gone to a local band. Five days before the dance it was reported in the press that representatives of the MUA had met with the prime minister in Canberra to seek an embargo on foreign musicians taking work from locals; “Discussion turned strongly on visiting American players” (Sutcliffe, 1997, p. 10). Then, as reported in both the Melbourne and Sydney press, a few days before the scheduled dance, police, with a reporter in tow, and following lengthy surveillance through a window from across the road, raided an apartment in East Melbourne where, the press reported, “a number of young girls were associated with Negroes” (Sutcliffe, 1997, p. 11). The “Negroes” were members of Sonny Clay’s band, and the Melbourne newspaper *Truth*, whose reporter had accompanied the police, slathered over the discovery of “empty glasses, half dressed girls, an atmosphere poisonous with cigarette smoke and the fumes of liquor,” and general “abandoned behaviour” (Johnson, 2010, p. 10). The only charges that could be devised against the young women was for vagrancy, a charge often used to prosecute prostitutes, none of which in any case succeeded. The musicians had broken no laws, but all their performances were cancelled, and they were ordered to leave the country on pain of formal deportation back to the United States. The Federal Cabinet determined that “No more Negro entertainers are to be admitted into Australia” (Sutcliffe, 1997, p. 11).

This story has been told before by historians in various degrees of detail, (see, for example, in chronological order Sales, 1974; Bisset, 1979/1987, pp. 43–45; Sutcliffe, 1997, pp. 3–13; Hall, 1997, 1998; Johnson, 2010; Cassells, 2013; O’Connell, 2016, 2021; Egan, 2020, pp. 24–42). But the narrative has been refracted primarily through the prisms of race, xenophobia and employment protectionism: A culture, exemplified in the MUA, opposing the importation of foreign, and especially non-white, non-British musicians who would steal employment from the locals as well as introduce forms of cultural contamination. As Cassells (2013) has pointed out, these accounts occlude the flashpoint of the whole event: The women without whom the crucial scandal would never have eventuated, whose rendezvous with the US jazz musicians provided the decisive leverage in securing the band’s deportation. When Cassells gave the women’s identities as individuals, for the first time we rediscovered their socio-economic profile, and also gain a sense of how far they became the local public scapegoats for the whole affair through media hyperbole. Cassell expounds this in such impressive detail it would be superfluous to replicate her arguments here. But I want to extrapolate a further point; she makes much of the threat of miscegenation but makes little of the genre of music that brought the black men and white women together—jazz.

The Colored Idea scandal is a case study in the central role of women in the understanding of jazz in the early interwar period, when the music was undergoing its first and crucial stages of globalisation. I have set out this case in broad terms (Johnson, 2020, pp. 139–152), and I want to re-examine The Colored Idea episode through that prism of gender politics, arguing that it was this that finally provided the decisive leverage to deport the last African American jazz band to officially perform in Australia for decades to come. And this could only have happened because jazz at that time was closely aligned with the young modern girl.

My interest here is in the ease with which the media were able to situate the women at the centre of the scandal as the “frivolous, scantily clad ‘jazzing flapper’, irresponsible and undisciplined.” That characterisation was from an article called “A Million Women Too Many” in the 5 February 1920 issue of the UK paper, the *Daily Mail*, in which the overabundance of unmarried British women is blamed for male unemployment and emigration, and the decline of the family, and warned of the threat to morality of the “modern independent girl” pursuing pleasure for pleasure’s sake (Melman, 1998, pp. 18, 19). Melman’s study was of the UK, but continuing research into the Modern Girl of the 1920s confirms that this was a global perception, spanning East and West (see Weinbaum, 2008). Such studies also incidentally confirm that the anthem of the Modern Girl was jazz. It is extremely puzzling that, as quotations above regarding the perennial masculinization of jazz indicate, this “incidental” insight has not been transferred to any significant degree to jazz scholarship. To develop this argument, we need to explore two contesting forces: The framing culture, of which the MUA was a microcosm, and the image of the Modern Girl in Australia in the late 1920s.

The Musicians’ Union of Australia

The Musicians’ Union of Australia (MUA) was established in 1916, growing out of various organisations that had emerged from the late nineteenth century that sought to unionise the profession; by the year of the visit of The Colored Idea, it was at the peak of its lobbying power, with 5,000 members (Arthur, 2003, p. 348). It had by this time become “highly protectionist, ... and pursuing a policy of total exclusion of foreign musicians” (Dreyfus, 2013, p. 17). This posture was a microcosm of the larger political context, as reflected in the White Australia Policy (WAP), based on the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, the same year as the act of Federation that brought the single nation of Australia into existence. The spirit of the Act was articulated in a speech given by former Prime Minister Billy Hughes at the National Party conference in March 1928 in which, apart from implicitly expressing regret that the “niggers” had not been lynched, he “reaffirmed” the policy in no uncertain terms: “We believe in a White Australia ... and a British White Australia at that” (Dreyfus, 2013, p. 84). Unsurprisingly, African American musicians were among those targeted by this racist xenophobia, aggravated by the Australian Commonwealth Band’s recent local union ban on performance in the United States during its otherwise very successful international tour (Hall, 1998, p. 179). Nationalist Party Senator J.F. Guthrie alluded to this in a letter he wrote in response to the visiting Kentucky Jubilee Singers in 1929, in which he inveighed against

nigger bands and nigger singers. The Commonwealth Band, which performed with marked success in Europe, was insulted in America, and not allowed to perform there. I saw a band of fat niggers arrive at Spencer Street [station, in Melbourne] last week. I asked who they were and who had imported them. They replied—“We are the Kentucky Singers, under engagement in Australia to the theatre people.” Ye gods and little fishes! Foreign films, foreign ‘talkies’ teaching our children to mutilate in every way the English language, canned foreign music, imported nigger singers.

(Egan, 2020, p. 181)

The MUA formally adopted the WAP at its annual conference in 1925, and it was not removed from the federal rule book until 1961 (Dreyfus, 2013, p. 119). It was an attitude that “was no different from that of any other Australian Union of the time” (Dreyfus, 2009, p. 7) and a reflection of a general xenophobia and racism that went back to the nineteenth century (Egan, 2020, pp. 23, 25). Its deployment against African American jazz musicians had precedent: In 1923 Tom Carlyon sought permission from the Department of Home and Territories to book a black US jazz band into the ballroom of the Esplanade Hotel in Melbourne’s beach-side suburb of St. Kilda. The refusal became a precedent for subsequent applications (O’Connell, 2016, p. 244).

The ostensible mission of the MUA in relation to imported players was the protection of employment for Australian musicians, gaining increased urgency from the late 1920s as the emergence of the 'talkies' reduced employment of musicians, rising to 4/5ths of MUA membership by the late 1930s (Arthur, 2003, pp. 348–349). The union argued that imported US dance bands were taking employment from local musicians who were quite capable of providing dance music of the same quality (Dreyfus, 2013, pp. 80, 82, 83). Initially, jazz bands were accepted because they would boost demand for the music and therefore increase employment for Australian jazz orchestras, but as unemployment became more severe at the end of the 1920s, they too were regarded as a threat. In 1928 the MUA lobbied the government for controls over the importation of musicians and in 1929 introduced a ban on union membership for non-British musicians (Arthur, 2003, pp. 348–349).

This policy placed the MUA at odds with entrepreneurs who wanted to import bands under contract through touring circuits, to present various styles of music of a quality that they insisted could not be found locally (Dreyfus, 2013, p. 64). From February 1929 the union introduced rules that in effect excluded foreign musicians, also drawing a distinction between those who entered the country under a contract, and those who entered individually as free-lance musicians. The former obviously brought the union into tension with entrepreneurs, and these disputes were conducted publicly, while the latter cases were handled within the union. The whole process was muddy, the distinction porous (see Dreyfus, 2013, pp. 63–4), but fundamental was the protectionist policy of the MUA, fuelled also by racism, as opposed to the interests of entrepreneurs who wished to serve the public taste for international styles presented at the highest standard.

Industrial disputes were settled through an arbitration system in which representatives of the sector involved were able to participate. In the entertainment and leisure environment of the 1920s, the MUA was a very strong lobbying force, with direct access to the highest level of government. In cases affecting the employment conditions of musicians, the general secretary of the MUA together with another union representative, such as the national president, would play an active role. Regarding imported musicians, "a small cohort of union officials was able to usurp the authority of the system in order to counter the real or imagined threat" (Dreyfus, 2013, p. 64, see also 69). During the period under discussion here, the Federal president of the MUA was Frank Kitson, who was also the secretary of the New South Wales branch. He had been a powerful influence in the union since 1916, and became central in the formation, advocacy, and enforcement of policy as the union's delegate in the arbitration process regarding foreign musicians, which he vehemently and litigiously opposed throughout his tenure in those offices from 1924 to his death in 1951 (Dreyfus, 2013, pp. 57–58).

At the same time, Kitson was an experienced and canny political player, skills which served him and the MUA very effectively during The Colored Idea episode. Within the union movement, the arrival of this revue, with its African American jazz band, was a double affront. It represented not just a potential threat to employment for Australian musicians, even though it was a stage band for revue with a contained touring schedule. It was also an offense against the racism institutionalised in the WAP, to which the union was explicitly committed. It was the former consideration that was argued most vigorously, though of course the latter was a (sometimes) covert factor. But the MUA under Kitson also understood the importance of public opinion: "Characteristically, MUA rhetoric attached itself to popular causes as a means of strengthening its appeal" (Dreyfus, 2013, p. 66). As we shall see further below, throughout the 1920s there was a feverish appetite for the latest in US dance bands, and above all, jazz.

Kitson well understood the importance of marshalling public opinion. In opposing an application for union membership by two Italian musicians in mid-1928, Kitson appealed to a general interwar suspicion of Italian immigration, using the press to publicize his arguments that these non-English speaking foreigners would not be competent as orchestral players in Australia (Dreyfus, 2013, p. 77). In this he was assisted by the cultivation of an alliance with Ezra Norton, owner of the Melbourne newspaper *Truth* ("The People's Paper"), also opposed to the importation of foreign musicians (Dreyfus, 2013, p. 109). It was an alliance that would prove invaluable in the union's

fight with the Sonny Clay band from The Colored Idea. Kitson used the same tactic against Italian musicians imported to open the new Regent Theatre, and when theatrical company J.C. Williamson Ltd. imported twelve Italians for their Grand Opera season, while the original agreement with the union had been for only five. The union “was able to link its feelings of resentment to general public concerns about Italian migration” (Dreyfus, 2013, p. 83). Similarly, his relentless campaign against the Jewish refugee Weintraub Syncopators from 1937 exploited a deep vein of anti-Semitism among the Australian public (Dreyfus, 2013). These cases exemplified how the MUA could, in engaging with the public through the press, deploy arguments which had popular appeal, but which in fact masked the more basic and general objection by the MU to foreign imported musicians.

