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# Jazz and the Primitivist Myth

TED GIOIA

In what way would the music of savages be inferior to that of civilized man?

-Hugues Panassie

## I

IN his 1969 biography of Louis Armstrong, the French critic Hugues Panassie gave the following evocative account of the trumpeter:

One feels the intensity with which he lives each moment; one feels his innate goodness, his uprightness, his simplicity. Gifted with an extremely lively sensibility, his reactions are immediate and attractive in their finesse, spontaneity and intuition. He approaches people and things with his entire humanity. . . . If Louis speaks only circumspectly about the music of others—and even his own—it is not through indifference. On the contrary, music is such a natural part of him that he no longer feels the need to talk about it, just as one does not talk about the air one breathes.<sup>1</sup>

Panassie recalled an anecdote which illustrated Armstrong's instinctive approach toward music:

Music was within him, and a melodic fragment was a voice speaking to him; a tune he caught or the mildest rhythm might rouse echoes in him, thrilling him to the depth of his subconscious. Alix Combelle, the French saxophonist, told me that during one of Louis' visits to Paris they were walking up the rue Pigalle late one night when a horse and carriage went by. The horse's hooves rang out clearly on the pavement and to the accompaniment of this unexpected rhythm, Louis immediately began to sing, to the great astonishment of his companion.<sup>2</sup>

Students of cultural history may recognize in these passages the figure of the "noble savage." Calling attention to Armstrong's "finesse, spontaneity

<sup>1</sup> *Louis Armstrong* (New York, 1971), pp. 23-34.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

and intuition," Panassie summons up an image not entirely dissimilar to the following account of the South Sea islanders written by John Hawkesworth in 1773:

In their motions there is at once vigour and ease; their walk is graceful . . . and their behaviour to strangers and to each other affable and courteous. In their dispositions, also, they seem to be brave, open, and candid, without either suspicion or treachery, cruelty or revenge.<sup>3</sup>

One of the remarkable things about this account is that its author never visited the South Seas. Hawkesworth was a director of the East India Company, as well as a writer, and had access to the then-unpublished journals of Captain James Cook and his fellow passengers, Joseph Banks, later to head the Royal Society, and Dr. Solander, a Swedish botanist. He used these documents to concoct a romanticized version of native life which often differed significantly from the firsthand accounts. Hawkesworth's sources remained unpublished for over a century, and, consequently, his inaccuracies were largely unchallenged.<sup>4</sup>

Hawkesworth's view of South Sea culture, however, was not without precedent. The figure of the "noble savage" had been prominent in French thought at least since the late sixteenth century. Montaigne, with his essays on *Des Cannibales* and *Des Coches*, inaugurated a line of thought which was reflected in later travel literature such as Hawkesworth's and in the writings of philosophers such as Rousseau and Diderot. This view saw non-Westernized man as enjoying an innocence and purity—an "innate goodness" to borrow Panassie's term—which civilized man, for all his erudition and technological superiority, could not match.

This view, however outworn, gained a certain renewed authority in the early part of this century with the immense interest generated by primitive art in French intellectual and cultural circles. Works of primitive sculpture began appearing with great frequency in Paris around 1906, and over the next several decades their influence began to be seen in the painting and sculpture of modern artists first in Europe and later in America.

The idealization and theorization of primitivism in French culture was soon followed by an equally enthusiastic—and equally abstract—reception for another import from foreign soil: American jazz. To a certain extent, the two intellectual tendencies fused: the passion for jazz was, in many ways, an extension of the passion for "les choses africaines" which was already a dominant theme in French culture. Such a fusion could

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Hoxie Neale Fairchild's *The Noble Savage: A Study in Romantic Naturalism* (New York, 1928), pp. 108-9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104-12.

be seen, for example, in the work of Darius Milhaud. Milhaud's ballet, *La Creation du monde*, which premiered in Paris in 1923, showed his strong interest in jazz—an interest spurred by hearing black jazz musicians in Harlem during a visit to New York in 1922—while the dancers' costumes were equally innovative in their use of designs drawn from African sculpture and masks. Milhaud, like other French artists of his generation, was increasingly looking outside of Europe for sources of inspiration. The time-honored traditions of Western culture were felt by many as a terrible burden which stifled rather than enhanced creativity. In this light, jazz and primitive art were seen as closely allied; both were like a breath of fresh air, full of the vitality and exuberance missing in the more stylized extensions of purely European traditions.

