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## **Appropriating Black Music While Segregating Black People: The Paradox of 1920's American Culture**

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## Appropriating Black Music While Segregating Black People: The Paradox of 1920's American Culture

Dr. Mark Naison

The period from the beginning of World War I to the onset of the Great Depression was one of change, turmoil, tragedy, resistance and great cultural creativity among Black Americans. More than 1 million Black people left the rural South for the Urban North and Midwest during those years, seeking higher incomes and greater freedom, but encountering levels of violence and segregation that sometimes equaled, if not exceeded what they encountered in the rural South Race Riots- which sometimes were more like Racial Pogroms- took place in Chicago, East St Louis and Washington DC during the first part of that period, alongside the mass killings in Elaine Arkansas and Longwood Texas, and the unprecedented destruction of the wealthiest Black community in the nation in Tulsa Oklahoma in 1921.

Despite this violence, and despite fierce discrimination in housing and labor markets, enough Black people got jobs in stockyards, steel mills, and auto factories to assure that Black urban communities began to flourish in a score of Northern cities, and with them a vibrant black press and a number of important resistance movements. The NAACP grew rapidly during those years, along with the National Urban League, but they were dwarfed in size by Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, the largest mass movement among Blacks in US History. A literary movement called the Harlem Renaissance also emerged in those years as well as the first emergence of recorded music aimed at a Black audience. The first Great Migration led to an expansion of a Black consumer market for commodities ranging from newspapers, to books, to hair products and recorded music as well as the opening of clubs and theaters catering to black audiences.

One result of this was an explosion of music created and marketed in Black communities which combined African polyrhythms and syncopation with European instrumentation, which encouraged dancing and vocal improvisation, and incorporated an irreverent and something erotic atmosphere where it was performed. This music, sometimes called "Race Music" sometimes called Jazz, captured the imagination of whites wherever they heard it, but did not lead to any substantial crossing of racial barriers in the music's performance and consumption. When whites began performing the music, they did not include any Black artists in their bands, and when whites went to hear Black artists perform as they did at numerous clubs in Harlem, they insisted that no Blacks be allowed in the audience.

No greater example of this astonishing record of appropriation and exclusion can be found than in the 1930 film "King of Jazz" which after claiming that the music the film highlighted had roots "in the African Jungle" then proceed to anoint a white orchestra leader, Paul Whiteman, "The King of Jazz" while presenting scores of white musicians and dancers in evening wear performing George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue."

This was done at a time when arguably the two greatest jazz musicians of the first half of the 20th Century, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, were reaching their creative peak! But so powerful was the belief, not only in the South, but the North and Midwest, that the prosperity and stability

of the nation required the preservation of white racial superiority, that Blacks were rigidly segregated and socially isolated even when performing music they had created.

Not until the Depression destabilized the economy and political system, and drove large portions of the white population in the country into poverty, was even limited headway made in integrating the creation, performance and audience for popular music.