But The Colored Idea and its jazz band presented a very different problem as far as public opinion was concerned. As entrepreneurs recognised, there was a strong public demand for imported bands that could present the latest in American dance music. In 1924 the Harry Yerkes US band was imported to play a season at the Wattle Path dance palais in Melbourne. The MUA appealed against this to the Industrial Registrar, on the grounds that the contract should have gone to local musicians. The appeal failed, the Registrar declaring that Australians could not “get that rhythm that is essential in the dancing halls nowadays.” The employer backed up this judgement by reference to public taste:

We boosted an Australian Band when the Americans were here but the public wanted an American band. We tried very hard to keep the Australian orchestra but public opinion was against it. As a matter of fact our own men were unable to get the same rhythm as the Americans.

(Dreyfus, 2009, p. 10)

The feeling that the US musicians were able to produce the rhythmic feel appropriate for the latest in modern dance was frequently expressed in the interwar period. In her memoir of growing up in the 1920s, Kathleen Mangan recalled the excitement caused by the visit of the US fleet in Melbourne in July 1925. As the daughter of the celebrated Australian painter Frederick McCubbin, she was in a position to receive an invitation to a dance on the USS *Pennsylvania*:

When our party arrived, a little late, ... the band was playing and the ball was in full swing. They had two bands that night, each composed mainly of brass instruments with excellent saxophonists that set your feet a 'tingle the moment you walked on board.

(Mangan, 1984, p. 196)

As far as the general public was concerned, the *demier cri* of US dance music trumped union concerns, and protectionism in entertainment counted for little. Australia had a long history of enthusiastic, if sometimes patronising, reception of coloured US troupes (see for example Egan, 2020, pp. 32, 66). The appeal of The Colored Idea was much enhanced by the fact that it incorporated a band with credentials in the latest of the new genres in popular music—jazz. As noted above, the revue, and in particular its band, was a hit with the public. The reviews were breathlessly enthusiastic, and that these were not simply press hyperbole tends to be confirmed by an interview I conducted on February 13, 2012 with a highly lucid 104 year old Grace (Gay) Stell (b. January 11, 1908), in a nursing home in the Victorian rural town of Euroa. She had attended a performance of the revue in Melbourne, and although she could recall little detail about the show, her most vivid memory was of the public excitement it caused.

The engagement of the band to play the ball at the Green Mill was outside its stage contract, and the union could have had a case for imposing an embargo, on the basis of the 1925 precedent cited above, but public enthusiasm for the band had already led one reviewer in Sydney to declare that “if Sonny is allowed to depart without affording us a chance to strut our stuff to his syncopation, every

cabaret and dance hall management deserves bankruptcy [sic]" (Sutcliffe, 1997, p. 9). In light of the failure of its opposition to the Yerkes band a few years earlier, the MUA understood that to impose a ban on the dance performance would certainly have been a public relations disaster for them. It was necessary to exploit a different set of concerns, to activate a deeper, pre-existing moral panic in which racism and gender politics converged: The infiltration of the exotic primitive jazz through the agency of the sexually undisciplined modern girl.

To an extent the stage had been set in the previous year. In August 1927 the vocal group, The Coloured Emperors of Harmony, arrived in Australia for a season. Unfortunately the 'harmony' was disrupted when, eagerly headlined in the press, one female member of the troupe stabbed her husband in a jealous rage (Egan, 2020, p. 161), providing all the elements that would surface later with The Colored Idea: Black Americans and their music, sex, lack of restraint. It so happened that Dick Saunders, the victim of the highly publicized stabbing only months prior to the arrival of The Coloured Idea, was now the revue's MC (Egan, 2020, p. 175).

The MUA's opposition to foreign imports was able to be refracted through several other sites of public anxiety which obligingly converged: The odium that attached to jazz, to blackness, and deep moral panic about the New Woman. When it came to harnessing broad popular opinion, it was not the threat to the employment of local musicians that was deployed, but the politics of race and gender, of miscegenation, of sexual dynamics, in this case, the intimate complicity that was recognised between young women and jazz.

The Modern Girl and Jazz

The liberated profile of the Modern Girl and her synergy with urban modernity has been amply documented at an international level (see especially Weinbaum et al., 2008; on South East Asia, see also Keppy, 2019). That nexus has a distinctive inflection in the case of Eurocentric settler Australia, where conquering the rural "bush" to lay the foundations of primary industries was the emblem of muscular masculine production. By contrast, the city was a place of heedless consumption, emasculating, decadent, a space where leisure was given over to modern American fripperies like "jazz parties." This divide became a pervasive trope in the prolific early Australian silent film industry (on the gender politics of this divide see further Johnson, 2000, pp. 69–78; Moore, 2012, pp. 103–106). The Australian experience of World War I sharpened this contrast between a virile pre-industrial rural tradition and decadent modernity. For the men who served in the conflict, the experience of modern technology was of death and maiming. Australia's proportion of casualties was 16 per cent higher than Britain's and, during the interwar years, the continuing disability of 77,000 veterans of the First Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and the death of three veterans per day from wounds was a continuing reminder of the impact of military modernity (on casualty rates see Robson, 1982, pp. 202–203; Dreyfus, 2013, pp. 231–232). Norman Lindsay, a major cultural influence of the era, wrote of "Man":

But we only have to turn to his actions in mass; his collective impulse expressed in his commercial greeds; his activity in manufacturing implements of destruction, his last war, and the war he is now preparing for, ... to realize that this animal, for all his rituals in religion, his conventions in sociology, his prattle of humanitarianism, and all the surface effects of civilization in city streets and civil life, is just as savage and dangerous as he was a million years ago.

(Lindsay, 1960, p. 89)

For such men and for the physically and mentally wounded veterans, modernity was a sickness. There was a gender dynamic underpinning these circumstances, exemplified neatly in the establishment of London's Endell Street Military Hospital. Its 500 beds were given over to wounded war

veterans, but it was entirely staffed by women (see a full study, including of its suffragette background, Moore, 2020).

For women, the war opened up public spaces for employment and leisure which continued to expand postwar (Matthews, 2005, pp. 71, 83–84, 86–88). During the 1920s Australia had not only recovered from the financial depression of 1896, but was enjoying a very high level of prosperity (Matthews, 2005, pp. 20–21, 25), and this was of particular benefit in expanding leisure opportunities for women. In the early 1920s the Sydney Tivoli vaudeville and variety theatre inaugurated afternoon matinees specifically catering to women: Children were admitted at half price and “Ladies of discernment will find in its cheerful surroundings an entertainment economic, and in excellent taste” (Van Straten, 2003, p. 74).

For young women, modernity was liberating. Major Australian poet Kenneth Slessor wrote a series of poems between 1928 and 1933, collected in 1983 as *Backless Betty from Bondi* (all page numbers refer to this collection). Among the profiles of the Modern Girl which he celebrates are cinema usherettes (“Firefly” p. 6), typists/secretaries (“Underwood Ann” p. 10), nurses (“Nightingale” 1930, p. 14); she wears revealing lingerie (“Pantette” p. 31) and bathing costumes (“Backless Betty from Bondi”—“HER EYES ARE FULL OF WIRELESS” p. 32), she travels (“Streamer’s End” p. 17). She skis better (“Skis and Shes” 11), out-hikes (“She Keeps on Walking” p. 12), and outsurfs (“She Shoots to Conquer” p. 13) her male counterpart, a common scenario of the 1920s as in the song ‘Flappers in the Sky’, in which young women pilot an aircraft leaving behind “mere man” (see further Johnson, 2020, pp. 140–141).

Modern technology gave women a consumer’s leisure paradise in the postwar era: Movies, gramophones, radio, and a growing abundance of labour-saving domestic commodities, all on display in the proliferating women’s life-style magazines, department stores and what we would now call multiplex entertainment venues (see further for example Mackay, 1994; Matthews, 2005, pp. 57–58). New hotels

rivalled the department stores in providing lunches and teas for ladies who stopped and chatted. They offered their palm courts for modern women to enjoy a cocktail and a cigarette and a spin on the dance floor, and their ballrooms entertained both public and private dances and balls. By the mid 1920s, these hotels had become renowned not alone for their grandeur, but for their dance bands and jazz rooms.

(Matthews, 2005, p. 53)

Cinema provided relatively inexpensive entertainment that, with its creches, particularly catered for women—70 per cent of Australian cinema attendees in 1927 were female (Johnson, 2000, p. 62). But film narratives also presented models for new ways of being a woman (Matthews, 2005, pp. 81–82; Moore, 2012, p. 126) and advertisements for American films spoke of “brilliant men, beautiful jazz babies, champagne baths and midnight revels” (Brisbane, 1991, p. 181). Cinema also offered employment opportunities, in film production and in the picture palaces as usherettes, in box offices and kiosks and as musicians—the majority of cinema pianists improvising from pastiches for the silent movies were women (Whiteoak, 1999, pp. 14, 66).

Along with cinema, the massive global spread of social dancing became a site of “the emerging social and moral economy” and in fact the two complemented each other as movies brought “images of the dancing stars, their frocks, their steps and demeanour” (Matthews, 2005, p. 85). In the 1926 Australian film *Greenhide*, the young protagonist Margery is identified both for her diegetic party guests and for the movie audience by presenting the spectacle of herself improvising a solo dance to the accompaniment of a jazz band (see Johnson, 2000, pp. 69–76). Notorious Sydney bohemian Anna Brennan (daughter of the equally notorious poet/academic Christopher) was celebrated for tap dancing on table tops (Moore, 2012, pp. 129–130). That is, dancing, and especially alone with extravagant extroversion, became a form of self-production,

a visible demonstration of agency. Self-presentation as spectacle was an important way of proclaiming the identity of the Modern Girl (see Conor, 2008, pp. 227–228) and the jazzing—that is, dancing—flapper was very much a spectacle of the decade, as in the hit song from the 1920s, “Wait Till You See My Baby Do the Charleston.”

And, as in this case, the latest in modern dance was “the jazz.” The association of the liberated young woman, the ‘flapper’, with jazz and jazz dancing was pervasive in social practice, in cinema, in lifestyle journals (on cinema see Johnson, 2000, pp. 59–76, on life-style journals see Mackay, 1994; Moore, 2012, pp. 121, 134). Its brassy sounds were integral to the rising volume of urban modernity, as in the sonic collage of Jean Curlewis’s prose poem “The City”: “Jazz. Traffic. Noise. Trams ... Sirens. Steel Hammers clanging” (Matthews, 2005, p. 46). The young modern girl was “the incarnation of the Jazz Age” (Matthews, 2005, p. 65). In 1925 the newspaper *Truth*, which would lead the charge in publicizing The Colored Idea scandal of 1928, published a poem called ‘Recipe for a Flapper’, which included the lines,

Take a handful of girl of about seventeen ...// Soak in the foetid atmosphere of a City
until all Modesty and // Rationality disappears. // Cover the face with a thick, double or
triple layer of // Cosmetic, and stain two fingers of the right hand brown ...// Fill with the
notion that Jazz is the noblest work of God and // garnish with a trifle of slinky dress and
considerable legs. Over // all sprinkle the dust of Complete Conceit.

