

JAZZ



Drawings by Arthur Schmalz

by **ISAAC GOLDBERG**

A“AMERICAN music is not jazz, and jazz is not music.” Thus, dogmatically, Mr. Paul Rosenfeld in his tight-packed little monograph on our national composers. And the late Herr Adolf Weissmann, in his *Music Come to Earth*, inveighs against jazz as a raucous aspect of the Machine Age.

It is an old charge. More than five years ago the Reverend John Roach Straton, in his fiery sermons, crystallized the theological hatred of the new rhythms. Its practitioners were bandits and rattlesnakes; it should be outlawed. Yet, to give the undevilish fellow his due, he could have found among musicians justification for his divine animus. Sir Thomas Beecham, the athletic English conductor, was calling jazz “a sickness that has come upon music . . . a rash upon the times . . . no more important than was the polka to Bohemia, the waltz to Germany.” One had thought that the waltz was a trifle important to Germany: even Wagner and Brahms paid radiant tributes to Strauss. However, let that pass. Came, then, Daniel Gregory Mason to read a brief burial service. Jazz, he declared with round optimism, was a fiasco.

Let us see about this. The machine is supposed to have turned us into robots; the age of the machine has pared life down to its bare, practical essentials. Ours, if we take its word, is an age of tonic fundamentals. Gone — but can it be forever? — the masculine admiration of female curves. Gone the melodious languorousness of the romantic composers and their long-drawn-out virtuosity. But have we really done with romanticism? Our composers who

consider themselves “beyond emotion” might remember — and with them their brothers in the other arts — that “beyond” emotion may as easily mean below it as above.

The forms of modernist music favor brevity, intensity, even impersonality; its characteristic timbres are sharp, dry. Stravinsky, in his latest work, a setting of three psalms for chorus and orchestra, banishes the violins and the violas. For long the violin has been reduced to a subordinate position in the jazz band, which, despite the saxophone, is still mostly percussive. Sad fate for the erstwhile siren of the orchestra. And behold, too, what has happened to the noble organ, translated from the cathedrals of the Lord to the cathedrals of the Cinema, and degraded to the purposes of the popular potpourri. It is the clown, with cap and bells, drums, glockenspiel, and an emission of tones that at times resembles nothing so much as a snarling expectoration.

Extremes meet. Jazz, at its least inhibited, becomes hysteria, which is mad romanticism. On the other hand, the rationalism, the mathematics of percussive music, if it looks forward, looks also backward to the classical age that gave us the Bach suite and the sonata that evolved from the suite. There is thus more than an imaginary affinity between the intellectualized music of the eighteenth century and the “machine” music of the twentieth.

Machine music. Herr Weissmann, toward the end of his impassioned little opus, reveals a conflict not only with the mechanized world but with himself. “No amount of machinery,” he concludes, “can produce a fundamental

change in human nature. . . . The machine, being the work of human beings, must in the end exhaust itself as a world power, while man with all his longings remains. By relieving him of all that is mechanical, the perfected machine will unreservedly solve all its problems and thus leave man freer to serve art, which demands his independence of all material things."

I refuse to grant that art demands one's independence of *all* material things. But, really, has not Herr Weissmann, in these few sentences surrendered his carefully constructed case? Moreover, it is possible to point out that jazz, in its development, *is itself a reaction from stereotyped, mechanized living*. By that same token it justifies its ways to God and man, to Messrs. Rosenfeld and Mason, and to the shades of Straton and Weissmann.

JAZZ — AN ESCAPE

JAZZ, indeed, was from the first, so to speak, an unconscious effort of the machine to free us from the machine. Was anything more machine-made, more mechanical, than the ballad and the waltz-song from which ragtime helped to deliver us? It is the nature of mass production, of course, to turn a form into a formula — to make even the happiest inventions sound, by pitiless repetition, stereotypical. It has often been asserted that jazz music is nothing but a compilation of clichés. Each age, however, and each activity within any age, has its rubber stamps. The music of Bach, of Mozart, of Beethoven, rings with clichés; so does the music of Rossini, Verdi, and their brothers. In the beginning there were no clichés; it is repetition and imitation that make them.

