



as the music of other Ragtime pioneers: James Reese Europe (1881-1919), Ferdinand “Jelly Roll” Morton (1890-1941) and Will Marion Cook (1869-1944). Morton referred to the Latin rhythms in Ragtime as “the Spanish tinge.”

Cook, who studied with the iconic Czech composer, Antonín Dvorák, and brilliant Hungarian violinist, Joseph Joachim, aspired to be “the black Beethoven.” Joplin studied piano with German-born piano teacher, Julius Weiss, growing up in Texarkana, Texas, and would eventually compose dozens of Ragtime compositions, a ballet and two operas.

Dvorák taught at Jeannette Thurber’s National Conservatory of Music in Harlem from 1892-95, and it was his contention that it would only be a matter of time before America found a unique voice in the music world. His intuition proved to be correct. Novelist and film director, Rupert Hughes, writing in *Etude Magazine* in 1920, echoed Dvorák’s contention:

“American Ragtime or ‘Jazz,’ which is Ragtime raised to the nth power... behind it there is a gem of something wonderful, which the composer with ears made in America may well build into the master music of tomorrow.”

The multi-talented James Reese Europe played the violin, mandolin and piano and became one of the most influential musicians in New York in the pre-World War I era. A highly regarded music director, arranger and a successful cabaret pianist, J. R. Europe was a key figure in developing black musical theater in the city, as well as the founder of the first musician’s union for African-Americans who desired to make their way into the music industry.



*The Clef Club Orchestra with James Reese Europe, 1912 (courtesy Eubie Blake Collection, Maryland Historical Society).*

In 1910, J. R. Europe formed the Clef Club Orchestra (later renamed the Southern Syncopated Orchestra), that performed both Ragtime and concert music. Will Cook became the Clef Club’s choral director and occasionally conducted the orchestra as well. In 1912, the Clef Club made history when it presented a concert at Carnegie Hall for the benefit of the Colored Music Settlement School in New York City — the first Jazz ensemble to play at that esteemed venue. It is hard to overstate the social importance of that Carnegie Hall concert in the history of Jazz in the United States.

In the opinion of Jazz historian and composer, Gunther Schuller, James Reese Europe “had stormed the bastion of the white establishment and made many members of New York’s cultural elite aware of Negro music for the first time.” Jazz legend Eubie Blake called J. R. Europe “the savior of Negro musicians, in a class with Booker T. Washington and Martin Luther King.” The Clef Club’s Carnegie Hall concert was particularly significant in that it demonstrated the power of art and music to assist in the process of overcoming the barriers of race and class.

David Mannes, concertmaster at the time of the New York Symphony Orchestra, and director of the Colored Music Settlement School, was of the opinion that music was a universal language that could serve as a catalyst in bridging racial divides. Mannes’ views regarding the social power of music were echoed by his colleague, the noted ethnomusicologist and civil rights activist, Natalie Curtis, who said, “If anything can bring harmony from the present clashing of the two races during this difficult period of problems and adjustment, it might as well be the peace-giver, music.” She was a resolute advocate of the promotion of African-American music and the idea this music could be a factor in promoting American cultural development and “the spirit of Democracy.”

Delta and Chicago Blues (Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson, John Lee Hooker, et. al.) arrived a generation after Cook, Joplin and Europe, but the influences of the Ragtime composers and their Blues brethren

would have a lasting influence on the evolution of American music for decades. We simply cannot imagine the contemporary iterations of Pop, Blues and Rock music without acknowledging the influence of these iconic musical pioneers.

Another socially important aspect of American popular music is how it came to represent the life and times of the “common man.” With the emergence of the middle class after the Industrial Revolution, the distinctions between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” musical expressions were militated by the increased democratization of American life. As social conditions changed, music — and people’s response and expectations of it — also changed.

Popular music didn’t receive the same critical analysis that classical art music did as it was to be enjoyed in a way that was free from an intellectual or elitist gaze. Commenting on this condition, Roger Scruton observes that American popular music is “democratic and global... able to defeat any rival simply by its refusal to believe in rivalry, happily appropriating every sound that could be reissued as a song.”

It is undeniable that American popular culture has become one of America’s most influential cultural exports. As Scruton asserts:

“One conclusion to draw from the history of American popular music is that we should take the word ‘popular’ seriously... this music was not imposed upon the American people by an unscrupulous ‘culture industry’ [the neo-Marxist supposition of Theodor Adorno, et. al.]. It arose ‘by an invisible hand’ from spontaneous music-making, with a large input from Afro-American music, both secular and religious.”

As such, it was music very much of the people, by the people and for the people. This development caused some consternation among the intellectual class, whose tendency to promote the “sacralization” of high art as something higher or nobler, led to the practice of making distinctions between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” tastes in music. As Scruton points out, this was due to the “common man” aspect of American music, and because “it gets up the intellectual nose, precisely because it seems to leave no opening for the would be ‘priesthood.’” Intellectuals often have a difficult time accepting the idea that “the spontaneous choices of ordinary people might be the final explanation of their social world.”

In the prologue of his influential book, *Highbrow, Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Lawrence W. Levine cites several instances in which his friends and colleagues took him to task for not making qualitative distinctions between American popular artists and their “more serious” European counterparts. Yet, the idea of musical cross-fertilization can be said to be in accord with Cheon Il Guk: two becoming one.

This, again, is what our founder suggested in the juxtaposing of varying styles and genres. Assimilation has been the American way, but we can easily ascertain it’s the heavenly way as well.

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*David Eaton has been Music Director of the New York City Symphony since 1985. In addition to his conducting career, he has been an active composer, arranger and producer with 55 original compositions and over 700 arrangements and transcriptions to his credit. One of his recent compositions, “70 and Counting!”, was performed at the United Nations as part of its 70th Anniversary concert in 2015. In 2016, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by UTS.*

Photo at top: The music for the “Garden Hymn,” known to Unificationists as “Song of the Garden,” from the 1835 edition of the Southern Harmony hymnal.