(Matthews, 2005, p. 66)

Those “considerable legs,” dancing, confirmed the corporeality of jazz as it was understood during the 1920s, a very different music from the cerebral exercise it became after World War II as exemplified in bands like the Modern Jazz Quartet. The visiting Peruvian contralto singer Margarite d’Alvarez had declared to the press in 1922, “I am crazy about jazz, and I think that it possesses a certain rhythmic essence which creates movements of the body that nothing else can equal” (Brisbane, 1991, p. 180). Jazz dancing gave the body new ways to advertise itself, to be, in public. And that “way of being” inevitably overlapped with sexuality. The famous Sydney bohemian Dulcie Deamer declared that women “jazzed” (that is, again, dancing, as in “waltzed” or “tangoed”), as a form of “sexual adventure, and to allow our repressed polyandrous instinct to get a breath of fresh air” (Johnson, 2000, pp. 66–67). The US term “jazz belle” was originally slang for prostitute (Dreyfus, 1999, p. 43). And women not only “jazzed” as dancers, but as performers, and as such were equally likely to be tainted with the sexual aura surrounding jazz. Among the “new pool” of women’s bands in 1920s Australia, Dreyfus documents the band Lynette and her Six Redheads, who included jazz and comedy in their repertoire. Encountering hostility from male bands, with their risqué outfits, bright red wigs and sexy presentation, they were regarded as morally dubious: “Hussies! They must come from Sydney” (Dreyfus, 1999, p. 59). That they debuted in Sydney just months after the Coloured Idea scandal could not have diminished the image of moral dubiety (Dreyfus, 1999, pp. 60–61). Jazz, sex, and the liberated modern women formed a semiotic unity.

My purpose now is to draw the foregoing together to document the way in which this perceived association was deployed to make a moral case that provides leverage in public opinion. The women at the center of the scandal were constructed as examples of the Modern Girl who threatened public decency by acting as the channel through which the contaminations of modernity and modern dance music—jazz—entered Australian culture.

The five young women involved were a seamstress, a live-in nanny, two domestic servants, a typist—“ordinary working-class women”—their ages ranging from seventeen to twenty-three, (Cassells, 2013, p. 9). But these mundane and humanizing details were swamped in the press reports by a strident emphasis on their scandalous association with the African American musicians. The *Truth* led its report with the headlines: “WHITE GIRLS WITH NEGRO LOVERS: Raid Discloses Wild Scene of Abandon; Flappers, Wine, Cocaine and Revels” (Johnson, 2010, p. 5). Egan has

gathered a pungent national sample, in which headlines include “SORDID STORY NEGRO NIGHT PARTY WITH WHITE GIRLS, MELBOURNE” (*Sydney Sun*); “NEGROES AND GIRLS. RAID ON A FLAT. Disgraceful Conduct Alleged” (*West Australian*); “LUSTFUL ORGY. NEGROES AND WHITE WOMEN. DISGUSTING CONDUCT IN MELBOURNE FLAT” (*Courier*) (Egan, 2020, p. 174). The police fed details to the public through their briefings to the press, including the information that different groups of women were entertained by the musicians every night, and that the “girls were naked” (O’Connell, 2016, p. 249). One of the arresting police officers, Constable Leslie Saker, giving evidence before the magistrate, was reported as claiming that from his surveillance post across the road he witnessed “wild dancing” and the musicians “pulling around” the girls, though he also admitted that his vision was much restricted by a tree outside the window. He declared that in the flat he found cigarettes, wine and hinted at cocaine. The suspicion that he was indulging in prurient embellishment is fortified by his response to the magistrate’s enquiry as to why no charges of offensive behavior had been laid: That he didn’t have sufficient evidence (Cassells, 2013, pp. 11–12).

Public indignation was massive, in a way that a union ban could never have achieved. An angry crowd of between 700 and 800, mostly men, assembled outside the court when the women came before the magistrate (Cassells, 2013, p. 11; O’Connell, 2016, p. 249; Sales’s source (1974, p. 77) gives a figure of “no less than a thousand men ... inquisitive to learn what sort of female would associate with men of another race”). The powerful Returned Soldiers and Sailors Imperial League passed a motion that the WAP should be strengthened to prevent white women from “consorting with negroes” (Cassells, 2013, p. 16), and in Federal Parliament, the MP for Bass in Tasmania demanded to know if any action was planned over the episode; the Minister for Health informed him that “the negroes will sail from Australia on Saturday next,” and that in future applications for admission by foreign performers would be more carefully scrutinized (Egan, 2020, p. 174).

As the various police statements in the media and in court suggest, however, the narrative fed to and devoured by the public was in many ways a strategic fiction, playing on anxieties about the Modern Girl, her tastes and lifestyle. Cassell’s study in particular suggests that the scandal was driven by a characterization of the women as the conduit of all that was threatening to a conservative order. While it was clear that there were regular parties involving the jazz musicians and what would now be called local groupies, the embellishments by the press and the media were all calculated to inflame moral panic over the modern girl—indeed it appears that the musicians remained largely anonymous, a collective homogeneous Other; one of the young women was reported as declaring “These boys are American, and they are interesting” (Sales, 1974, p. 78). The press reported the presence of a sixth girl named as Irene McCollough who boldly escaped out a window. Cassells’ detailed research suggests that no such woman existed (Cassells, 2013, p. 5), but the story certainly heightened the image of the defiant and independent spirit of these young women. *Truth* also published what it claimed were extracts from a diary belonging to one of the women, but which was most probably a fiction. The extracts confirmed all too strongly that this woman, and by association the others involved, were promiscuous and sexually deviant. The diary obligingly included a list of around thirty lovers, referred to abortions, hidden pregnancies, an illegitimate child adopted out, and, most scandalizing of all recorded her wish to “renounce her race” for love of an African American (Cassells, 2013, p. 15). Thus, it was not the MUA’s protectionist concern for its members, but miscegenation, the contamination of the white race and white culture, that lay at the heart of the public furor. The vehicle of this contamination was the “jazzing flapper” and its musical mediation was jazz. Jazz, that is, was in the 1920s not a site of heroic male artistic *agon* as it came to be in the post-World War II era, but of subversive female emancipation.

This raises the question of how and why the gendering of jazz was so fully reversed in the post-World War II era that its gender politics of the 1920s seems to have been all but forgotten in jazz studies. The full elaboration of that argument must be for another time, but it would center on

several cultural shifts over that period. The Colored Idea was a single, contained scandal. But the fear of cultural contamination mediated by women became pervasive during World War II, when the US garrison included a large proportion of black servicemen (Cassells, 2013, p. 6). This wartime anxiety was followed by a broader attempt to drive women back to domesticity from the enlarged public space which two world wars and the interval between them had made available. This deep conservatism of the postwar decades colluded with a significant shift in the status of jazz. What, in the 1920s, had been a form of popular culture rooted in the corporeality of dance (very much a female domain), was becoming in the 1950s, an art form, created and engaged with through masculinist intellectual labor (for an invaluable case study in this shift see Schlicht, 2008).

In summary, there were many forces at work behind the deportation of the Clay orchestra. They included the hostility of the MUA to foreign musicians, aggravated by the Commonwealth Band embargo, the union's formal commitment to the WAP, the separate contractual arrangements at The Green Mill entered into by the band, all underpinned by a broader xenophobic and racist streak in Australian culture. But, apart from harnessing racism, none of these was presented as such in mobilizing public support for the deportation: It became a matter of gender politics, of the "contamination" of Australian society by black jazz musicians through the medium of the independent-minded young woman and her music. It was not men who opened the door to this new American music. It was the "jazzing flapper."

Note

- 1 The distinction is discussed with fine nuance in Weinbaum (2008, pp. 9–10), who nonetheless concludes that the two categories are "intertwined", and that both "found political inspiration in popular female performance and spectacle" (Weinbaum, 2008, p. 10).

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2

“I’VE GOT THE HAITIAN BLUES”

Mamie Desdunes and the Gendered Inflections of the Common Wind

Benjamin Barson

A Note from the Author: Throughout this chapter I use the term *gender* to refer to both gender and sex whilst acknowledging that strictly speaking, sex is designated by biological differences, and gender is socially constructed. As this chapter also addresses prostitution, I have, following activists who work on the issue, prioritized the term “sex workers” when referring to people who sell erotic services, including sex.

At this point, I want to clarify that I am an able-bodied cisgender and heterosexual male from the United States. This has allowed me to pursue my professional ambitions from a position of privilege, unhindered by the structural disadvantages experienced by women, Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC) individuals, or others from social or economically disadvantageous milieus. Therefore, I cannot claim to write this chapter from a position of experience. To partly alleviate this lack, I have aimed to use sources by female or non-binary authors, primarily.

Introduction

Mamie’s Blues ... [is a] bird who migrates or emigrates or immigrates or transmigrates,
roadblock jumper, smuggler,

a song which

is inevitable, is rain and bread and salt, something completely beyond national ritual, sacred traditions, language and folklore: a cloud without frontiers, a spy of air and water, an archetypal form, something from before, from below.

It is a piece that delivers listeners “back to a betrayed origin,” a musical ethos that demonstrates that “perhaps there have been other paths and that the only one they took was maybe not the only one or the best one” (Cortazar 1987, p. 195–198). So wrote the Argentine exile in Paris, Julio Cortázar, in his landmark work 1963 choose-your-own-path novel (what he called an “Anti-Novel”) *Hopscotch*.

Like Cortázar, I also consider “Mamie’s Blues” to be something of a “betrayed origin” in how we narrate and tell the story of jazz. This is a piece that contemporary musicologists now consider to be the first twelve-bar jazz blues (Hobson 2011), an opinion shared by Buddy Bolden’s trombonist,

Willie Cornish, who claimed that this was a song any musician “had to know” in early twentieth-century New Orleans (Cornish in Hobson 2011, p. 3–27). Over multiple interviews, Jelly Roll Morton remembered that it was “among the first blues that I’ve ever heard” (Russell 1999, 223), and that “Although I had heard them [the blues] previously, I guess it was Mamie [who] first really sold me on the blues” (Lomax 1950, p. 20–21). Then a teenager working as a roustabout on the docks, Morton went to extreme lengths to study with its composer, Mamie Desdunes. “Of course, to get in on it, to try to learn it, I made myself the ... the can rusher,” a person responsible for bringing heavy barrels of beer from breweries to the brothels, where pianists like Mamie Desdunes played (Morton 1938). The thought of a young Morton, age eleven, carrying heavy barrels of beer to the most upscale brothels in the United States through a highly policed red-light district would be almost comical if it did not also reveal the twisted deprivation in which Black artistry was forced to toil.