What, indeed, is academicism but a surrender to a form that, in the hands of a true creator, was originally creative? We had *kapellmeister Musik* before we had the machine; it was, in fact, the product of a mechanized spirit.

Ragtime, and more especially jazz, even in their lowliest phases, stood for an escape from routine — not only the routine of verse and sound but the routine of living. Jazz intensified the revolt against the usual. It broke up the melodic line; it spiced up the harmonies; it brought, to take the place of bare, unimaginative accompaniment, a care-free experimentalism in the various voices. More, it broke up the

old popular orchestra, wherein the violin still kinged it over the piano (not yet grown percussive) and the clarinet, cornet, trombone, cello, and small battery. So doing, it is interesting to note, the jazz band returned, as well as went forward, to percussiveness. For the band of the early minstrel shows, with its "bones" and banjos and horseshoes and pipes (in the plumber's meaning of the word), was also chiefly a rhythmic, rattlety-bang organization.

Jazz, then, was a marked advance over the popular music of a previous day. I doubt that the history of any other nation can show, in the case of its everyday song, a development at all analogous — a development that was very early to have its effect upon "serious" music. Musical categories, by the way, are not musical criteria. They cannot be, in themselves, fiasco or success. Music is either good or bad, and its "seriousness" or "lightness" is a secondary consideration. Rather, any time, a lively, vital jazz chorus, than any of the symphonies (by grace of the dictionary) that are annually still-born in the groves of Academe.

We have in this country a type of snob that sings and listens enthusiastically to the popular music of Spain, Italy, and (now that the foreign talkies are with us) to the street music of France and Germany. But the popular music of his own country causes him to raise his hands in protest. It is jazz! Small matter that the foreign tunes he delights in are often but pale imitations of Broadway. Broadway is his own; therefore it is a poor thing. This snob has a brother; the fellow who applauds Respighi's silly use of the nightingale in the "Pines of Rome" but who deplores the clever and organic employment by Gershwin of the French taxi horns in "An American in Paris"; the fellow, again, who discovers vitality in Ravel's "Bolero" (which is simply skillful in the use of instruments) and considers the "Rhapsody in Blue" chiefly a piece of bad manners.

French musical comedy is never so sickly, from the musical aspect, as when it trails along Tin Pan Alley. It seems unvaryingly bad. German popular stuff is largely a denatured Strauss, as is attested by the audible films that she is exporting to us. Nor do I except "Two Hearts in Three-Quarters Time." But few of her composers show any ability to adopt jazz. Even the Austrian contingent, with Hungarian

rhythms to support it, is not too felicitous, although such spirits as Emmerich Kalman, Franz Lehar, and Oscar Straus do not need to come aborrowing. None of these countries, while we were evolving from ragtime to jazz, produced — as we decidedly did — any new rhythms or new verse patterns. At the same time, too, we added humor and self-criticism — sly digs at our own weaknesses, take-offs on the simpler words and music of the older day.

If jazz had done nothing else than shake our popular music out of its torpor, its achievement would have been considerable. It has improved public taste, despite all the ineptitudes and plagiarisms and denaturings through which it has made its way, roughshod. For it has quickened the public ear, attuning it to diversity and to skill. In its own way, reflecting the course of modernism in Europe, it finally affected that modernism in a symptomatic degree. And it is still, though at a slower pace, exhibiting vitality on its home grounds.

It was with the evolution of ragtime into jazz that the business of the arranger in Tin Pan Alley took on a new and a revolutionary significance. The jazz band, once Whiteman had reduced its fantastic improvisations to paper, became strangely enough an agency of musical subtlety. It created a new field for clever — and sometimes more than clever — musicians who dressed up the popular tunes for the particular band that employed them. Jazz, so largely an orchestral function, made the Tin Pan Alley public for the first time instrumentation-conscious. And not that public alone. It introduced new color, new combinations. Contrasted rhythms, blue notes, interwoven melodies, impudent improvisations — these blended into a new spirit that gave music a new pertinency to living.



