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Fascination and Fear: Responses to Early Jazz in Britain

The 'jazz age' has become romanticised in retrospect, and indicative of the supposedly universal appeal of jazz on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1920s. Although jazz, both as a specific musical style and an abstract idea, was omnipresent in British society at this time, its obvious popularity was balanced by the correspondingly strong outrage and antipathy that it provoked among some quarters in Britain. Indeed, R.W.S. Mendl thought it necessary to include a chapter on the dislike of jazz in *The Appeal of Jazz*, the first British book on the subject (1927).¹ Whilst jazz represented a welcome escape from the complexities of modern life, it could also present a significant threat to the foundations of tradition. However, those who were opposed to jazz had often never experienced the music for themselves; Canon Drummond, as cited in Neil Wynn's introduction, admitted that he 'had no personal experience of the art of Jazz dancing'.² Therefore, to understand the variety of responses to early jazz in Britain, it is necessary to look beyond the musical material to consider the image of jazz. As I have argued elsewhere, this had been firmly established in Britain before the well-documented arrival of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band in 1919 and was extremely influential on the reception of jazz in Britain.³

¹ Robert W.S Mendl, *The Appeal of Jazz* (Glasgow: Robert Maclehose, 1927).

² *Times* (15 March 1919) 7.

³ Catherine J. Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain, 1880-1935* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

Jazz was certainly not viewed as an isolated development when it appeared in Britain, as it was initially presented in revue shows as the latest in a series of American dance music styles to cross the Atlantic. Jazz was incorporated into revues as a modern and fashionable replacement for ragtime, a style that had been popular since around 1912 but was considered to be outdated after the War. Jazz was also linked with previous forms of African American music that had been presented in Britain through the inclusion of the banjo in almost all jazz bands well into the 1920s. The banjo was the instrument most closely associated with black music due to the minstrel show, and had developed a clear musical and symbolic identity by the end of the nineteenth century. The continued use of the banjo also enabled blackface stereotypes, which had been established in the nineteenth century as truisms for a public that had limited acquaintance with black people, to continue to influence the reception of jazz in the twentieth century. Therefore the importance of previous experiences of African American culture in influencing the reception of jazz in Britain cannot be underestimated.

When discussing the response of white South Americans to black culture, Christopher Small writes that ‘white people have always viewed black culture with a mixture of fascination, fear and even envy’.⁴ Two specific and important factors emerge in the British reception of minstrelsy that can also be observed in reactions to jazz, and exemplify Small’s premise. Firstly, the idea of the Negro as ‘primitive’ influenced the positive reception of black entertainers in Britain as representative of a culture that was fascinatingly ‘other’ in its simplicity. Specifically, an innate musicality was considered to be one of the characteristics of the otherwise ‘primitive’ Negro, an idea that was confirmed through the centrality of music in the minstrel

⁴ Christopher Small, *Music of the Common Tongue: Survival and Celebration in Afro- American Music* (London: Calder 1994) 141.

show. At the same time, the 'primitivism' of the Negro could engender an attitude that black culture was fundamentally inferior in an extension of 'scientific racism'. This imagery was also used in support of colonialism, particularly in British exhibitions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵

Secondly, although the popularity of minstrel shows from the 1840s onwards⁶ demonstrates that 'there was need in white culture for what black culture had to offer',⁷ black entertainment that was understood to be founded on realism was less popular than versions presented by whites in blackface. The apparently threatening nature of the 'realistic' portrayals of black culture to the British public is shown by problems encountered by Sam Hague, who brought an all-black troupe to Britain in 1866. In the end, Hague had to replace most of the troupe with white, blacked-up performers 'as the public seemed to prefer the imitation nigger'.⁸ The competition between black and blackface minstrel shows would have increased the pressure for black minstrels to conform to white stereotypes for their survival. The threat of 'genuine' black minstrel performers was clearly being felt in Britain as late as 1912, as one writer commented:

When the nigger-minstrel can wash his race off after office hours he is harmless; but the true negro singer is often a dangerous fellow to be let loose in a hall - we dare not be so familiar with him.⁹

⁵ Marika Sherwood, 'White Myths, Black Omissions: the Historical Origins of Racism' in Britain in *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research* Vol. 3 (1) 2003 (<http://www.centres.ex.ac.uk/historyresource/journal5/Sherwood.rtf>).