Apparently, Morton was not the only prospective student who opted for the can-rushing route to gain proximity to Desdunes. The African American trumpet player Bunk Johnson, who became associated with the New Orleans revival in the 1950s, also recalled playing and studying with Mamie Desdunes. Johnson told Alan Lomax in a recorded interview in March 1949, that he

knew Mamie Desdoumes [Lomax’s spelling] real well. Played many a concert with her singing those same blues. She was pretty good looking—quite fair and with a nice head of hair. She was a hustling woman. A blues-singing poor girl. Used to play pretty passable piano around them dance halls on Perdido Street.

(Lomax 1950, p. 21)

Jazz historian Peter Hanley, based on census data, has suggested that Bunk Johnson and Mamie Desdunes were next-door neighbors, and that “There seems little doubt that Bunk and Jelly Roll knew each other well in their early youth and probably competed with each other for the job of Mamie Desdunes’ ‘can rusher’” (Hanley 2002). Morton and Johnson maintained a friendship throughout their lives, and they both claimed to have “invented” jazz. Perhaps their early training with Mamie Desdunes gave them the confidence to make such an assertion. For all of Morton’s eagerness to lay claim to creating a variety of widely shared songs and conventions, he is extremely deliberate in crediting Mamie Desdunes for “Mamie’s Blues” on every possible occasion. As he explained in a letter to his label representative,

Mamie Desdume [*sic*] wrote Mamie’s Blues in the late 90s. I don’t like to take credit for something that don’t belong to me. I guess she’s dead by now, and there would probably be no royalty to pay, but she did write it.

(Russell 1999, p. 223)

Given the gendered turn in jazz studies, it is surprising that Mamie Desdunes has not had a more visible showing in recent literature. Desdunes herself is a fascinating figure. Born out of wedlock to Rodolphe Desdunes and Clementine Walker in 1881, Mamie was connected to a lineage of Haitian-descended activists who maintained close connections to the Black republic throughout the nineteenth century. Her uncle, Pierre-Aristide Desdunes, visited Haiti as part of a delegation of free Blacks to discuss possible emigration in 1847. Instead, the Civil War broke out, and he served as one of the first Black soldiers in the Union Army in the *Corps d’Afrique*. He was also an influential poet whose work is often included in anthologies of Afro-Franco literature from nineteenth-century New Orleans (Bell 2011 and 2014). Mamie’s father, Rodolphe Desdunes, was a Reconstruction-era activist and author. He organized for land reform and public rights, corresponded with a young W.E.B. du Bois on political strategy and tactics, and published *Nos Hommes et Notre Histoire*, a landmark account of New Orleans Creoles of Color from a radical and activist perspective (Desdunes 2001). Mamie’s brother, the multi-instrumentalist and brass bandleader Daniel Desdunes, participated

in a direct-action sit-in during February of 1892. Arrested, Daniel later won his case, setting the stage for Homer Plessy to challenge the constitutionality of segregation four years later in a similar freedom ride, with less sanguine results (Scott 2007; Otto 2011; Vernhettes and Hanley 2014).

Like her family members, Mamie fused arts and political critique, while creating a new form of music that sounded aspects of her Haitian ancestry. But unlike her family members, she did so from the point of view of a woman working in the quasi-dystopian sexual economy known as "the District," or more commonly today as Storyville. Recent literature has complicated the depiction of Storyville as a "good time," highlighting the intersection of the New South variant of capitalism, sex tourism, violent white supremacy, and the disciplining of Black women's bodies (Landau 2013; Adams 2012). "Mamie's Blues" is a remarkable work because it provides testimony and critiques these conditions.

Writing about Mamie Desdunes is difficult because, outside of her death certificate and a few census records, we lack any "hard" archival evidence to prove many claims made about her. In 1893, she made a rare appearance in print media when the New Orleans *Picayune* reported that a "colored girl named Mamie Desdunes" lost two fingers after being run over by a train. (Morton and others corroborate that Mamie had only three fingers on her right hand) (New Orleans *Picayune* 1893). She died in 1908 of tuberculosis at the age of 31, a disease that disproportionately claimed Black and female victims, manifesting New Orleans's health disparities. She died about a decade too soon to have any of her performances recorded. She left no sheet music, and her name does not appear in ads for Storyville's bordellos. Yet it is precisely this archival gap that makes her presence in assorted interviews so suggestive. The reason we know Mamie Desdunes's name was because she profoundly influenced a coterie of early jazz musicians who attest to both (a) her influence as a mentor and (b) the importance of her innovative signature composition, "Mamie's Blues." The song's unashamed celebration of Black women's sexuality was a refrain for a generation of Storyville's blues people. Indeed, it suggests that blues women responded to this dystopian playground through a new expressive culture called the blues.

In this chapter, I argue that the social vision proposed by "Mamie's Blues" contributed to a Black "counterpublic" that resisted the dehumanizing conditions of Storyville while celebrating Black women's right to desire. As Farah Jasmine Griffin wrote in her discussion of Zora Neal Hurston, Black women artists "raise a level of consciousness about the manner in which black women have come to know and feel about their bodies," and thus "provide a path out of this prison" (Griffin 1996, 534). Mamie Desdunes's signature work celebrated the erotic from a woman's perspective, providing an impetus for self-determination through pleasure. That she did so from the point of view of the "prison," in this case, Storyville, suggests that the body was a site of contestation, and her conception of the blues spoke directly to this.

The second half of the piece explores the resonance of Mamie Desdunes's Haitian identity in the work. I suggest that a particularly Haitian form of cultural production can be heard both in her commentary on sexuality and its attendant power relations, as well as in her use of *habanera*-based polyrhythm in the song's bass line (as played by Jelly Roll Morton). By centering how sex workers and musicians of color understood themselves and the values they carved out, I argue that Mamie's Blues offers another genealogy of jazz, one which is antipatriarchal, communal, and Atlantic in scope. It is this betrayed origin to which I now turn.

Locating Mamie Desdunes in Storyville

Storyville was contested terrain, and Black women and men attempted to shape the terms and conditions of employment. Blues was a song form that emanated both from within and without the working-class of a sex tourism economy, and from its inception it had a highly gendered slant. Jazz historian Lara Pelligrinelli has pointed to Jelly Roll Morton's recollection that "chippies" or prostitutes, stood outside cribs and brothels, "singing the blues" to suggest that the blues emerged as

a women's vocal tradition, specifically among those directly involved in the sex industry (Pelligrinelli 2008). Pianist Manuel Manetta similarly claimed that it was "Women who sang mostly blues," and this included "Mary Thacker, Alma Hughes and Ann Cook." Manuel Manetta mentioned "Mary Jack the Bear" and "Mamie Desdume" [sic], specifically singling out the latter as "a madam [female pimp] who had a house on Villere Street" (Manetta 1957). Sex workers populated the class of blues women innovators, foregrounding the dual employment of Memphis Minnie and Bessie Smith, both of whom were not only legendary blues singers but also part-time sex workers (Garon and Garon 2014). These occupations were not ancillary to their artistic output. Their cultural work confronted and narrated the logic of this sexual marketplace. This was a class of artistic innovators who held the contradictory and impossible condition of the "commodity who screams" (Moten 2003, p. 12), humanizing supposedly subhuman subjects.

Mamie Desdunes's only recorded composition, among the most diffused and earliest songs of its type, compels a critical reading. The song's first stanzas suggest an interrelationship between feminized poverty and patriarchal family structures. As an alternative, Desdunes suggests liberation can come through erotic pleasure:

I stood on the corner, my feet was dripping wet
I stood on the corner, my feet was dripping wet
I asked every man I met

Can't give me a dollar, give me a lousy dime
Can't give me a dollar, give me a lousy dime
Just to feed that hungry man of mine

I got a husband and I got a kid man too
I got a husband and I got a kid man too
My husband can't do what my kid man can do

I like the way he cook my cabbage for me
I like the way he cook my cabbage for me
Look like he set my natural soul free.

(Morton 1938)

Several points stick out about these lyrics that locate them within what Angela Davis identifies as a "blues legacy, [a] black-working class legacy" of Black blues feminism (Davis 1983, p. 25). Mamie Desdunes's narrative personifies a feminized poverty exacerbated by intersecting social forces. Yet there is also agency and self-determination in these words. Black women were often primary breadwinners in households, and many were heads of household. In multiple censuses, Mamie Desdunes was herself registered as the head of her household, even when she was married (Vernhettes and Hanley 2014). Desdunes's independence was reflected in her lyrics: while her song's protagonist entertained a formal marriage, she does not shy from sexual pleasure ("cooked my cabbage") outside of the relationship; in fact, it is only with her "kid man" that she feels that her "natural soul" is set free. Mamie Desdunes thus precedes by decades the convention of women blues singers using double entendre to express sexuality and to narrate gendered power struggles within the household and the marketplace. For instance, Ma Rainey, who spent a significant amount of time working in New Orleans with some of Mamie Desdunes's collaborators, uses this lyrical technique in several of her songs, including her self-exposition as bisexual in "Prove It On Me Blues" (1928). The dual emphasis on poverty and sexual liberation has a long history in blues lyrics, what Richard Wright identified as the blues' "lust, lyrical realism charged with taut sensibility" (Wright 1963, ix). In addition to Rainey's work, sexual poetics can be heard in Bessie Smith's (1926) "Young Woman's Blues," Ida Cox's (1939) "One Hour

Mama," and Ethel Water's (1925) "No Man's Mamma Now." Each of these songs openly discusses sexuality within (and in opposition to) patriarchal power structures; they also postdate "Mamie's Blues" by nearly three decades (Carby 1998).

Sung during the height of New Orleans' progressive movement which emphasized social order and patriarchal power structures, it is quite striking that Mamie vocally embraces sex outside of marriage. Based on the limited archival evidence available on Desdunes, this reflected her own life experience. In 1898, Mamie Desdunes moved in with warehouse worker George Duque, and they married in 1900. It seems they almost immediately broke up, because within a year, they were living separately, and Mamie was living alone in the same home, using her maiden name in the 1901 Soard's directory of New Orleans. By the end of her life, Mamie and George had apparently smoothed things over; the 1910 city directory showed George as a resident of the house and Mamie's death certificate reads "Mamie Dugue." While there is no evidence that Mamie or George's sexual activity was driving these break ups, it is clear that they did not share a traditional nuclear family or household. Mamie was herself born out of wedlock, and other illegitimate children of her father, Rodolphe, and her mother. Clementine Walker, lived with Mamie, including her younger sister Edna and her younger brothers John and Louis. Complex and fluid understandings of marriage and extended family households necessitated a different vision of community outside of the heteropatriarchal nuclear family, and Desdunes's lyrics emphasize openness to life's many opportunities for emotional and sexual connection (Edwards 2016; Snook 2018; Vernhettes and Hanley 2014).