European jazz was only in its infancy when composers like Milhaud and Ravel began integrating it into their works. Jazz's first passage across the Atlantic closely followed the United States' entry into World War I in April 1917. America's sudden reversal of its historical isolation may have stemmed from military motives, but the cultural impact of the Yankees' arrival was by no means insignificant. The United States forces included several hundred thousand black soldiers who brought with them their own traditions and distinctive culture.

William Haywood, a colonel in one of New York's black regiments, mounted a nationwide search at the time to put together what was, in his words, "the best damn brass band in the United States Army."<sup>5</sup> Backed by a \$10,000 donation from businessman Daniel Reid, Haywood scoured the country and even went to Puerto Rico in his search for musicians. The resulting ensemble, dubbed the Hellfighters, included bandleader James Reese Europe as conductor and dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson as drum major. Although not conceived as a jazz band, almost from the start the Hellfighters began including jazz-oriented numbers in their repertory. The band was also able to break down into smaller groups for more informal playing sessions, and these probably drew more directly from the jazz traditions back home. In early 1918 the band covered some two thousand miles in an extended tour of France, and the group's stunning success inspired other Army bands to "jazz up" their music. The 350th Artillery Band, under the direction of Lieutenant Tim Brymm, evolved into what he described as "a military symphony engaged in a battle of jazz." Another ensemble, led by Lieutenant Will Vodery, was described in the newspapers as "the jazziest, craziest, best tooting outfit in France."

<sup>5</sup> This and following quotations from Chris Goddard, *Jazz Away From Home* (New York, 1979), pp. 12-14.

American jazz did not disappear from Europe with the end of the war. In 1919 Sidney Bechet, the celebrated New Orleans clarinetist and saxophonist, became the first major jazz musician to tour in Europe. As part of Will Marion Cook's Southern Syncopated Orchestra, Bechet played with great success in France and England. In the latter country, he played a command performance at Buckingham Palace for King George V. Bechet commented on this event years later in his autobiography *Treat It Gentle*: "It was the first time I ever got to recognize somebody from having seen his picture on my money."<sup>6</sup>

Bechet, born in New Orleans in 1897, grew up in a Creole environment which flirted with high culture. He was surrounded by a very musical family, and as a child he occasionally went to the French Opera. He began learning clarinet at six, using an instrument borrowed from his brother, and within a few years began playing with some of the finest jazz musicians in New Orleans. By the time he went to Europe with the Southern Syncopators, he had already worked with performers such as King Oliver, Bunk Johnson, and Freddie Keppard.

Bechet was to make several more trips to France in the years following the war, finally settling there permanently in 1949. In America he had often needed to supplement his income by working as a tailor; in France he was able to live as a respected artist, and died (in 1959) a wealthy man. Leonard Feather wrote of Bechet in his *Encyclopedia of Jazz*: "In France he transcended jazz fame to become a national vaudeville figure, an entertainer and personality in the Maurice Chevalier class."<sup>7</sup> Today a visitor to Paris can see him commemorated in rue Bechet, which intersects rue Armstrong.

## II

Almost from the start jazz received the serious attention in Europe that it would not find in the United States until the late thirties. Ernest Ansermet published an analysis of Bechet's music in 1919 that was amazingly prescient in its understanding of this new type of music. Ansermet called attention to the improvisational element, the rhythmic and tonal characteristics, and the distinctive role of the blues in early jazz long before these elements were well understood in the United States.

