

# NewStatesman

MUSIC & THEATRE

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## **“Fascination and fear”: Rhythm and Reaction shows how Edwardian Britain responded to jazz**

A new exhibition charts the influence of, and racism towards, the musicians bringing jazz across the Atlantic.

**H**ard as it may now be to imagine but, a century ago jazz was a wild, untamed music fresh off the boat from America. Hated by conservatives, loved by youths; both the soundtrack to wild clubbing and a sonic siren for modernism, jazz meant many things – not least that the UK would spend the rest of the century following developments in African American music.

What kind of reception did those black American musicians get when they came to the UK? This isn't a question often asked – UK pop/ rock histories love to go on about Jimi Hendrix being welcomed here at a time when Americans didn't recognize his genius, and old Mississippi blues men settling in Yorkshire because it was so much more

welcoming than the Jim Crow South. When this is stated, there is often a collective outbreak of patting ourselves on the back for not being racists – at least towards musicians we like – unlike our cousins across the Atlantic. But that was 50 years ago. How about a century ago?

“Fascination and fear  
sums it up well,”  
says Professor  
Catherine Tackley  
when asked about  
how Edwardian  
England responded  
to the influx of jazz  
musicians. “There  
was certainly a  
strong novelty  
element, and jazz  
being understood as  
black music certainly  
established it for  
some as a threat.  
There was overt  
racism expressed,  
particularly towards members of black theatre companies which was  
also tied up with oppositions to 'Alien' workers more widely.”

Tackley is Head of Music at the University of Liverpool and curator of an exhibition that opened late-January in London. *Rhythm & Reaction: The Age of Jazz in Britain* looks, at first glance, to be just another gathering of old artifacts from a bygone age. And yet while this exhibition may trade in arcane items from a sepia era, *Rhythm & Reaction* provides both a fascinating overview of a largely forgotten time and a history lesson: documented here is how a new American sound, created by pioneering black musicians, would go on to resonate across Britain.

The exhibition emphasises how, almost a century ago, the “jazz age” – as F. Scott Fitzgerald famously described a post-WW1 USA, overflowing with money, confidence and hot music – also existed in the UK. Admittedly, in a nation traumatized by the war, Britain's jazz age was never going to be as loud and ostentatious as that then underway in the US. But what *Rhythm & Reaction* makes evident is how jazz inspired an outbreak of British creativity – not just music making but painting, graphic design, fashion, journalism, textiles, even ceramicists responded to the sound of New Orleans.

Using the end of WW1  
as a starting point,  
the exhibition begins  
by acknowledging  
earlier African  
American musicians

who had performed  
in Britain. In 1873 the  
Fisk Jubilee Singers  
toured widely to raise  
funds for a black  
university in  
Tennessee (and sang  
for Queen Victoria:  
her Royal Highness  
was impressed) while  
minstrels worked the  
music hall circuit

from the 1870s on and would remain popular up into the post-WW2  
years (so much so they inspired the now infamous Black & White  
Minstrels TV series). Ragtime arrived in England just before WW1 and  
fed into a craze for American dances such as the Lindy Hop and the  
Grizzly (swing dance's origins are here). But jazz, unlike the  
aforementioned genres, launched a cultural revolution.

Jazz detonated in London in 1919 with the arrival of The Original  
Dixieland Jass Band – a crude, if energetic and entertaining, white  
quintet. The ODJB resonated with British youths in a manner  
comparable to the arrival of Elvis in the 1950s, Jimi Hendrix in the

1960s, The Ramones in the 1970s and Run-DMC in the 1980s. Raw American music, often involving more energy than skill, excited and inspired British youths (while upsetting their elders) across the 20th Century.

Featuring striking paintings by William Patrick Roberts and Edward Burra alongside exceptional graphic and textile work, Tackley's exhibition makes a case for jazz being at the forefront of British modernism. The jazz musicians may have paid little or no attention to developments in painting and literature, but they fired up all kinds of creative possibilities here.

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sex. Inevitably, race came into play in an era where the UK was predominantly white and a colonial mentality shaped through centuries of Empire meant people with dark skins were often treated as inferior. Sex and race have often proved an explosive combination, as reflected by a selection of paintings and cartoons featured by *Rhythm & Reaction*. These range from crude caricatures of musicians as savages, through to Scottish artist J.B. Souter's painting *The*



**Breakdown.** The Breakdown featured in the Royal Academy's 1926 Summer Exhibition and, in portraying a naked white woman dancing to a fully clothed black saxophonist (who sits on a broken classical bust), immediately proved controversial: Edgar Jackson, the editor of *Melody Maker* (the first UK magazine devoted to jazz), decried the painting, but not because of its toxic racism. Instead, Jackson stated, “We demand also that the habit of associating our music with the primitive and barbarous negro derivation shall cease forthwith”.

Jackson campaigned for jazz to be seen as a sophisticated Anglo-Saxon music. The aptly named Paul Whiteman – a white American bandleader who played symphonic jazz, ie jazz softened with elements of light classical music – was its exemplar and very popular in the 1920s. But there was no hiding that the musical geniuses pushing jazz forth were the likes of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, both of whom began touring the UK in the early 1930s. Not that they were welcomed by all: Armstrong’s London debut found *The Daily Herald*’s critic writing of the man who would touch more lives than almost any other 20th Century musician, “He looks and behaves like an untrained gorilla”.

“Stereotype was never far away,” says Tackley, “and the point I make is that this can be traced back to the exaggerated portrayals in minstrelsy. There was an impulse to 'civilise' 'primitive' jazz via

dance music, but then in the 1930s particularly, a growing realisation that individual improvisation by black musicians was a key aspect of the music. Black musicians generally seem to have been welcomed here. That review of Armstrong is extreme, and he does seem to have been more problematic for British audiences than Ellington, because the latter fitted better with dance bands on stage and dance halls.”

Indeed, *Rhythm & Reaction* doesn’t dwell on the negative, instead offering insight into how black musicians, increasingly from Britain’s Caribbean colonies, came to win loyal audiences here. Striking photos of Ken “Snakehips” Johnson – who led the first all black British jazz band until a Luftwaffe bomb killed him on the bandstand of London’s Café du Paris in 1941 – hint at a black British identity that would develop more widely three decades later.

“For black Britons working in the entertainment industry offered important opportunities for those that would have been limited in terms of career advancement and social mobility,” says Tackley.

“Jazz certainly brought races together, particularly musicians, but also audiences, in a way that was problematic to some degree in this period.”

Synchronicity of sorts finds *Rhythm & Reaction* connecting with two recent Radio 4 series that both survey British music making just

before the jazz age. Clarke Peters (of *The Wire*) presented three episodes of *Black Music In Europe: A Hidden History* so looking at the pre-jazz music making of Africans and African Americans in England (and further a field) while Cerys Matthews presented a five-parter on the pioneers of the British recording industry that was taking shape as jazz took hold. While they are both fascinating series to listen to,

*Rhythm & Reaction* allows the viewer to meditate on a great range of objects and build their own associations.

By shining a light on a very British response to a very American musical phenomenon of almost a century ago, *Rhythm & Reaction* poses plenty of questions for a UK once again divided over identity and outsiders.

*Rhythm & Reaction: The Age of Jazz in Britain* is at Two Temple Place until the 22 April.