"Mamie's Blues" contains a second stanza which expands the song's social criticism, relocating sexuality from the domestic sphere and women's pleasure by highlighting the violent and unequal power relations that undergirded the Gulf Coast's sexual economy. Jelly Roll Morton sings this stanza in his 1939 recording, and it is also present in Bunk Johnson's 1944 recording of the song (Morton 1939; Bunk Johnson and The Yerba Buena Jazz Band 1944). In these other lyrics, Desdunes narrates the disappearance of a loved one through a sex trafficking network that linked New Orleans to the Texas gulf region, with the refrain "Number 219 took my baby away," referring to a train that connected New Orleans with Texas oil boom towns. As the third line, Desdunes explains that "the 217 may bring her back someday." Charles Edward Smith recalled Morton explaining that the 2:19 was the train that "took the gals out on the T&P [Texas and Pacific Railroad] to the sporting houses on the Texas side of the circuit ... [and] the 217 on the S.P. [Southern Pacific] through San Antonio and Houston brought them back to New Orleans" (Wald 2016).

With this foregrounding of the 2:19 train, the other stanzas completely change meaning. Poverty's locus is now in the unequal power relations within the prostitution industry and the economy at large. Not only does Desdunes connect feminized poverty to a repressive sexual economy, she lifts up the erased voices of vulnerable migrants. There are only scattered historical records of these trafficked migrant sex workers, destined for these boom towns. Historians of prostitution have documented that towns such as Beaumont and Gladys City at the turn of the twentieth century were home to many migrant sex workers (Humphrey 1995). These itinerant workers were especially vulnerable to exploitation, often with few social connections in the towns where they arrived (Balderach 2005).

"Mamie's Blues" shines a light on this social reality, and its story was familiar enough that it struck a chord with Storyville's Black counterpublic. Desdunes foregrounds the social history of a class of invisible migrants whose pain lay at the intersection of commercialized sex, displacement, and modernity. These same forces animated the lifeways of those who made Storyville their new home, where thousands of Black migrants escaped white violence and repression in the sugar parishes to constitute the first wave of the Great Migration whose primary vectors were not South to North but rural to urban (Hahn 2003). The women of Storyville embodied the proletariat of a new sexual economy, but they were also the first audiences and innovators of the music that became known as the blues. Desdunes developed a vernacular critique of capitalism and women's captivity as it was emerging in its modern form. She both archived and aestheticized these itinerant workers' struggles.

“Mamie’s Blues” showcases the dark side of “progress,” and the use of the train is one metaphor that speaks to this objective. Trains and railroads are a long-standing signifier in blues songs. What was celebrated as industrial development by progressive reformers was experienced as a new entanglement of capital, enclosure, and economic displacement by others. Desdunes paints the 2:19 train in a negative light, as both symptom and cause of alienation, a comment on modernity, capitalism, and violence against women (see Carby 2008). In Desdunes’s rendering, the train is not a force of social or geographic mobility. She understands this industrial vehicle to reflect how the plantation evolved, how its political economy continued to lay claim to the Black woman’s body with modern machinery. Desdunes’s spotlighting of these subaltern workers speaks to a genre of “decolonial poetics produced by [afro]diasporic communities,” poetics which, in the words of Katherine McKittrick (2013), “depict city death not as a biological end and biological fact but as a pathway to honoring human life” (p. 14). Desdunes’s narration of these disappeared women thus honors them. Her tale of dispossession and its emotional costs denormalizes “the fungibility of the captive body” (Hartman 1997, p. x), and the blues places this invisible economy on the aural stage for all to hear, and for those who bear witness to say: “enough.”

A final and speculative reading of “Mamie’s Blues” is heard when we think through the song within her Catholic upbringing. Mamie’s training as a pianist was a convention amongst the middle class, French-speaking Afro-Catholic women, and suggests a certain degree of immersion in the culture. According to Jelly Roll Morton, Mamie Desdunes was close friends with French-speaking Eulalie Echo (also known as Laura Hunter), a Vodou practitioner who was also Morton’s godmother (Daniels 2003). Vodou, Catholicism, and other spiritual systems powerfully intersected in both Haiti and Louisiana, where a substantial number of Afro-French Creoles traced descent, including Desdunes and Echo (Dagget 2016; Johnson 2016). It is thus quite improbable that Mamie somehow existed outside of Catholic mores, and therefore striking that Genesis 2:17 through 2:19 are passages that correlate with the creation of women as instruments of male pleasure.

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. The LORD God also said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make for him a suitable helper.” And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.

(Genesis 2:17-2:19)

“2:19 took my baby away” may refer to both this verse of scripture and a historic train line that trafficked prostitutes, laying siege to the patri-centric rendering of human creation and proposing an alternative narrative rooted in the reality of women’s exploitation as well as pathways to pleasure outside of Christian decorum. While there is no recorded testimony from contemporary listeners of the piece to support this interpretation, blues and Christianity intersected liberally in early twentieth-century New Orleans, perhaps most directly within the widely cited evidence that trumpet player Buddy Bolden attended Baptist services in the same halls that he performed in on Saturday night, partially as an attempt to translate Black liturgical aesthetics into popular music (Marquis 2005). Such a reading is even more plausible when one considers the litany of early-twentieth century blues repertoire which employed biblical motifs and appropriated religious channels of expression (Levine 1977). Angela Davis considers the blues to have been condemned by Black church leaders in the first decades of the twentieth century specifically because it “drew upon and incorporated sacred consciousness and thereby posed a serious threat to religious attitudes” (Davis 1998, p. 8). Whether or not “Mamie’s Blues” directly referenced (or critiqued) scripture, it certainly channeled a sacred sense of sexuality and mourned the loss of those disappeared by demonic forces.

"Mamie's Blues" had a dual imperative: to reclaim sexuality and desire from plantation social relations while theorizing the political meanings of Black woman's conscription into a new sexual economy. This is broadly in tune with the observations put forward by scholars of Black women's history, who have suggested that the erotic and sexuality were markers of post-emancipation cultural transformation. "[What] is most striking is the way the blues registered sexuality as a tangible expression of freedom.... Sexuality thus was one of the most tangible domains in which emancipation was acted upon and through which its meanings were expressed" writes Angela Davis (1998, p. 8, 23–24). Similarly, Saidiya Hartman argues that for Black women Philadelphians who migrated from the South, "an everyday act of fucking" should be thought of as "the center of this revolution in a minor key" as both blues lyric and its hybrid tonality became poignant repositories of this new structure of feeling based on sexual emancipation (Hartman 2019, p. 117–118).

New Orleans's jazz musicians were certainly aware of these contestations between sex, autonomy, and the power of capital and the state. Danny Barker was one of many who commented on the power relations of the sex industry. Describing an incident in the year 1919, he wrote that

The police in New Orleans were making it tough for the madames and their girls to make a dollar (that is, a peaceful one), so they spread the news and called a meeting of all the big shots in the District, the pimps, madames, whores, gamblers, hustlers, bartenders and all the owners of joints.

Musicians also attended. Held at Peter Lala's, "the District's number one cabaret," on a Sunday evening, the event included speeches and performances by Joe Oliver's band. Barker suggests that organizers of this event strategically used specific songs and styles produced by Joe Oliver to arouse the sentiments of their audience:

[Madame] Ready Money told Joe Oliver to play the blues real sad, which he did. Then, when the crowd returned to their seats, she had the drummer Ratty Jean Vigne, roll his snares and she pleaded sadly with tears in her big blue eyes for attention. You could hear a pin drop as she informed the gathering of the many humiliating abuses she had constantly received from the brutal police of New Orleans which they all knew so well. She then told them of her plan to organize them. She proposed that each person present come up to the table where she stood, sign their name and pledge twenty dollars as an active member, which most of them did. She had Joe Oliver play the spiritual Down by the Riverside so the crowd could march up to her and rally to the cause.... She blew kisses to the crowd and yelled, "We'll show them goddamned police!" Everybody screamed, yelled and clapped their hands and they balled till the next morning to the music of Joe Oliver.

(Barker 1998, p. 67-68)

Much like "Mamie's Blues," Oliver's simultaneously aestheticized a profound pain and celebrated a liberated future. The coordination between Oliver and Madame Ready Money is presented by Barker as a piece of theater, suggesting more than a passing familiarity among sex workers with blues and jazz songs, sounds, and their emotional impacts. This event was so successful that the following week, another iteration was put together, this time under the helm of a benevolent society organized by and for sex workers. An advertisement saved by Barker reveals its level of detail:

"Black Sis," "Rotten Rosie," and "Lily the Crip," were sex workers ("sporting girls") with leadership positions in this organization. In their very presence on this pamphlet, they announce their intentions as political subjects and resist intimidation and stigmatization. They demand recognition as workers, women, and human beings. Women's blues reflected and contributed to this process, creating a movement that was not anti-male but rather anti-sexist, what bell hooks might have called a "feminism for everybody" (hooks 2000). Joe Oliver's presence at both events is significant because

**The First Grand Ball and Soirée to be given at the Economy Hall
May 2, 1919, by the
HELPING HAND BENEVOLENT AID AND PROTECTIVE
ASSOCIATION**

**Organized on April 7, 1919, for the aid and protection of sick, needy,
helpless, disabled, aged and persecuted Sporting girls and Madames
who are confined to hospitals, pest houses, houses of correction,
criminal institutions, jails and penitentiaries.**

Officers

Black Sis: President	Ready Money: Treasurer
Rotten Rosie: Vice President	Ida Jackson: Ex Officio
Mollie Hatcher: Secretary	Lily the Crip: Delegate
Mary Meathouse: Recording Secretary	One-Arm Edna: Sick C'ttee
Warmbody Stell: Financial Secretary	Bird Leg Nora: Trustee
Barrel of Fun: Sgt. at Arms	Bob Rowe: Director
Reverend Sunshine Money: Pastor	

**MUSIC FURNISHED BY JOE OLIVER'S BAND
Admission 50c. Pay at the Door**

Figure 2.1 Advertisement for the Helping Hand Benevolent Aid and Protective Association Ball.