The jazz fan of today can scarcely imagine the vast amount of misinformation on jazz which circulated here in the twenties and thirties. For example, John Tasker Howard's *Our American Music*, first published

<sup>6</sup> (New York, 1960), p. 128.

<sup>7</sup> (New York, 1955), p. 101.

in 1931,<sup>8</sup> claimed to cover ragtime, jazz, and swing music but displayed little understanding of any of these areas. Howard's ignorance of the New Orleans jazz tradition and his focus on the work of commercial musicians such as Paul Whiteman, Ted Lewis, and Zez Confrey was all too typical of early commentaries on jazz. And even in the revised editions of 1939 and 1954, the book did not mention such crucial figures as Scott Joplin, Duke Ellington, Sidney Bechet, Bessie Smith, or Fletcher Henderson—all of whom had been performing long before the first edition of *Our American Music* had appeared.

The first pioneering efforts in serious jazz studies were made by three Europeans—Hugues Panassie, Charles Delaunay, and Robert Goffin—whose work began filtering back into the United States in the mid-thirties. Although Goffin was the first of the three to write on jazz, he was probably less influential than Panassie, whose work was the first to be translated into English. The appearance of Panassie's *Hot Jazz* in America in 1936 remains one of the major turning points in the history of jazz criticism; despite flaws, it went a long way toward establishing jazz as a subject worthy of serious study in its land of origin as well as in France. Panassie's follow-up book, *The Real Jazz*, appeared in 1942 and served to correct the excesses of the earlier volume, while extending its author's influence.

While Panassie and Goffin were working in the areas of jazz criticism and jazz history, Charles Delaunay was embarking on the first of a series of influential discographical studies. His *Hot Discography* first appeared in France in 1936; its many revised editions have served for almost two decades as the standard reference guide to recorded jazz. Delaunay initially eschewed the purely alphabetic approach followed by most later discographers and tried to integrate a historical perspective into his work by classifying styles and attempting to show the music's development. But his task became increasingly difficult with the enormous growth of jazz recording after World War II. Jazz's very success was soon to make all but the most ambitious give up any attempt at compiling comprehensive general discographies. The 1948 update of *Hot Discography* was the last complete edition; Delaunay's attempt to publish a multivolume follow-up edition never got beyond the letter H. Dave Carey and Albert McCarthy's *Jazz Directory* was similarly overwhelmed: its several volumes, published between 1949 and 1957, stopped at the letter L.

Of the three pioneers of jazz studies, Delaunay had the closest contact with the primitivists in the visual arts. He was the son of the celebrated modern painter Robert Delaunay and the artist-designer Sonia Delaunay-Terk, and was thrust, from his earliest years, into the very center of con-

<sup>8</sup> (New York, 1931).

temporary aesthetic trends. The influence of the primitivists clearly figured prominently in the Delaunay household. Indeed, his parents became acquainted through their common interest in African art. Art historian Gustav Vriesen wrote about Robert and Sonia:

They went to the Louvre together often, but not to see the paintings of recent centuries. Rather what attracted them and enriched their talks and their thinking were visits to the Egyptian section, the Assyrian sculpture, the Chaldean art. They were less interested in the stream of history than in the ancient sources of artistic form.<sup>9</sup>

Frequent visitors to the Delaunay household included the poet Guillaume Apollinaire and the sculptor A. P. Archipenko, both closely involved in the primitivist movement. In fact Apollinaire, one of Robert Delaunay's closest friends, lived with the family for a brief period shortly after Charles's birth in 1911. At the time, Apollinaire had been suspected of being involved in the recent theft of the Mona Lisa. Deserted by most of his friends, he stayed in the Delaunay's studio until the charges were eventually dropped.