One man, George Gershwin, in himself has provided a quasi-symphonic repertory developed out of this so easily despised product of the musical slums. In 1924 the "Rhapsody in Blue," which has continued in unabated popularity and conquered Europe; in 1925 the too-little heard "Concerto in F"; in 1928, "An American in Paris"; in 1931 the "Second Rhapsody," recently played at Carnegie Hall

by the Boston Symphony. And Gershwin is but thirty-three. Ragtime and jazz, historically considered, are the beginning and the peak of a single movement. Forty years is the span that bridges this evolution. Forty years that have produced bands like those of Jim Europe, Paul Whiteman, Ted Lewis, Vincent Lopez, and their fellows, composers of musical comedy such as Kern, Gershwin, Youmans, Rodgers, and theirs, are not to be found too easily in the history of the people's music. Crowned by the Gersh-

win who writes with equal facility for playhouse and symphony hall, they add distinction to distinction.

It has been said that there was nothing essentially new in jazz, and that its spirit and its process were to be discovered in the music of centuries past. So, too, ragtime was in its heyday dismissed by many as mere syncopation. Yet Brahms, as late as 1896, was attracted to the ragtime of that period and wrote to an American correspondent that he meant to experiment with its attractive possibilities. Brahms, who knew a thing or two about syncopated Hungarian rhythms, could hardly have been drawn to ragtime if it were merely a duplication or an adaptation of European syncopation. Nor, for that matter, would Debussy have written his "Gollywog's Cakewalk" in the contemporary American idiom unless his ear had sensed an essential novelty.

From the musical Americanisms of Dvořák to the latest borrowings and acclimatizations of Hindemith, Ravel, Křének, Weill, and their compeers, the imitation of even the "serious" Europeans — frequently inept — bears witness to the core of originality in our ragtime and jazz. I am ready to grant that this in itself does not confer upon ragtime and jazz artistic validity. Artistry, we have agreed, lies not in the category, but in the treatment. This is what Gershwin meant when, one day, he suddenly remarked to me, "What the deuce do I care about jazz?" The music is the thing.

Our own toplofty composers did not deign to notice the new values introduced by jazz until these had attracted attention and imitation in Europe. Others of our new spirits, again, approached jazz not as groppers emerging from the pluggers' cubicles of the Broadway publishers, but as soundly trained theorists and executants. Gruenberg, Antheil, and Copland are among them, with the human average of hits and misses in their attempts to assimilate the peculiar qualities and suggestions of jazz.

Yet, much as one rejoices to watch the vindication of jazz in the symphony hall — and the symphony hall is by no means done with jazz — one feels that jazz does not require this endorsement in order to win justification. What it has done for popular music is enough to give it a secure place in the story of the national culture.

WORDS AND MUSIC

THE MUSIC of our popular songs is usually written before the words. Not only the music but the melody, and chiefly the words, is the thing. With ragtime, and especially with jazz, this process was intensified, with important effects upon the "lyrics": the text, such as it too frequently is, has been rendered uncommonly flexible. The old method of word-setting, in which everything was sacrificed to the freedom of the melodic line, was responsible even in the classics for such stereotyped devices as repeating the same words and phrases *ad nauseam*. The popular "lyrist," compelled by the exigencies of the trade to fit words to music, is often confronted with melodies that tax his ingenuity; as a result, when he doesn't succumb, he provides a text bristling with inner rhythms, with piquant accents, with staggered yet undoubtedly effec-

tive meters. Without the music his lines may look stupid, yet they translate with uncommon skill the mood of the tune and in their humble way add suppleness to our prosody. Far from having mechanized our "lyrics," jazz has freed them from a deadening metric pattern.