Source: Public Domain, also printed in Barker (1998).

it suggests that musicians worked alongside sex workers in ways that were not merely exploitative or ancillary. This was the environment that “Mamie’s Blues” contributed to and was shaped by. Just as Desdunes evinced a concern for the unnamed women shuttled away to Beaumont, Texas, to work far from home in conditions they could not control, so too did the “Helping Hand Benevolent Association” and its Vice President, “Rotten Rosie” express a commitment to furnish “aid and protection” for the “sick, needy, helpless, persecuted, disabled, aged and persecuted sporting girls and Madames,” who could be “confined” to hospitals as well as penitentiaries. The focus on disability and the implicit critique of hospitals, prisons, and mental institutions (where Buddy Bolden was then languishing) as sites of disciplinary power anticipates Foucault’s observation that “as medicine, psychology, education, public assistance, ‘social work’ assume an ever greater share of the powers of supervision and assessment, the penal apparatus will be able, in turn, to become medicalized, psychologized, educationalized” (Foucault 1977, p. 306). These activists’ language also is a “pre-echo” of twenty-first century movements that fight for the rights of sex workers and people with disabilities.

While Danny Barker’s legitimacy as a truth-teller has been called into question by several historians, (Wald 2020) his recounting of these Joe Oliver concerts on behalf of sex workers—imagined or not—serve as windows into the nature of the ideological and political battles that roiled New Orleans’s sex industry and its workers’ relationships with the state, police forces, and white civil society during the first decades of the twentieth century. Historians of Storyville have documented how Black sex workers fought against police brutality and racist zoning laws in both organized movements and spontaneous acts of defiance (Landau 2013, Adams 2012, Long 2005) and Barker’s stories certainly

illuminate the issues and the players in the contest over spaces, dignity, and self-determination and complicate the stereotypical image of New Orleans jazz musicians as single-minded pleasure-seekers.

Mamie Desdunes's work portends to the power of women's radical cultural tradition to sustain a Black counterpublic sphere within a highly regimented capitalist economy whose prime commodity, marketed to white consumers, was interracial sex (Landau 2013). In 1900, Black women made up 38 percent of this workforce, and were often the lowest paid, sometimes making as little as fifteen cents a transaction (Foster 1990). Major financial interests bankrolled Storyville and displaced low-income families in New Orleans, while white supremacist politicians organized violent militias to wreak havoc on the Black rural agrarian organizing in Louisiana's sugar parishes (Landau 2013; Gould 1984; Scott 2005). The supply of Black labor in New Orleans' sex industry was thus directly correlated to the formation of post-Civil War racial capitalism. Trombonist Kid Ory marveled at how the shift system of prostitutes functioned as "clockwork" (Ory in Landau 2013, p. 369) and one madam described the almost industrial regularity and emotional toll of the work: "It was a life regular as sunrise: regular joy, misery, hope, lack of hope, and ideas of suicide. A shrug-off of the present, a numb idea of the future, too. We all lied to each other about the future, and to ourselves as well" (Kimball 1970, 86).

Out of such limited social possibilities, New Orleans sex workers produced a vibrant counterpublic that honored and acknowledged Black women's pain as the basis for building an intersectional, interethnic movement for social justice and counter-plantation values (Casimir 2020). Mamie Desdunes was an innovative composer who helped construct this common sense by creating one of the most popular, and perhaps the first, twelve-bar blues. It is essential to understand the blues as a counterculture, one that contested these social forces that laid claim to Black bodies as commodities. And the fascinating paradox is that such songs were sung during the point of transaction, as piano players often played alongside prostitutes or took regular gigs in brothels. Desdunes lived in both worlds and thus was able to critique as one who had experienced its alienation.

Informing Mamie Desdunes's artistry and political voice is her identity as a Haitian-descended woman. In the following section, I explore Desdunes's connection to the Black Atlantic and the Haitian diaspora more specifically, which over the nineteenth century reproduced a rich and important tradition of speaking truth to gendered power.

The Latin Tinge and the Haitian Diaspora

In her 1923 composition "Haitian Blues," New Orleans vocalist Lizzie Miles relays her abuse at the hands of an unfaithful husband:

Daddy's been cheating
he's been mistreating
gave me a beating for some abuse
Now I've learned my lesson
and I'm confessin'
I wish that I had never been born
I'm leaving town
'cause I've got the Haitian Blues
Boo hoo hoo hoo¹

Miles seems to imply that there was something particularly "Haitian" about being the victim of infidelity and abuse, and localized this particularity in New Orleans. While there is no evidence the two worked together, Mamie Desdunes and Lizzie Miles were both Creoles of Color who claimed Haitian ancestry, as was Jelly Roll Morton (who claimed that Lizzie Miles was his "favorite vocalist") (Tucker 2004, p. 324). In fact, "Mamie's Blues" reinterpreted Haitian musical devices in its base line

and core rhythms, notably those now called *habanera* and *tresillo* rhythms. I hear these Atlantic bass lines as gestures rich with abolitionist signification. While Desdunes's lyrics commented on women's sexualities within and against the sex industry at large, she simultaneously overlaid a rhythmic cadence that was specifically and semiotically evocative of Creole of Color identification with the Haitian diaspora in New Orleans.²

When we zoom out in time and place, we can observe that these works by Mamie Desdunes and Lizzie Miles were not aberrations, for across the nineteenth century Caribbean, Haitian diasporic traditions created a way of talking about, and talking back, to gendered and sexual power structures. In this section, I argue for a particularly Haitian hermeneutics which critiqued slavery and coerced sex during the 19th century, and how this historic tradition provides both an Afro-Caribbean and a gendered genealogy for the development of jazz-blues. This is what I believe is hidden within Jelly Roll Morton's statement that "Mamie could really play those blues": how it differed from ragtime in that it overlaid African American and Afro-Caribbean traditions, which both in turn affected the development of jazz.

Mamie Desdunes was born out of wedlock to an African American mother, Clementine Walker, and a prominent Haitian descended activist father, Rodolphe Desdunes, and the latter grounded himself in New Orleans' Creole of Color community. To suggest that Mamie's identity was "Creole of Color" would be reductive, as she was likely alienated from her father while she worked in an industry that contemporaries of her father publicly detested (Cheung 1997), and the fact that she sang exclusively in English also differentiated her from Creole of Color singers (Vézina 2015), but her training as a pianist suggests that she was raised and educated within Creole of Color familial and gendered conventions (Tucker 2004). These mixed-race, French-speaking African-descended peoples were largely free during antebellum Louisiana history and a group with a strong sense of historical identity and social cohesion. They have been the subject of an enormous amount of commentary, and recent historiography is fairly split on their class and social role, with some commentators pointing to their complicity with slavery and their racist statements against non-mixed race African Americans (Wegmann 2105; Ake 2002), while others highlight their revolutionary republicanism, their service to the Union Army, their pivotal role during Reconstruction, and their ongoing connections to Haiti (Bell 1997; Scott 2007; Woods 2017). We do not have sufficient space in this chapter to address this tension. For our purposes, I believe identification with the Haitian republic and its anti-racist, anti-slavery project was a marker of an egalitarian political sensibility within the Creole of Color community, albeit one that not all Creoles of Color shared (Brickhouse 2007).

There is extensive evidence of Haitian-derived rhythms in "Mamie's Blues," such as the *habanera* and *tresillo*. Several scholars have noted that *tresillo*, *habanera*, and *cinquillo* rhythms are all based on a similar set of rhythms which are rooted in different interpretations of a "4 against 3" hemiola. They are characteristic of several genres of Afro-Cuban and French Afro-Caribbean music (Floyd 1999). They are quite prominent in Jelly Roll Morton's performances of the piece and became a major part of his piano style for the rest of his career.

My contention is that these rhythmic conventions became organically linked to a brand of Black Atlantic politics and antipatriarchal storytelling with roots in the Haitian Revolution. Refugees from Saint-Domingue, as colonial Haiti was named, more than doubled the population of New Orleans from 1791 to 1811 and tripled its free community of color (Dessens 2008; Fiehrer 1991; LaChance 1988). The musicologist Christopher Washburne has pointed out, "The musical influence of the Saint-Domingue refugees was vast," noting that in addition both cultural practices, institutions, and creolized rhythmic traditions such as the *tresillo* arrived with the Haitian immigrants (Washburne 2020, p. 54). Sara Johnson argues that these "musics were built upon the migratory labor of black artists and their publics" and that it is therefore "not surprising that the *cinquillo* resurfaced in communities where Saint-Domingue migrants resettled. Cuba provides a case in point" (Johnson 2012, p. 144). Accompanying these musical forms were

"I've Got the Haitian Blues"



Figure 2.2 Measures 8–15 of “Mamie’s Blues,” as played by Jelly Roll Morton. The left hand of the piano alternates between a Habanera and a Tresillo rhythm. The arrows outline where a three quaver lengths, or eighth notes, accents are placed above the Habanera/Tresillo bass line.

Source: Transcription done by author from Morton 1938.

not only specific rhythms but also “barbed observations about racial and sexual hierarchies” in different slave societies. These “observations” travelled with the enslaved migrants and their music, to Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Louisiana.

The adjectives “Spanish” and “French” have contributed to erasing Haiti/Saint-Domingue’s contribution to New Orleans musical culture. For instance, Baby Dodds recalled that

In the downtown district where the Creoles lived, they played blues with a Spanish accent.... They lived in the French part of town and we lived uptown, in the Garden district. Our ideas for the blues were different from theirs. They had the French and Spanish style, blended together.

(Russell 1999, p. 23)

Jelly Roll Morton himself perhaps mostly widely popularized the concept and the phrase called the “Spanish tinge.” In an interview with Alan Lomax, he explained, “Of course you got to have these little tinges of Spanish in it ... in order to play real good jazz.... I’ll give you an idea what this, the idea of Spanish there is in the blues” (Morton 1938). One of his collaborators, Walter “Foots” Thomas, recalled Morton’s orientation as well: “I always felt his melodies came from New Orleans but that his rhythms came from the Latin countries” (Garrett 2008). Contemporary musicologist Charles Garrett (2008, p. 60) hears in Morton’s performances of these influences a “sonic metaphor for cultural difference and conflict.”

Black commentators who published in this era, however, heard in the *habanera* rhythm a cultural lineage that connected the music of Louisiana specifically to Haiti. Maud Cuney Hare, an accomplished Black pianist and daughter of the famed Texan Reconstruction activist Norris Wright Cuney, published a 1921 compilation titled *Six Creole Folk Songs*, which are full of *habanera* bass lines much like those present in “Mamie’s Blues” (Hales 2002). She writes in the book’s introduction that these songs were

Mainly African in rhythm, [and] the music was brought to South American countries and to the West Indies, thence to Louisiana.... Distinct from the mountain song of Kentucky, the Negro Spiritual or the tribal melody of the Indian, the Creoles have added a new note in their gift to the folk-song of America.

(Hare 1921, p. 3)

Hare highlights the “West Indies,” namely Haiti, as an important waystation for the Afro-Atlantic genealogy. As she works through the sardonic and sarcastic nature of the pieces, Hare explains that

“songs of mockery, pointed at times with cruel satire, were common among the Creole songs of Louisiana and the Antilles [Haiti]” (p. 18). Hare also notes that these songs treated themes of gender and sexuality. She writes that the song “Caroline” “sheds light into the tragedy as well as the romance of the young Creole slaves. Marriage, that state of blissful respectability [was] denied to the multitude either by law or social conditions” (p. 18). Hare makes the case that the violence of Southern slave laws was necessary to understand the gender politics of this piece.