Apollinaire was a passionate defender of the artistic merits of African and Oceanic sculpture and is justly viewed today as one of the founders of primitivism. The following passage from one of his essays probably reflects the kind of pronouncements he made in the presence of Charles:

The enthusiasm of today's painters and collectors for the art of fetishes is an enthusiasm for the basic principles of our arts; their taste is renewed through contact with these works. In fact, certain masterpieces of Negro sculpture can compete perfectly well with beautiful works of European sculpture of the greatest periods.<sup>10</sup>

Charles Delaunay was thus raised in an environment in which the so-called unreflective and instinctive relationship of the "primitive" artist with his art was seen as a positive virtue. The overly refined and self-conscious attitude which the European artist took toward his work was a hindrance, an obstacle to the creative act. Although the savage's supposedly "natural" response to art probably could not be achieved by a twentieth-century European, it symbolized an ideal toward which one could aspire. Little wonder that Delaunay, along with his contemporaries, would try to make jazz fit the mold of primitive art. Such an association, from their perspective, could only add to the music's allure.

Robert Goffin was also closely associated with the primitivists. A writer of poetry as well as prose, he was an acknowledged expert on Apollinaire,

<sup>9</sup> Robert Delaunay, *Light and Color* (New York, 1967), p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Translated by Susan Suleiman in *Apollinaire on Art* (New York, 1972), pp. 470-71.



and the impact of the latter's thinking is clearly reflected in Goffin's works on jazz. Indeed Goffin, like so many of jazz's great critics, was a man whose talents extended far beyond the world of music. In addition to his career as a writer, he was an authority on rats and eels, and a celebrated criminal lawyer in Brussels. A native Belgian, Goffin fled his country at the time of the Nazi invasion, leaving behind a successful practice and a collection of over 3,000 jazz records.

The last of the three to have his works published in the United States, Goffin was in fact the first to write on jazz. His full-length critical study *Aux frontières du jazz* appeared in 1931; at a time when Whiteman was acknowledged as the "King of Jazz," Goffin dedicated his book to Louis Armstrong, "the real King of Jazz." His *Jazz: From the Congo to the Metropolitan* (1944) was his first American publication. His book on Armstrong, *Horn of Plenty*, published in 1947, was, along with Barry Ulanov's early study of Duke Ellington, one of the first significant jazz biographies.

Hugues Panassie, Charles Delaunay, and Robert Goffin were the founding fathers of jazz studies. In criticism, discography, and biography they made the first real steps, at times awkward and uncertain, toward establishing a new area of musical research. Their views, assumptions, and biases served as starting points for the next generation of critics, both in the United States and abroad. Just as American jazz crossed the Atlantic to take root in Europe, jazz criticism had to come here from Europe to gain serious attention. By the time jazz studies began in earnest in the United States, the discipline was already established by these overseas models. Jazz still retains to this day the marks of this initial European perspective.

A half century of jazz scholarship has made it relatively easy to point out in retrospect the flaws in these early forays into jazz studies, yet in comparison with the mixture of misinformation and neglect which preceded these pioneering works, the achievements of Panassie, Goffin, and Delaunay are considerable. Looking back to Goffin's favorable view of Armstrong, Ellington, and Henderson in 1931, one is struck by how much his critical judgments conform to today's consensus. These early works are perhaps more dated by their general tone than by any factual or critical discrepancies. Jazz historian Richard Hadlock has referred to this as "the carefully documented gee-whiz attitude." Or as Derek Langridge put it: "If the keyword for the 'twenties is ignorance, that for the 'thirties is enthusiasm."<sup>11</sup> Often limited in their understanding of the musical underpinnings of jazz, these first jazz writers focused instead on the vitality and energy of the "hot" soloist. Jazz, for them, was an intense experience,

<sup>11</sup> Derek Langridge, *Your Jazz Collection* (London, 1970), p. 56.