⁶ See Michael Pickering, 'White Skin, Black Masks: 'Nigger' minstrelsy in Victorian Britain' in Jacqueline S. Bratton, (ed.) *Music Hall: Performance and Style* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986); Michael Pickering, 'John Bull in Blackface' in *Popular Music* Vol. 16 (2), 1997; Harry Reynolds, *Minstrel Memories: The Story of Burnt Cork Minstrels in Great Britain 1836-1927* (London: Alston Rivers, 1928).

⁷ Ben Sidran, *Black Talk* (New York: Da Capo, 1981) 32.

⁸ Reynolds, *Minstrel Memories* 165.

⁹ William R. Titterton, *From Theatre to Music Hall* (London: Stephen Swift, 1912) 213.

In this essay, I will consider the different responses to jazz in Britain in the 1920s, which demonstrate the manifestation of the emotions of fascination, fear and envy. I will conclude with close analysis of the reactions to Louis Armstrong's first appearances in Britain in 1932.

When jazz came to prominence in Britain during the 1920s, the understanding of its links with black culture were the source of some extreme responses of fascination and fear. The appeal of jazz as a black music in the 1920s was inherently linked with the contemporary interest in the primitive. Jazz had appeal as an exotic music, which like minstrelsy, whose protagonists opposed 'the dominant moral and institutional order' of the Victorians, offered escapism to British audiences by providing an 'inverted image of society'.¹⁰ Stanley Nelson described the post-war embrace of 'primitive' culture through the adoption of jazz as dance music:

'The War shattered many of our illusions and brought us nearer to earthy things. That is why the artificiality of the Victorians in their dance music was superseded by a dance music [jazz] which was unashamedly proud of showing its crude emotional stress'¹¹

In the 1920s, the perceived simplicity and freedom of black culture could be something desirable for whites to emulate, rather than just observe or imitate, and jazz 'seemed to promise cultural as well as musical freedom' for young people.¹² Although this was tinged with misunderstanding based on the long-held assumption that black art was the unsophisticated 'low other' of Western culture, this attitude seems to demonstrate genuine interest and appreciation of the perceived 'authentic' qualities of

¹⁰ Pickering, 'White Skin, Black Masks', 88-89.

¹¹ Stanley R. Nelson, *All About Jazz* (London: Heath Cranton Ltd, 1934) 170.

¹² Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 128.

black culture. For the 'Bright Young Things' caught up in the aftermath of a war that prompted the basis of Western civilisation to be questioned, the values of 'primitive' black culture could act as a constructive replacement for the ruined past, offering a less complicated alternative to modern life, and was also a way in which they could subvert tradition: 'Whites gravitated toward black music and black culture in general because they felt it expressed the abandon and hedonism toward which they liked to think they were moving'.¹³

Paradoxically, primitivism can also be read as the rejection of the whole idea of the modern age, with the Negro as a cultural primitive who 'maintained a kind of escapist innocence in the face of technology - a myth perpetuated by blacks who were gaining respectability in white society'.¹⁴ But yet, the prominence of black culture in so many art forms in the 1920s, particularly through the art and literature of the 'Harlem Renaissance', established the 'primitive' Negro, ironically, as a primarily modern idea. Jazz was unique in presenting this 'primitive' culture in a way in which it could be assimilated, reproduced and experienced directly by whites, and thus 'became a cultural shorthand for that which was both supremely modern and, through its African roots, connected with the exotic origins of things. It was the music of the urban jungle'.¹⁵ The paradoxical expression 'urban jungle' is particularly apt when describing the simultaneous expression of 'supreme modernity' and 'the exotic origins of things' in London in the 1920s. Jazz encapsulates musically the metaphor of the 'urban jungle', as its modernity was expressed through its perceived 'primitive' rhythmic qualities.

Jazz provoked a 'primitivist' response through dancing that was increasingly improvisational. Dancing was now a response to the basic rhythm of the music, rather

¹³ Sidran, *Black Talk* 54.

¹⁴ Sidran, *Black Talk* 54.

¹⁵ Adam Lively, *Masks: Blackness, Race and the Imagination* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1998) 99.

than a formal series of steps, and required participants to become absorbed in the music. Jazz dancing as a social activity encouraged the division between young and old, freedom of expression and the liberation and sexual freedom of women. Significantly, dancing was a more overtly sexual experience than previously as partners could dance pressed closely together for balance, and women's dresses were more revealing. The 'primitive' and exotic associations of the music were enhanced by the environment of the new dance clubs were decorated in unusual, other-worldly colour schemes, and the prevalence of drink and drugs within these venues, which pointed to the function of jazz as a source of escape from the modern world.