Compiled and published in the first two decades of the twentieth century, Hare’s anthology reflects how African American musicians of the era understood the *habanera* rhythm and the social-commentary it informed: (a) as a Haitian (“West Indies”) derivation, and (b) included in songs of a satirical nature in which gender and plantation sexual relations were held up for critique, contemplation, and ridicule.

Hare was not wrong. Saint-Domingue Black women produced a well-documented body of oral work by nineteenth-century standards. The deeply systemic practice of interracial sex was disavowed in the colonial public sphere, but its nuances were nonetheless communicated in song and poetry that illuminated the contours of this world for both white and Black publics (Burnard and Garrigus 2016). Creole song and poetry produced a space in which enslaved and free women of color could comment on matters that addressed the intersections of race, desire, and power, often critiquing the violent, contradictory sexual relations of the colony or celebrating their own sexual powers. For instance, one late eighteenth century poem depicted an enslaved woman, “Lisette,” chastising her lover for escaping to town to have sex with a mistress. She claimed of her foe:

Her butt is no more than a packet of bones. (*Bonda li c’est paquet zos*)
 She has not a tooth in her mouth, (*Li pas teni dents dans bouche*)
 Her tits are like the sugar cane trash we feed the pigs. (*Tété li c’est blan cochon*)

In contrast, Lisette claims a litany of positive attributes: she claims that she sings like a bird (“Mon chanté tant com zozo”), that her breasts are upright (“Tété moins bougé debout”), and that she is sexually active (“mon gagné canal / D’yo pas lé manqué li,” which literally translates to “I have a canal / And no shortage of water for it”) (Saint-Méry, quoted in Jenson 2011, 297). Deborah Jenson calls this the “Earliest [recorded] example of female-narrated dissing in the New World African diaspora” (Jenson 2011, 297).

Such dissing and erotic agency travelled with Saint-Domingue refugees and enslaved migrants who fled the Haitian Revolution and Napoleon’s reign of terror. For instance, a similar song appeared in Jamaica, another destination for Haitian emigration and where a performance style known as “French Set girls” emerged, marked by women in using handkerchiefs and a heel drumming technique closely tied to Haiti (Abrahams and Szwed 1983, p. 238; Johnson 2012). As in Louisiana, “French” in this instance came to stand in for Haitian where Black peoples were concerned. In Santiago de Cuba, Emilio Bacardí, a Cuban historian whose maternal relatives were planter emigres from Saint-Domingue, recorded a song he overheard during an Afro-Cuban performance:

Those white men from France, oh shout it! (Blanc lá yó qui sotí en Frans, oh, jélé!)
 They use their (white) wives as a pillow (Yó prán madam yó servi sorellé)
 For caressing black women (Pú yó caresé negués).

(Fernandez 2000, p. 85)

This song was derived from a *Tumba Francesa*, meaning “French dance.” Like “Spanish tinge,” “French” in this case was a misnomer since the *Tumba Francesa* was a set of dances and a song form reproduced by enslaved Haitian communities in Santiago de Cuba, which had the largest concentration of Saint-Domingue refugees outside of Louisiana. Its revolutionary content was derived from its ability to directly insult both the desirability of masters’ wives and their fetishizing of their Black

female "property" (Johnson 2012, p. 136). In *Tumba Francesa*, the *cinquillo* was heavily present, and musicologist Ned Sublette has suggested that one of its component dances named "frenté" is based on one of Saint-Domingue origin which also appears in Puerto Rican *bomba plena* (Sublette 2004, p. 138; and Cadogan, 2008).

New Orleans was another recipient of *cinquillo* rhythm and its travelling companion, biting sexual commentary, narrated from the point of view of violated women and men of color. Haitian-derived dance forms and song lyrics were observed not only in Congo Square but also on the levees surrounding the city (Dunham 1983, p. 72; Joyaux 1904; Dewulf 2018; Kubik 2017; Mitchell 2018). Camille Thierry, a free man of color, published in 1874 the Creole song "Lament of an Aged Mulatta" from New Orleans. It rings of the style of the Creole poetry heard in Saint-Domingue:

Listen! When I was in Saint-Domingue,
Negresses were just like jewels;
The whites there were ninnies,
They were always after us.
In a household,
Never any fighting,
The love of a white meant adoration!
They weren't stingy,
They were very rich,
A good *bounda* [ass] was worth a plantation!
Times have changed, we are sleeping on straw,
We, whom the planters celebrated...
Before long a lower-class white
Will be calling us riff raff!

(Thierry 1874, 298–299).

The reappearance of the political power of *bounda* is, in this case, a marker of descent. Its relative power to the old days—when it was worth a plantation—had disappeared. Other French Louisiana songs of that describe rape and unwanted sexual contact on the part of white men against Black and Creole of Color women have been documented by Tony Russell (1970) and Maud Cuney-Hare (1921).

"Mamie's Blues" should be read as a late-nineteenth century echo of a Haitian and circum-Caribbean women's critique, whereby sexual violence, the Black body, and the erotic were brought out in a Black counterpublic enunciated with musical culture. Storyville's somewhat audacious performance of dissent and critique through blues, performed both for a concert-going public and during the moments of transactional sex, thus has a lot in common with these Afro-Caribbean public arts. An eighteenth and nineteenth Atlantic sexual economy had a built-in critique within its corresponding performance traditions, a practice of symbolic negation in spaces where Black women artists had a circumscribed but still tangible role to signal dissent, ridicule, and reject the terms of engagement. This oral technology of resistance had circulated through the Black Atlantic for the better part of a century, a product of revolution, enslavement, and modernity, and it continued to play an important role in the age of Storyville. The *habanera* rhythm could communicate this history from below in the hands of an expert artist and truth-teller.

Conclusion

In culturally composite countries and, for example, in the case of the Creole cultures of the Americas, advances are accomplished by means of traces.

Edouard Glissant (2006), *Une nouvelle région du monde*.

Storyville was “shut down” by government ordinance in 1917, but the contested nature of the erotic and the sex industry did not suddenly cease to be an important topic for blues women singers. Yet the stirrings of early jazz and their interaction with this sex economy became less pronounced as their classic blues counterparts. Admittedly, the lines were not so firmly drawn, and the recording industry was only beginning to set boundaries between genres which would mark clean divisions between the two. But, in a strange twist, jazz’s acceptance as an art form amongst mainstream American society also reproduced bourgeois and patriarchal ideologies that separated the (male) artist from social and cultural concerns in producing “his” art. When exceptional women instrumentalists “made” it, they were often marketed in ways damaging to their careers and their contributions became posthumously distorted or marginalized (Chilton 2010, p. 201).

Mamie Desdunes not only challenges a male-centric reading of early jazz but also deals directly with the question of Black women’s bodies, their desire as well as their containment, as foundational to the music. The embrace of her song by Jelly Roll Morton, Bunk Johnson, and countless others suggests that this variant of social commentary was widely disseminated. It points to how the new music was a space in which Black women (and men) “could discuss, plan, and organize this new world ... the cries of a new society being born” (Woods 1998, 39) As I have shown, these cries were built on a foundation of centuries of Black Atlantic resistance through art, in which the weapons of the weak became the soundtrack of the future.

Mamie Desdunes offers us a lesson in jazz that does not center stars, careers, or egos, but rather social movements and intangible lessons from the narrow cracks offered by glimpses in census archives, death certificates, and a polyrhythmic bass line. Her song demonstrates women’s agency and cultural influence within a social context that many modern-day commentators have written off as factories of patriarchal pleasure. It suggests that Black womanist and feminist stirrings were important forces that stirred the creation of new art forms, foundational to the blues form itself. By working through the painful and contradictory negotiation with the erotic through centuries of slavery and capitalist commodification, artists like Desdunes catalyzed new art forms.

In the contemporary moment, it is overdue that jazz educators and historians focus on the relationship of sexuality, women, gendered and racial exploitation, and resistance as central to the art form. In a field still skewed by patriarchal ideologies, women continue to be erased and their struggles and cultural work are considered as separate from the work of iconic artists. But repeatedly, figures like Mamie Desdunes, Mary Lou Williams, Melba Liston, and dozens of others prove this is ideological in nature rather than historical. In that light, we should also take more seriously how male musicians dealt with sexuality in their jazz practice, such as Charles Mingus’s self-conscious engagement with the “oversexed” Black male (Rustin-Paschal 2017). Black artists critiqued have followed in Desdunes’s footsteps and critiqued their sexualization and fetishization, not only in Storyville, but also against the spectacles of minstrelsy and American popular culture writ large.

Finally, “Mamie’s Blues” demonstrates that collaborations between Afro-Caribbean and African American culture were happening in jazz much earlier than what is often assumed. This is why I agree with Cortázar that “Mamie’s Blues” is “a cloud without frontiers, a spy of air and water, an archetypal form, something from before, from below.” We would do well to continue to study it and hear what it can tell us about gender, women’s agency, and the history of Black Atlantic resistance over the past four centuries.

Notes

1 I would like to thank Michael Heller for his help with lyric transcription.

2 For a discussion of piano training as an important part of Creole of Color femininity in New Orleans, see Sherrie Tucker, “A Feminist Perspective on New Orleans Jazzwomen” (New Orleans: New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, 2004), 41.

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3

LIL HARDIN ARMSTRONG AND HELEN JOYNER

The Forgotten Patrons of Jazz

Jeremy Brown

Statement on Gender Identification: In this chapter, I will be referencing the various musicians, authors and other persons named as female/she/her/hers, male/he/him/his. I identify as he/him.

Author Note

Some material in this chapter appears in a Festschrift for Michael Budds (in press), the former editor of the College Music Society “Sourcebooks in American Music Series” and founder of the Budds Center for American Music Studies at the University of Missouri, Columbia, where he was a Professor of Music. This material is interpolated throughout the chapter in no specific order. Portions of this chapter were also presented in a lecture at the 2020 College Music Society National Conference in a paper entitled “Jazz Patronage: The Creation of Opportunity in Jazz Music.”

Although it might be their lifeblood in a metaphorical sense, the argument can be made that though music is created by and for musicians, sharing music and connecting to audiences is just as crucial as the creation process in securing cultural value. For this reason, those who support individual artists or musical enterprises must be recognized for their essential role in its history. Patrons have historically occupied a critical position in forming cultural value; in jazz, this crucial function has been filled by lovers and spouses, family members, and colleagues.