and a purely musicological approach was not yet possible. It was perhaps inevitable, if somewhat distressing, that they would project this same lack of concern with music theory onto the musicians themselves. They saw the jazz artist as a creature of inspiration who, in his own rough and unskilled way, would forge a musical statement that was of the heart and not necessarily of the mind. As Panassie proclaimed in *The Real Jazz*: "Inspiration without culture can produce beautiful works; culture without inspiration is incapable of doing so."<sup>12</sup> For him, jazz's eminence as an art form depended on its practitioners' lack of sophistication. "In music," he wrote,

primitive man generally has greater talent than civilized man. An excess of culture atrophies inspiration, and men crammed with culture tend too much to play tricks, to replace inspiration by lush technique under which one finds music stripped of real vitality.<sup>13</sup>

From this perspective, formal training and intellectual rigor serve only to stifle the jazz musician. The vitality of his art has no need of these essentially decadent Western practices.

Goffin was perhaps even more extreme than Panassie in his emphasis on this "enlightened ignorance" of the jazz musician. "Louis Armstrong," he wrote in *Jazz: From the Congo to the Metropolitan*, "is a full-blooded Negro. He brought the directness and spontaneity of his race to jazz music."<sup>14</sup> This stemmed from Armstrong's ability to enter what Goffin referred to as "the trance." He saw this as the crucial determinant of Armstrong's success. Goffin elaborated on this talent:

Besides the two qualities which I have just mentioned—imagination and technique—Louis possesses the great gift which permits him almost automatically to enter into a trance and then to express his sensibility by means of his instrument. The other two qualities are possessed to a greater or lesser degree by the musicians we have just compared to Armstrong. Here is a fact I want you all to mull over. Many musicians, particularly among the whites, have plenty of natural talent; yet, for these, the phenomenon of the trance is rare if not completely nonexistent. Armstrong's gift is present in a few Negroes—Charlie Shavers and Leo Watson, to name but two—but I know of no white musician who is able to forget himself, to create his own atmosphere, and to whip himself up into a state of complete frenzy.<sup>15</sup>

This statement is one of the earliest formulations of a stereotype which has lingered until the present day—a stereotype which views jazz as a music

<sup>12</sup> (New York, 1942), p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> (New York, 1944), p. 167.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

charged with emotion, but largely devoid of intellectual content, and which sees the jazz musician as the inarticulate and unsophisticated practitioner of an art which he himself scarcely understands.

This Primitivist myth expresses an attitude which, in one form or another, has colored much of the literature on jazz. When this view is presented as starkly as we find it in Goffin the modern reader is likely to feel somewhat uneasy. Musical and racial stereotypes are mixed together. Despite the author's intention of praising Armstrong, his comments seem clearly, if unintentionally, condescending. How else can one interpret his description of the ideal jazz performance as "a state of complete frenzy." Presented in such terms, jazz performance is less a cultural event and more like epilepsy or schizophrenia.

Though such extreme examples now seem insulting and patently unjust, milder forms of this same attitude continue to influence many recent discussions of jazz. Performances which fail to attain the frenetic and energetic ideal postulated by the stereotype are labeled "cerebral"—one of the most damning adjectives in the critical vocabulary of jazz writers. In contrast, the most excessive demonstrations of musical chaos are often lavishly praised so long as they are done "with feeling."

Note, for example, Bill Cole's description of John Coltrane and Elvin Jones from his 1976 biography of Coltrane:

There are really no words to describe the energy that these two men would exude. After each set they would literally be drenched with perspiration, and I often wondered how they could possibly do this over and over again without catching bad colds or even pneumonia. Just before Pharoah Sanders entered the band, I remember beginning to watch Trane and wondering how much longer he was going to be able to put out that much energy. . . . When he played, his intensity was almost unbearable to watch. He seemed to almost want to envelop the instrument, whether that instrument was soprano or tenor saxophone. His face always seemed to be straining to its utmost capacity, and the veins in his face seemed as if they would pop straight out of his body. He was truly an awesome figure to watch. And as intense as Trane could be, Elvin Jones was certainly his equal. Jones was demonic, constantly whipping and interchanging with Trane during the solos. It wasn't just John Coltrane and Elvin Jones: they were a pair—and they both put out an equal amount of energy to the people.<sup>16</sup>

For Cole these are words of highest praise. Their similarity with Goffin's description of Armstrong's "trance" is striking.