Already in ragtime there had been an attempt to achieve variety by the repetition of a musical phrase, usually at the end of the refrain. This was not, technically speaking, an irregularity; it was the duplication of a regular element. The jazzers, weary of the stenciled refrain, with its even number of bars, have made up their mind to break through this cage. I do not refer to such conscious soarings above Tin Pan Alley as the "Rhapsody in Blue," in which Gershwin deliberately aimed to prove that jazz was something more than undifferentiated dance; or to Ray Henderson's unpublished concerto; or to Kay Swift's string quartette. I have in mind the tin-pan jazzers at their daily task of providing taps and tunes for *boi polloi*. Close attention to the sheet music, and to the radio broadcasts, reveals an increasing number of irregular refrains — of choruses in which there is an alternation of phrases in triple time and phrases in duple time, of songs with extra bars worked in at the end of the four-bar phrase. (A few examples: "Lady, Play Your Mandolin," by the brilliant young pianist, Oscar Levant; "Without Love," by Ray Henderson; "Would You Like to Take a Walk?"; "There's So Much More," from Rodgers and Hart's musical comedy, *America's Sweetheart*). The versatile Vernon Duke, the other evening, played me a fox trot of his in $\frac{7}{8}$ time; this is tantamount to delightful treason. It may be an earnest of what is happening among the more independent practitioners of the jazz art. In any case, it is a sign of vitality.

Most significant of all, from the present standpoint, is this: the average man, whose notion of a good tune — not always an erroneous notion and not at all moronic — is its adaptability to whistling, whistles these tunes without any unpleasant consciousness of their radicalism. Whistling, on the whole, may have declined since the days when as a youngster I practiced it in the doorway on lonesome midnights with an assiduity that elicited inappreciative complaints from the neighbors. Yet I wonder whether I am wrong in the observation that such whistling as we hear is more in tune

than it used to be, and more sensitive to rhythms.

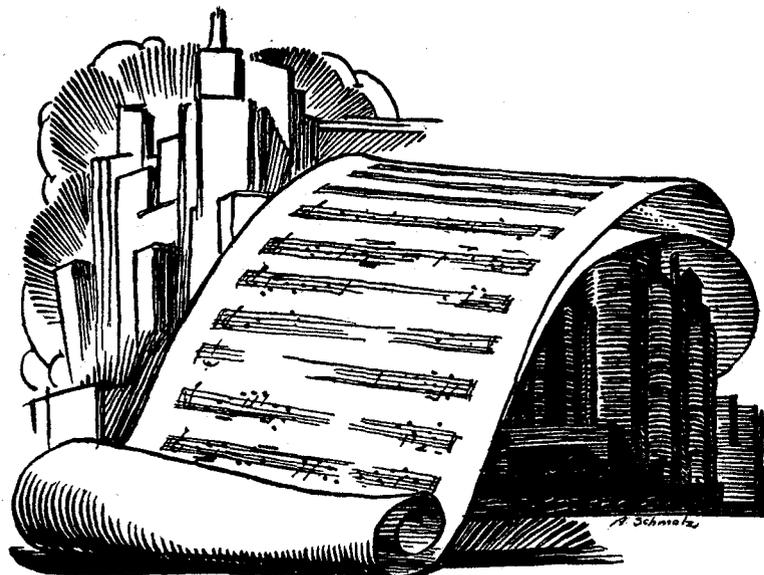
However, it is not a case of out with the old and in with the new. Advance there is, undoubtedly, yet it does not mean the disappearance of old means and old matter. Of late there has been a revival of the ballad of the nineties and everything thereunto appertaining. For this there are several reasons. First of all, the public for these monstrosities never died, any more than did the public of the melodrama, so the radio helped to bring back the ballad. Reaction against "hot" jazz brought "sweet" jazz; the "torch" song, that burning symbol of blue, unrequited love, is too sophisticated and, at bottom, insincere for the commoner. It is after all virtuosity, not veracity. Further reaction was bound to return in the direction of the Simple-Simon sob. So that, while at one end of Tin Pan Alley we witness a reaction toward virtuosity, complexity, and modernism, at the other we discover the ancient simplicities poking their unashamed heads up from behind the piano. "Art may come," they sing, "and art may go, but we live on forever."