The classic model of the patron, an individual of position and wealth eager to encourage composition and performance to enhance his or her social status and bring pleasure, can also be found in the jazz world, although not on as grand a scale. Writers, record producers, concert promoters, and critics can also be considered patrons who celebrate the accomplishments and sustain listeners’ and readers’ interest in jazz artists’ careers. Of these, perhaps most interesting is the contribution of businessmen to the dynamic tradition of jazz patronage. Owners of clubs and the decision-makers for record labels must be acknowledged for their positive impact on the careers of jazz musicians since the days of Storyville. Although they undoubtedly acted out of self-interest, the opportunities they provided and the payments they made for professional services were not all that different from the relationship of Haydn to Lord Esterhazy, of Tchaikovsky to Nadezhda von Meck, or of Stravinsky to Diaghilev.

Of the various types of patrons, jazz artists’ wives are overall the most under recognized. Should they have shown talent as instrumentalists, their accomplishments were often diminished as well. Louis Armstrong, for example, married to Lil Hardin, was painfully harsh (through the lens of the twenty-first century) in his assessment of his former wife, saying: “Read music—yes. As an improviser—Hmmm—terrible”

(Teachout, 2009, p. 75). Yet Lil Hardin was known for a powerful and driving way of playing the piano, a unique style adopted by other prominent musicians. Writer Chadwick Hansen says of white blues pianist Art Hodes (1904–1993): “One can hear something of Lil Hardin in the way he drives with his left hand” (as cited in Martin, 2020, p. 12). Yet, women instrumentalists in jazz were consistently marginalized unless they were glamorous singers. There was, in jazz, an instrument stigma. The working conditions for jazz musicians in the early twentieth century were not considered an environment for women. As historian Gerald Horne summarizes, “there are terrible destructive forces—racism, organized criminality, brutal labour exploitation, battery, debauchery, gambling, from which grew an intensely beautiful art form, today denoted as “jazz” (Horne, 2019, p. 29).

As noted, wives as patrons often figure prominently in jazz artists’ success (although they are typically passed over in biographical studies). At the same time, they worked in the background, in a kind of hidden economy. Critic Lauren Du Graf (2017), reviewing the film *I Called Him Morgan*, hits the bull’s eye when she writes about Helen Morgan (1926–1996)¹:

By centering on Helen, the film has a feminist streak, a badly needed course corrective for a musical genre whose histories overwhelmingly stem from the perspective of men worshipping at the altar of other men. Like Nellie Monk, Lorraine Gillespie, Gladys Hampton, and Maxine Gordon, Helen Morgan labored in an invisible economy of jazz wives who worked behind the scenes to ensure their husbands’ success and survival.

(*par.* 4)

Men worshipping at the altar of other men in jazz music was so entrenched and so widely accepted that male (and perhaps female musicians) were not fully aware of how pervasive it was.

Two African American women, in particular, deserve closer study. Lil Hardin Armstrong (1898–1971), a pioneering female jazz pianist of many talents and the second wife of Louis Armstrong (1901–1971), arguably contributed more to American music than any other woman before or after her arrival on the scene (Dickerson, 2002, p. 217). More controversial was Helen Morgan, “who met Lee Morgan on a cold night in New York and killed him on a cold night in New York” (L.R. Thomas, personal communication, October 22, 2020). Nonetheless, she guided Morgan back from the brink of death due to addiction, allowing him and, perhaps more importantly, encouraging him to perform and record numerous additional albums.

Lil Hardin Armstrong

Growing up in Memphis, Lil became familiar with the local musical culture, despite the best efforts of her mother, Dempsey, to discourage her interest in blues and jazz music (Dickerson, 2002, p. 29). Mother and daughter moved to Chicago in 1917 in part because Memphis was

fragmented by violence, corrupt politics, strained race relations, drug addiction, teen pregnancies, an anti-educational mindset and a stagnant economy. What Dempsey feared most was that Lil’s strength—her passion for music—would lead her to Beale street and a life of prostitution.

(*p.* 22)

Lil Hardin attended Fisk University and earned degrees from the Chicago College of Music and the New York College of Music (p. 155).² She became not only a champion of her soon-to-be husband, Louis, but an artist of significant accomplishment in her own right. Lil composed the music for some of the best of Armstrong’s early recordings, including “King of the Zulus” and “Struttin with Some Barbecue,” and co-composed works such as “Hotter than That,” “Tears,” and “New Orleans Stomp.”

Despite her career as a pianist, composer, singer, bandleader, clothes designer, and arguably a co-founder of the American jazz tradition with Louis Armstrong, she remains among the most under-recognized women in music. In part, this is undoubtedly due to her being a jazz instrumentalist in the 1920s. Furthermore, her accomplishments would have been minimized and at the very least considered a novelty by the male instrumentalist-musicians who were accustomed to the culture of men-only on the stage.

The rough and tumble nature of the clubs was a difficult place for a woman performer. King Joe Oliver, who hired Lil to play in the Creole Jazz Band “kept a gun in his cornet case and threatened to use it on musicians whose conduct displeased him” (Teachout, 2009, p. 58). Even Lil gives credit to a man for her ability to as a musician. In 1956, when speaking of her style to play “just as hard as I could just like Jelly Roll did,” she credited Jelly Roll Morton, who played for her in a Chicago music store where she worked as a sheet music demonstrator (L.H. Armstrong, 2007, p. 109). In the 1920s, there were few if any female role models for a young woman musician to emulate.

The historical void that characterizes Lil Hardin’s legacy was further diffused by the words of her second husband, Louis Armstrong. In his 1954 autobiography, *Satchmo*, Armstrong recounts his first set with the King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band at the Royal Gardens in Chicago soon after arriving on the train from New Orleans in 1923. He describes with admiration and affection, in turn, each member of the band—Baby Dodds, Johnny Dodds, Bill Johnson, Honore Dutrey. When he comes to Lil Hardin, his description has a different tone:

For a woman, Lil Hardin was wonderful, and she certainly surprised me that night with her four beats to a bar. It was startling to find a woman who had been valedictorian in her class at Fisk University fall in line and play such good jazz. She had gotten her training from Joe Oliver, Freddy Keppard, Sugar Johnny, Lawrence Dewey, Tany Johnson, and many other of the great pioneers from New Orleans. If she had not run into those top-notchers, she would have probably married some prominent politician or maybe played the classics for a living. Later I found out that Lil was doubling after hours at the Idlewise Gardens. I wondered how she was ever able to get any sleep. I knew these New Orleans cats could take it all right, but it was a tough pull for a woman.

(pp. 237–239)

Although Louis recognizes that Lil is accomplished in her own right as a performer and a woman with a successful career, one could surmise that he might have been a bit jealous. He is outspoken in his admiration and praise of fellow male musicians but gives Lil little credit for her talent and ambition. Perhaps she had not shown enough allegiance to the young Armstrong (not as much as the other male members of the Creole Jazz Band); she remembers how she “thought he was a bumpkin. . . . I just didn’t like him. I was very disgusted” (as cited in Dickerson, 2002, p. 83). Also recalling that her musician friends called him “Little Louis,” she writes,

‘Little Louis, why do they call him Little Louis as fat as he is?’ [laughs] Oh boy, mmm, well, I was disappointed all around because I didn’t like the way he was dressed, [laughs] I didn’t like his hairdo. [laughs] He had bangs. That was the style in New Orleans, he told me later, to wear bangs. And they were sticking right straight out, and I said, ‘Whoa, Little Louis.’

(L.H. Armstrong, 2007, p. 111)

At the same time, Lil is self-effacing and matter-of-fact, claiming that “from a musical standpoint, jazz didn’t mean anything too much to me. Maybe it was because I was as young as I was, and I was interested in the money” (p. 111). It would be understandable for a young African American woman in the 1920s to be concerned about self-preservation and accruing wealth more than creating a new

art form.³ Recruited into the New Orleans Creole Jazz Band by Joe Oliver, Lil nonetheless became a part of the nexus of American jazz in Chicago. The Creole Jazz Band had many admirers and fans, including white musicians who listened to the band play at the De Luxe Café, Dreamland, and the Royal Gardens Café, later renamed the Lincoln Gardens Café. These included Bix Beiderbecke, Hoagy Carmichael (who sat in with the band on piano), and members of Paul Whiteman's band (p. 111). Lil knew this only because Louis and Joe Oliver told her who was listening. She said, "You see, the boys [the white musicians] never talked to me, anyway. They used to talk to Louis and King Oliver and Johnny [Dodds], but they would never say anything to me. Never, never a word said" (p. 112).

There is another perspective to consider as well. When writing about the Chicago power couple of jazz, Louis Armstrong and his wife Lil Hardin Armstrong in the early 1920s, James Dickerson (2002) makes a good point about the origins of jazz:

At that point in their lives, neither Louis nor Lil saw themselves as the creators of a new type of music. They played music because it paid better than anything else they could do, and most of the time, it was fun and exciting. Neither of them listened to or collected records. The creation of jazz was not an intellectual process for the couple; it was simply a byproduct of the lives they lived.

(pp. 112–113)

Blithely unaware of her legacy, or any sense of a feminist outlook in the 1920s, Lil said,

Most of the musicians didn't know it was going to be important either. We were just playing because sometimes you'd have a date, you wouldn't even bother to write the songs you were going to play until you got to the studio.

(L.H. Armstrong, 2007, p. 118)

The twenty-year-old self-proclaimed "Hot Miss Lil" was suddenly a musical sensation (Dickerson, 2002, p. 57). The young Lil and even younger Louis soon began a romantic relationship on the bandstand in the Creole Jazz Band. Their 1924 marriage became the genesis in 1925 of "Louis Armstrong's Hot Five." It is likely that without Lil's compositions, encouragement, and leadership as a bandleader, this group would have never formed and created their iconic recordings.

Although the legacy of Lil Hardin as a piano player is not equal to that of Jelly Roll Morton (1890–1941), her accomplishments when taken as a whole (support of Louis, compositions, recordings, performances, and arrangements) are remarkable. Hot Miss Lil was a savvy, knowledgeable, and ambitious young woman performing in an arena almost entirely composed of men. While women such as blues singer Alberta Hunter (1895–1984) were relatively common, women instrumentalists were rare. Not only that, Lil was by all accounts a hit with audiences, "a sensation among night-club patrons unaccustomed to seeing a gender-mixed band" (Dickerson, 2002, p. 57). An attractive woman, Lil was undoubtedly a skilled piano player as well, earning a position as a featured performer with King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band, considered among the best jazz bands of the day.

Alberta Hunter said of her,

All you had to do—we knew nothing about arrangements, keys, nothing—all you had to do was sing something like 'Make Me Love You,' and she would be one gone. She could play anything in this world and could play awhile. She was marvelous.

(as cited in Taylor, 1987, p. 35).

Lil is likely deserving of much more admiration as an artist, but her advocacy of Louis Armstrong may have overshadowed her accomplishments.