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## Making Jazz French: The Reception of Jazz Music in Paris, 1927-1934

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### Abstract

This article explores how people in Paris reacted to jazz in the late 1920s and early 1930s. When jazz arrived in Paris, it sparked controversy because of its foreign origins. The music was associated with America and with Africa, and it raised fears among French musicians about their jobs, since American players were in demand. By the late 1920s, a group of French musicians, critics, and fans began to change how audiences thought about jazz. They argued that this music could be seen as "French," not simply as an import that threatened French culture. This process of adaptation sheds light on debates about French national identity in the interwar years by suggesting that France was not completely weakened throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Rather, many people retained an openness to new influences and a capacity to redefine their sense of national identity in the wake of World War I. Cet article examine comment Paris réagit au jazz á la fin des années 20 et au début des années 30. Quand le jazz arriva á Paris il provoqua la controverse á cause de

ses origines étrangères. Cette musique était associée à l'Amérique et à l'Afrique ainsi les musiciens américains étaient largement demandés ce qui angossa bon nombre de musiciens français. A la fin des années 20 un groupe de musiciens, de critiques et de fans français commença à transformer l'opinion du public sur le jazz. En effet, cette musique pouvait être vue comme une musique française et non simplement comme une importation qui menaçait la culture française. Cette lente adoption jette de la lumière sur les débats à propos de l'identité nationale française pendant l'entre-deux-guerres en suggérant que la France n'était pas totalement affaiblie tout au long des années 20 et 30. En effet, bien des gens retinrent une ouverture aux nouvelles influences et une capacité à redéfinir leur perception de l'identité nationale après la première guerre mondiale.

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That large audiences in Paris appreciate jazz music today is indisputable—a fact confirmed by a brief glance through any issue of *Pariscope*, where one can find jazz clubs and concerts to attend every night of the week. But perhaps the obviousness of the acceptance of jazz in Paris has obscured the need by historians of France to ask how it came to be and to explore what it can tell us about French culture. Indeed, only a handful of works have looked at the birth of the Parisian jazz scene in depth, primarily Chris Goddard's often-cited *Jazz Away from Home!*<sup>1</sup> Goddard offers many important observations about the bands

Jeffrey H. Jackson is assistant professor of history at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee. This article is based on his forthcoming book *Making Jazz French: Music and Modern Life in Interwar Paris* to be published by Duke University Press. He is currently coediting and contributing to a collection of essays tentatively entitled *Music and History: Bridging the Disciplines*.

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Goddard, *Jazz Away from Home* (London, 1970). Besides Goddard's book, one of the most illuminating studies is by the well-known jazz historian William H. Kenney III and is entitled "Le Hot: The Assimilation of American Jazz in France, 1917-1940," *American Studies* 25 (1991): 5-24. Kenney argues that French musicians of the 1930s "nationalized" jazz by adapting the American form of the music to French tastes and in the process "created their own 'école française de jazz.'" Ultimately Kenney's description of this "assimilation" is almost entirely musical and, as a result, sheds little light on the history of interwar France. Musicians translated jazz into French forms, he argues, by substituting stringed instruments for the buzzy sounds of the saxophone and trumpet. Whether the French musical tradition can be reduced to the importance of strings seems a dubious argument, but, what is more significant, he overlooks the ways in which music is perceived and interpreted by audiences. His account also lacks a broad range of primary sources with which to tell the whole story of jazz in France.

For some time, U.S. historians and jazz studies scholars have examined the ways in which audiences in the United States encountered, debated, and ultimately accepted jazz as part of the musical mainstream. More important, they have integrated the story of jazz into the larger narrative of U.S. history by illustrating the ways in which the music was intertwined with evolving racial attitudes, changes in urban culture, and transformations in popular entertainment. This article



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