

The Times | 2 Arts
UK, Print
26 January 2018
Circulation: 402,752
EVE: £163,170

Rees & Co



THE  TIMES

2 ARTS

January 26 | 2018

Is this the best ever film about the Great War? Probably

Sam Claflin in Journey's End

The cover features a close-up portrait of Sam Claflin as a World War I soldier. He is wearing a green Brodie helmet, a brown trench coat with a "SURREY" regimental badge, and a yellow shirt with a brown tie. The background is a blurred, greyish landscape.

exhibition

Sex, drugs and saxophone solos: the music that jazzed up Britain

An exhibition shows how in the 1920s jazz music liberated and terrified us with its subversive attitude to race and sexual freedom, says **Will Hodgkinson**

It may be hard to imagine, but jazz once threatened to turn the nation's youth into drug-crazed zombies, inspire uncontrollable levels of licentiousness, upset the interior decor schemes of all the smartest addresses and generally transform this green and pleasant land into a cavalcade of debauchery. It was punk rock, rave and hip-hop rolled into one. A fascinating new exhibition, *Rhythm & Reaction: the Age of Jazz in Britain*, reveals just how big an impact the music made on our country between the wars and how it tied up with our complex attitudes on race.

"It's a combination of fear and fascination, often in the same response," says Catherine Tackley, the head of music at Liverpool University and the exhibition's curator, on how Britain coped with the arrival of black America's foremost art form. "Even Louis Armstrong's appearance shocked people. They thought he would be much bigger."



That fear and fascination is encapsulated in a 1926 painting by the Scottish artist John Bulloch Souter.

The Breakdown depicts a top-hatted black man sitting on a broken classical statue and blasting away on his saxophone while a naked, white, female figure writhes in rhythmic ecstasy beside him. The devastation of the First World War made a mockery of the British establishment's moral framework, and for the Lost Generation that came in its wake, jazz, with its associations of speed, freedom and escape, was the great liberation. It is the uneasy relationship between jazz, race and 1920s Britain that this small but clever exhibition seeks to evoke.

Recent V&A shows on David Bowie and Pink Floyd have established 20th-century rock stars as ideal subjects for blockbuster shows, but the panelled walls of William Waldorf Astor's neo-gothic Victorian mansion at 2 Temple Place



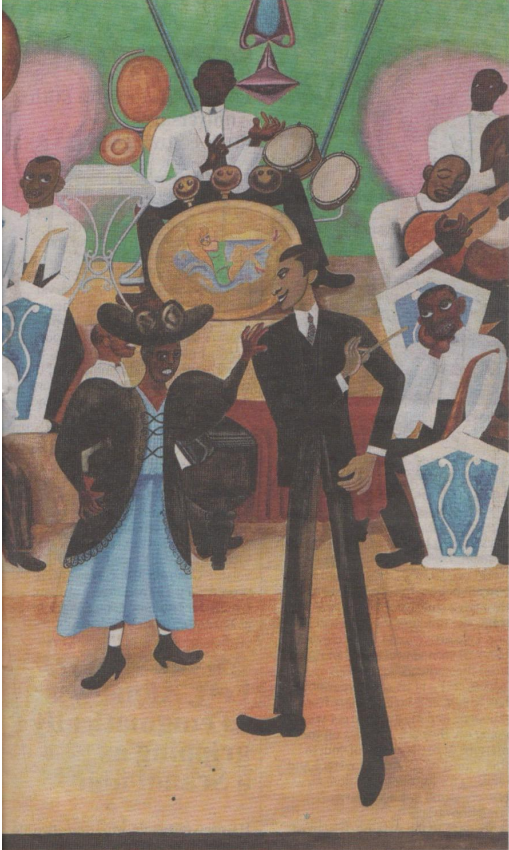
Edward Burra's watercolour *The Band*, 1934. Left: a 1930s jazz pattern

won't allow for that kind of scale. *Rhythm & Reaction* consequently takes a different approach, focusing on small details to tell its story. Publicity stills from the early African-American musical *In Dahomey*, which arrived in Britain in 1903, show its stars blacked up, even though they were black

“Even interior design took a jazz turn”

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ceramic vase designed by Enoch Boulton for Carlton Ware

already; they were just not black enough to conform to the era's prevailing image of Negro otherness. A costume from the 1925 ballet *Jazz* combines a straw skirt and ostrich-feather headdress with a jaunty polka-dot blouse, a seamless blend of primitivism and modernism.

Jazz also encouraged integration. A promotional poster from 1939 depicts a remarkably dapper Ken "Snakehips" Johnson, Britain's first black bandleader, in an art deco-style photo collage. When a bomb landed on the Café de Paris in 1941 during the Blitz and took out Johnson and half of his band, the surviving

musicians found jobs alongside their white counterparts.

As tends to happen with genres first perceived as wild or threatening, jazz was ultimately bowdlerised and made respectable, and a series of paintings chart jazz's move into the mainstream. In William Patrick Roberts's *The Dance Club (The Jazz Party)* from 1923, men and women carouse and gamble in an underground dive. By 1925 Mabel Frances Layng's *The Tea Dance* was depicting a more genteel scene, with smartly dressed couples dancing to a band of white musicians.

By 1931 it had all gone terribly wrong. Edward Burra's hallucinogenic



Above: the Original Dixieland Jazz Band at the Palais de Dance, Hammersmith, in 1919. Right: 1924 London Transport poster by Horace Taylor. Below right: a novelty drum, c1935

John Deth (Homage to Conrad Aitken) shows Death himself getting in on the scene, leering over a fallen woman at a decadent party of distorted, gargoyle-like characters. By the 1930s jazz had become associated with cocaine and prostitution, and Burra, whose modernist paintings of Harlem street scenes are also included, was depicting the Death Dance, a moral fear of the day that all this fast living could only end badly.

Elsewhere the exhibition shows how jazz influenced British tastes in less life-threatening ways. Interior design took a jazz turn: gone was the William Morris floral wallpaper in fashionable middle-class homes, to be replaced by jagged, rhythmic prints. London Underground used art deco designs on posters to advertise the prospect of catching the Tube to your favourite dance hall. There is even a collection of jazz pottery from 1930, for which Enoch Boulton designed geometric, brightly coloured shapes on a series of



exhibition

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glazed vases and tea sets for Carlton Ware. And jazz was everywhere, not confined to specialist clubs but on the radio, in the ballrooms and on the phonographs of those who could afford one. As the writer Anthony Hunt said of the era: "The immediate postwar reaction was colour at all costs: jazz and forgetfulness."

Rhythm & Reaction contains plenty of the objects you may expect, such as 78s by Louis Armstrong and Fats Waller, copies of *Melody Maker* and *Rhythm* magazine, photographs of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band who came to Britain in 1919 to kick the whole thing off, and Pathe newsreels of various musicians cooking up a storm.

The most fascinating aspect of the exhibition, however, is the way in which it shows how nothing changes. There will always be simplified notions of how people of other races and places behave. The older generation will always be shocked by the changing values of the young. And new musical styles will continue to be written off as fads, only to capture their times and endure far longer than predicted.

In 1927's *The Appeal of Jazz* the writer Robert Mendil doubted whether jazz would last to the end of the decade, but surmised that it nonetheless "expresses the spirit of the age we live in". He was half-right, at least.

Rhythm & Reaction: The Age of Jazz in Britain is showing at Two Temple Place, London WC2 (020 7836 3715), to April 22