Now, to ask of jazz a reformation of contemporary music, or to criticize it upon such a basis, is fatuous. Rather, let us see whether, in the story of any other country's popular music,

there has been any evolution to compare with that of ragtime and jazz. That American street music should, from its own miasma, have produced scores aiming at, and occasionally achieving symphonic values, is of historic importance. We recognize, in speech, an "American" language — a President's American — as distinguished from the King's English. Why should we be deaf to an equally "American" accent in music? Mr. Irving Schwerké, the French propagandist of American music, has very sensibly written, "Why America is to be blamed and the rest of the world praised for using jazz . . . must forever remain a mystery."

That jazz should have insinuated its way into the symphonic and operatic scores of a devitalized Europe provides, if nothing more, a highly interesting footnote in the history of modern music. For the first time in the history of the arts, Europe, through jazz, became a debtor continent to us. That jazz should breed, out of its own mechanization, irregularities to combat that machinery, lifts it by that same token above the commercial levels at which most of it is written and consumed.

If this is a "fiasco," then we may well wish for the popular music of other nations, and for our own, a few more such fiascos.



Young Men in Politics

by **WILBUR CROSS**

Governor of Connecticut

I

WHEREVER I go I find young college graduates intensely interested in the social and political affairs of Soviet Russia. If the subject comes up, as it generally does, in the talk at an informal gathering, the discussion at once becomes animated. Their remarks show that they are reading newspaper reports, magazine articles, and books dealing with Russian issues eagerly and thoughtfully. But when the conversation turns to American politics, the tone, until very recently, has at once changed. The life has gone out of it. Evidently they have not followed the speeches of our public leaders as they have followed those of Stalin. They have been inclined to treat the latest scandals in our municipal governments with boredom or cynicism. "Lousy" has been their word for the whole business.

Why is this so? Why is it that every summer increasing numbers of intelligent, alert young Americans take the fairly arduous and expensive trip to Moscow to see what is going on there and yet show so little desire to learn at first hand what is going on in Washington? I do not for a moment think that it is because they are all converts to Communism — or ever really expect to become converts. The answer is not so simple as that.

I believe that behind the enthusiasm among recent college graduates for visiting Russia is, first of all, the fact that they have been assured a warm welcome. Young people have always been peculiarly sensitive about going where they are not wanted, and the youth of our day, for all their confident air and loud talk, are no exceptions to this rule. By extensive and clever propaganda and by special facilities provided for sight-seeing, the Soviet Government makes young foreign tourists feel that they are wanted in Moscow to-day. And it assumes, apparently quite rightly, that they wish to learn something of the social and

political life of the country as well as of its museums and picture galleries.

Again, the young are naturally empiricists, and their school and college training in the scientific laboratories, in the courses in history or economics or sociology, if it has meant anything at all to them, has deepened their interest in experimentation. Now, whatever one may think of it, the fact is that a tremendous political-social experiment is being conducted at this moment in Russia. The whole country is obviously a vast laboratory. Its present rulers lose no opportunity to advertise the novelty and boldness of their effort. The fundamental premise of the entire structure is that this is a changing world and that they are the first to give effect and direction to the new movement of post-war life.

It is easy to see why, from this point of view, Russia exerts a fascination over young Americans fresh from their studies of civilization or science as a process of evolution. Nothing is further from my intention here than to present a brief for the Soviet Government. It may well be that experiments, social or economic, if not political, are now afoot in this country that will have a greater influence on history than anything that is happening in Russia. My point merely is that, if this is the case, they have not been effectively presented to the younger generation as vital or novel issues either in the speeches of our public men or in our conventional party platforms.

And this brings me to another reason for the vividness of the young American's interest in Russia. There is no question that, all superficial signs to the contrary in this year of grace, youth is still a period of crusading. The early twenties are a time of no compromise, of ardent loyalties and equally ardent prejudices. One does not have to be a professional psychologist to detect in the casual indifference or cynicism of many of the remarks one hears or