### III

The critical interest in primitivism and in jazz, which thrived in the French intellectual environment, came to the United States at virtually

<sup>16</sup> *John Coltrane* (New York, 1976), p. 6.

the same time. In 1934, the year of the first major showing of primitive art in the United States, Panassie began publishing the periodical *Le Jazz Hot* in both French and English editions, and *Downbeat* was launched in the United States—a magazine which still remains the preeminent American jazz publication. The next several years saw the first important books on both jazz and primitive art published in English. In America as in Europe, these two areas of artistic achievement seemed destined to go hand in hand.

Even a sophisticated commentator like the late Winthrop Sargeant, whose 1938 book *Jazz, Hot and Hybrid* remains one of the most perceptive works on the subject, could write about jazz with confidence:

Those who create it most successfully are the ones who know least about its abstract structure. The Negro, like all folk musicians, expresses himself intuitively.<sup>17</sup>

Here Sargeant mistakenly assumes that jazz's spontaneity implies a lack of self-awareness on the part of its practitioners. From this perspective, jazz is qualitatively different from serious composed music. It springs from inspiration, and not from the intellect. Sargeant's view is identical with Panassie's claim that jazz is "unconscious of its novelty, [and] untarnished by the slightest design."<sup>18</sup>

The truth of this view is somewhat dubious. Jazz, like all art from an aural-oral tradition, reveals its rigors in ways different from notated-written arts. The absence of a permanent document, whether musical score or printed word, does not indicate that the mental processes involved in the creative act are any less evident in improvised art than in composed art. Improvisation merely changes the time frame of what takes place: it is spontaneous composition. The identity of composer and performer allows this act to take place without the mediation of systems of notation. In fact, such settings call into question Western culture's veneration of the written document, when the creative act itself seems to be more central to our appreciation of art. As jazz pianist Errol Garner put it: "No one can hear you read music."

Moreover, the view that jazz was created largely by unschooled and unreflecting musicians who simply "played from the heart" is, at best, highly misleading. As early as Jelly Roll Morton and Pops Foster, if not before, New Orleans musicians were thinking in fairly theoretical terms about jazz. Morton, like most of the Creole musicians of his day, was familiar with the European music tradition, and his own compositions and performances show a sense of balance and formal structure which is anything

<sup>17</sup> (New York, 1975), p. 81.

<sup>18</sup> *The Real Jazz*, p. 7.

but primitive. Indeed virtually all of the major pianists of early jazz had some training in the European tradition: Scott Joplin, Tony Jackson, James P. Johnson, Lil Hardin, Earl Hines, Fletcher Henderson, Fats Waller, Count Basie, and Art Tatum—to name a few—all had formal training.

Nor were the other early jazz instrumentalists entirely unschooled. Coleman Hawkins, the first major tenor saxophonist, studied music in college, as did a number of later saxophonists including Chu Berry, Willie Smith, and Don Redman. The clarinet, an instrument whose use in jazz stems back even further than the saxophone, could boast of a number of well-trained early exponents. Alphonse Picou and Lorenzo Tio, both of New Orleans, were quite fluent in the European tradition and passed down their expertise to many of the younger jazz clarinetists. The Tio household, in particular, served as music school for a list of students which sounds like an honor roll of New Orleans clarinet players, including Johnny Dodds, Barney Bigard, Omar Simeon, Jimmy Noone, and Sidney Bechet. The New Orleans drummer Zutty Singleton read music—something many contemporary drummers are unable to do—and worked frequently with the John Robichaux Band in New Orleans. Robichaux, according to Pops Foster, “wouldn’t hire anyone who couldn’t read.”<sup>19</sup>

The European musical tradition figured prominently in the social life of nineteenth-century New Orleans. Grand opera began in the city in 1837, and light opera had been performed at least since 1810. The French Opera House, constructed in midcentury, held a central place in the city’s cultural environment. While the brothels and honky-tonks of Storyville receive most of the attention of jazz scholars, the “serious” music of turn-of-the-century New Orleans played an important and often overlooked role in shaping the first generation of jazz musicians. Both Alphonse Picou and Lorenzo Tio, Sr., for example, played in the French opera, and it is clear that many of the opera arias were familiar to even the nonreading musicians of the time.

