

Tales from the Square: 100 Years of Jazz transcript

Professor Catherine Tackley

You're listening to Tales from the Square with me Professor Catherine Tackley from the Department of Music at the University of Liverpool.

We're here today in the Tung Auditorium in the Yoko Ono Lennon Centre, which is a fantastic new facility here on campus. The Tung auditorium opened earlier in 2022. And it's a 400-seat venue. We use it a lot for teaching in the Music Department, but it also has an amazing series of public concerts, including the free lunchtime concerts, and a real variety of programming from classical right through to jazz, pop, and folk. So there's really something for everyone here.

My research centres on jazz in Britain, especially in the first half of the 20th century. So I'm really interested in looking at how what was of course, a music that originated in America, has transferred over into the UK and the history of that. I'm interested in the visiting musicians that came here, but possibly even more interested in how musicians here adopted jazz for themselves and how it developed in quite interesting and specific ways in the UK environment.

It seems like when we got to 2019, it was the ideal time to think about that 100 years history of the music being in this country. Now, I mean, technically, it probably had been here for a little bit longer than that. But I think a lot of people would quite rightly date 1919 as an important year in terms of the development of jazz in Britain. So it was the year in which two very important ensembles came and visited here both for quite some time, actually. One was the Original Dixieland Jazz Band that came from New Orleans, a group of five white men originally, interestingly, their, their piano player actually ended up not being with them and a British musician was brought in to replace them. So it was almost an Anglo-American band from when it was here.

And the other group was the Southern Syncopated Orchestra, which was a large group as the name orchestra might indicate, although they're not a conventional orchestra, of African American musicians that came, they were formed in New York coalesced in New York, and then came over to Britain again in 1919. And they were playing more in a kind of concert style for most of the time. But they did also have smaller groups that were offshoots that would go off and play for dancing as well, in fact, at some of the same venues as the original Dixieland Jazz Band. So 1919 was important for having all these American musicians in London at the same time.

Coming out at the end of the First World War, there was a real sort of sense of destruction. And people had lived through, you know, terrible events. But there was also quite an important generation that really had come of age during the war. So for them actually finding new ways to party on one level, but new ways to be socially was really important. And I think jazz was something that was new, it had a very specific identity. And I think for them sort of latching onto that, and I think especially being able to dance to this music was really significant. So it meant that quite quickly, they established modes of being and the etiquette associated with the ballroom and the music that was associated with that as well. That was all sort of thrown up into the air if you like. And there were new ways of dancing, there were new rhythms, there were new sounds from the bandstand. And that made really quite a fundamental difference to people's everyday lives.

Part of learning to dance in different ways. I mean, some of it was breaking out of the some of the norms of couple dancing and in some ways becoming more improvisatory on the on the dance floor, also sort of moving in different ways went alongside the changes that was happening with

particularly women's fashion. You know, you perhaps couldn't dance in a great big long dress or in a corset anymore, if you really wanted to be able to do these much sort of freer style of movement.

And I think I mean, the other things were, you know, the, the emergence of these big ballrooms that were much more socially open. I think, before that, if you wanted to dance in London, especially, you're looking at quite a high-class club or a big hotel or something like that, which was obviously quite restricted in terms of people that could access that. So again, in 1919 / 1920, you begin to see the opening of these new dance venues like the Palais de Dance the first of which was in Hammersmith, you didn't have to go as a couple necessarily anymore because they also had dance hosts and hostesses. So you could get somebody to come and dance with you if you weren't necessarily with anybody. And that meant that, you know, groups of women could go to dancing now in ways that just wouldn't have been something that happened before the war. So it was really quite a big social revolution. And jazz was the soundtrack to all of that.

Of course, there's a long history of a black population in in Britain, but I think African American musicians coming and being presented really on in the mainstream on the stages of variety halls and answers, it did bring people into contact with those musicians, and increasingly understanding jazz as part of African American culture. So you get a figure like Louis Armstrong, for example, who comes to Britain in the early 1930s. Now, for some people, his whole way of being his whole presentation, was actually deeply threatening, and they didn't understand it, perhaps. But for other people, they could totally appreciate what he was doing in terms of his improvisation, a different approach to music making, than a lot of people would have been used to. And so I think it did open people's eyes, to really understanding how music could be expressive of persecution and discrimination, as well as being something very enjoyable and entertaining as well. So it's a complex mix of reactions, I think.

We've got lots and lots of examples of stock orchestrations, the latest popular songs were arranged often for a group that could be as big as a, you know, a small band, or perhaps a small orchestra, you could buy them from your local music shop, to play with your band. Now, often, these scores would be quite adaptable, so you didn't necessarily need to have every instrument. So some instruments would be what we call cued-in. So you know, you might not have a trombone, but on the tenor sax part, it would say, play if no trombone, for example. So it was quite flexible for people to work with the musicians they had at their disposal.

Now, that would work very well on a local level. Perhaps if you had a semi-professional band, you could keep up to date by getting hold of the latest stock orchestrations, and playing them for your delighted audience of dancers on a Saturday night.

For the more perhaps established bands, who were broadcasting regularly playing in the bigger venues, in London or in the main cities, they would often get what was called 'special choruses' written, so they would get extra bits, or it might be an introduction or a coda that was a little bit different. But they would often still be working from the stock orchestration and add these extra bits in. And this is what I'm really interested in working on a little bit more. So I've worked with Jack Hilton's archive, which is at Lancaster University. And you can see that literally, they take the printed part of the stock orchestration, they cut it up, and the bits they don't want, they insert their own special choruses or special elements in which will make it their own and will make it distinct and will make people perhaps want to buy the record or perhaps even to transcribe what it was that they were doing if you had someone that had a very good ear, and then that could be replicated elsewhere in the country as well. So we know that went on, but I think there's a lot more stuff to discover about that practice.

The concept of jazz was really right there in popular culture before a lot of people would have heard the music because there was no radio, gramophone records were quite expensive. And even a band like the Original Dixieland Jazz Band that were here, you know, they were primarily in London, they didn't really tour. So the fact that people recognise jazz, aesthetically, and as a concept, I think, is quite significant.

So what it does mean is it translates through in various ways, not just musically. So we see real interest from painters but think there's also really important aesthetic dimension which we see in British design, both textiles and also ceramics in this period. So we see I think, the rhythm of jazz, this offbeat, syncopated feel, kind of comes into much more angular shapes and much more of a sense of rhythm in textiles than they have been previously. So you look at them, some of them almost let your eyes boggle because they're, they're full, they have zigzags and very geometric patterns now, which is quite different to what there was before. And also in ceramics, the same kind of design clashing, almost bright colours, again, the sort of zigzag motif that often comes through in those kinds of designs as well.

And I think what's really important about that is that these were things that people could bring into their own homes, and particularly when you start looking at sort of post war reconstruction as well, the idea that it's about making a home and you could perhaps have decorative items that would bring your home more up to date. So I really liked the idea that somebody might have bought a bit of fabric to make a cushion or a throw or a bought a vase or a tea set that had one of these sort of jazzy designs on and that was their way of perhaps engaging with that aesthetic of the times that was coming from the music, but translating through into the visual arts, but the fact that you could experience that domestically I think is quite significant.