In this light, it is hard to accept opinions such as those voiced by jazz and ragtime scholar Rudi Blesh:

With no formal training, the Negroes imparted vocal tone to the cornet, trombone, and even the clarinet, though it is an achieved, not a natural, tone with these instruments. Extreme musicality gave the Negroes quick mastery of even these difficult instruments and helped them to surmount difficulties they did not even know existed. Unable to read music, they promptly transformed the marches into Negro jazz just as their fore-runners had transformed the hymn into spirituals.<sup>20</sup>

In fact, not all exponents of “Negro jazz” were unable to read and lacking formal training.

<sup>19</sup> Pops Foster: *The Autobiography of a New Orleans Jazzman* (Berkeley, 1971), p. 43.

<sup>20</sup> *Shining Trumpets* (New York, 1958), p. 160.

This is not to say that all of the practitioners of early jazz had had a thorough training in their instruments. Many of the instruments—notably the cornet and saxophone—were not part of the symphonic tradition, thus limiting their practitioners' ability to imitate and study under classical players. Some of the best early performers on these instruments were largely self-taught and were, accordingly, poor readers. Moreover, many of the players who had studied formally were still far from achieving conservatory proficiency. Yet in virtually every case this lack of a formal background was not, as with a true primitivist, viewed as an advantage or as a key to inspiration. Many of the prominent musicians of early jazz took great pains to overcome the limitations of their formal training. Johnny Dodds, for example, felt a need for further study even after he had established himself with Kid Ory's band, perhaps the most celebrated New Orleans band of the time. As Pops Foster recalled:

Johnny Dodds didn't read so good and the only band he had played with was Ory's. When work got tough he was thinking about going to St. Louis or Chicago and wanted to know if I thought he could play with the other bands. I told him he should study and train himself to play with any bands and not just one like he'd done. . . . He said, "Yeah George, that's what I did wrong, I got wrapped up around one band and I sound funny with anybody else." After that he studied and could play with all bands.<sup>21</sup>

Armstrong, also a member of Kid Ory's band in the early twenties, felt a need to improve his grasp of fundamentals. In his autobiography, *Satchmo*, he wrote:

Kid Ory's band could catch on to a tune quickly, and once they had it no one could outplay them. But I wanted to do more than fake the music all the time because there is more to music than just playing one style. . . . David Jones played the melophone. He had joined us from a road show that came to New Orleans, a fine musician with a soft mellow tone and a great ability to improvise. I mentioned him particularly because he took the trouble between trips to teach me to read music. I learned very quickly.<sup>22</sup>

Certainly it is hard to agree with Blesh in viewing these musicians' "lack of formal education as a freeing factor in hot and spontaneous creation." They succeeded despite their limitations rather than because of them, and their success is a testimony to the inherent vitality of the Afro-American music tradition and not merely the result of musical illiteracy. Yet the primitivist mythology of jazz, borrowed from the first generation of European critics and still echoed by writers today, has fostered a romanticized view of jazz in which the limitations of the music's earliest practitioners have been depicted as their greatest attributes.

<sup>21</sup> *Pops Foster*, p. 50.

<sup>22</sup> (New York, 1955), pp. 140-41.

## IV

Only a century ago, John Ruskin could proclaim with a clear conscience that there was “no art in the whole of Africa, Asia or America.” The Victorian sensibility was not embarrassed by such Eurocentric opinions: it was an age which often equated artistic merit with refinement and technical mastery, and which could still perceive Western art as following a path of progress almost as surely and inevitably as the natural sciences.

The ensuing decades saw a striking reversal of this attitude. Today the notion of progress in the art world seems almost ludicrous—although the related concept of artistic decadence is having something of a revival—and the proud and defiant faith in the European tradition, epitomized by Ruskin’s comment, has clearly been shaken. The positivism of the nineteenth century has given way to, at best, a half-hearted relativism, or, at worst, an express dislike for all things smacking of civilization.

Because of this radical shift in values, the view of jazz which links it with the non-European traditions of primitive art remains popular. The music’s undeniable vitality seems somehow more assured and impressive if its ties to Western culture are severed. Such a view, however misleading or incorrect, brings with it some solace.

In fact, jazz is not primitive art. Nor, like the works of Picasso or Modigliani, is it imitative of primitive art. The jazz artist could not achieve the naïve attitude of the Lascaux cave painter or African fetish sculptor even if he tried. And far from trying to imitate such artlessness, the jazz musician has always striven to increase his level of sophistication and his knowledge of his craft.

Yet if the Primitivist myth were simply a misguided interpretation of jazz history, its excesses, though regrettable, would not be a source of major concern. The problem lies in the fact that this mythology has extended its influence far beyond the area of historical research. It has come to shape the critical standards which define the art form, and its impact is all the more damaging given that its influence is rarely stated openly. Like some unmentioned *a priori* line of reasoning, it colors critical judgments while rarely submitting itself to critical scrutiny.

One result of this is a false opposition, posed repeatedly in the literature of jazz, between music of inspired creativity, on the one hand, and that of “cold” intellectualism, on the other. The implication here is that jazz musicians can or should aspire to states of inspiration that “transcend” or “stop short of” mental processes. But such an opposition can hardly be said to exist. Anyone who has performed jazz can attest to the immense powers of concentration required in improvisation; the state of apparent distraction described by so many writers—what Goffin called the “trance”—



is by no means an attitude of forgetfulness but is rather a sign of the musician's intense involvement with the performance. Such concentration on the music is not an indication of any lack of ability on the performer's part. It is, in fact, quite essential: the necessity that jazz be *improvised*—the requirement of spontaneity—increases rather than decreases the demands, intellectual as well as otherwise, on the artist. The creation of jazz requires more than mere visceral energy.

The glorification of primitivism ends up by encouraging many of the worst aspects of jazz culture. It creates a general impression among musicians, both established and aspiring, that discipline is not required to learn or perform jazz; that a firm technical mastery of one's instrument is either unnecessary or positively to be avoided as stifling the creative impulse; that emotional immediacy is to be preferred over clarity and sophistication; finally, that the various well-publicized excesses of the jazz musician's personal life are not problems to be avoided but signs that the musician has achieved a special intensity of existence that sets him apart from his peers. Excesses of all kinds are apparently to be encouraged. Restraint, discipline, reflection, self-criticism are for artists in the decadent Western tradition, and have little to do with primitive art and, by implication, with jazz.

In the face of this one can hope that any great artist will impose discipline upon himself, that even outside the confines of a conservatory or university, the exceptional talent will fill in the gaps in his playing and undertake the labors necessary to insure mastery of his craft. Jazz history provides many examples of this same striving for perfection. Yet at the same time, the jazz world displays an even greater abundance of mediocrity, indifference, empty posturing, and empty music.

Certainly the question must be raised as to whether the Primitivist myth has served jazz well. Perhaps at some earlier stage in the music's development, it played an important part in romanticizing and popularizing an art form that was hindered more by neglect than by critical excesses. But today, such a mythology of jazz has long outlived its questionable usefulness. Now, uncritically assumed in so much thinking and writing of jazz, it threatens to become a self-fulfilling prophecy, creating a music which fits its unrelenting stereotype of an intellectually void and unreflecting art form.