The 'primitive' associations of jazz also provoked fearful responses from sections of British society. The popularity of jazz as a subversive alternative to convention meant that it presented a threat to those that felt responsible for upholding tradition and moral values. In particular, the overt sexuality of the jazz dance provoked strong opposition to jazz at this time. Canon Drummond referred to jazz as 'a dance so low, so demoralizing and of such a low origin - the dance of the low niggers in America' and Sir Dyce Duckworth described 'wild dance - amid noises only fit for West African savages - held in London drawing rooms'.¹⁶ Adverse comparisons between jazz and classical music were used as a fundamental source for those that wished to denigrate jazz. Essentially, comparing jazz to classical music could show that jazz was simple and under-developed particularly with respect to its harmonic basis, and its supposed dependence on rhythmic aspects clearly identified it as 'lowbrow'. This was a source of misguided criticism, particularly, as Mendl points out, from 'some of the most notable men in the musical world' whose views were often published in the national press and thus perpetuated the misunderstanding of

¹⁶ *Times*, (15 March 1919) 7; *Times* (18 March 1919) 7.

jazz.¹⁷ Such comments contributed to an image of jazz that clearly rendered it unsuitable as entertainment in civilised British life.

This opposition to jazz was clearly symptomatic of the racial prejudice in British society at this time. Racially motivated violence was prevalent in Britain in the post-war period, due fierce competition for jobs between black workers and demobilized white soldiers. The violence was often also sexually motivated, as black men were perceived to have ‘taken’ white women whilst white men were at war.¹⁸ Objections to black workers extended to the entertainment profession, where African American performers appearing on the stage were perceived to be putting British actors out of work. Negative aspects of blackface stereotypes, such as the supposed propensity of black men to steal and to have extreme sexual urges, were used in support of this discrimination. African American performers were often restricted to performing racially specific entertainment on the British stage in order to be granted work permits, as it could be shown that this could not be provided by the local population, but this often had the effect of perpetuating stereotypes still further. Numerous all-black shows were staged in London, including the ‘plantation revues’ *The Rainbow* and *Dover Street to Dixie* in 1923. These productions had imported African American casts and caused significant controversy in the national and theatrical press.¹⁹

Black people and jazz found refuge from prejudice within mainstream society in the nightclubs of the underworld of London. Many nightclubs had sprung up even within the relatively small area of Soho in London’s West End in the post-war period, an area that Robert Fabian, a policeman in the 1920s, called ‘The Square Mile of Vice

¹⁷ Mendl, *The Appeal of Jazz* 60.

¹⁸ See Jacqueline Jenkinson, ‘The 1919 Race Riots in Britain: A Survey’ in Rainer E. Lotz/Ian Pegg (eds) *Under the Imperial Carpet: Essays in Black History 1780-1950* (Crawley, Sussex: Rabbit Press, 1986).

¹⁹ See Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*, Chapter 7.

... where you can buy anything and see everything'.²⁰ There were in fact many different sorts of club in London at this time, embodying varying degrees of 'vice', and Seabrook, in his guide to London nightlife in *Brightest Spots in Brighter London*, wrote that 'London night clubs are not at all to be avoided as seats of Satan'.²¹ Nevertheless, in the 1920s 'the very words "night-club" immediately suggest to some people the picture of something degraded and disreputable',²² due to the fact that for most of the general public, knowledge of nightclubs was restricted to stories of scandalous activities that were published in newspaper reports. Although the image of nightclubs described in newspapers tended to be exaggerated, sensationalist and presented in such a way that it was seen as representative of all establishments, there were elements of truth contained within it. Criminal activity, ranging from holding dances without a license to armed robbery and drug dealing, was rife in nightclubs of all types. The fact that jazz flourished as the main form of entertainment in this environment, which had close associations with alcohol, drugs and prostitution, and also was increasingly understood as a black music at a time of growing racial intolerance, served to cement a negative image of jazz for the general public.

Whilst black people were suffering increasing racism in mainstream British society, there is strong evidence that they were probably much more welcome in the alternative communities of underworld of London which represented 'the negative image of daytime society'.²³ Seabrook noted the racial mix in nightclubs: 'The types of frequenters are as diverse as are their races, colours and creeds.'²⁴ Fabian describes

²⁰ Robert Fabian, *London After Dark* (London: Naldrett Press, 1954) 10.

²¹ Sydney A. Moseley, (ed.) *Brightest Spots in Brighter London: A Comprehensive Guide to London Amusements, Shopping Centres and Features of Interest to the Visitor* (London: Stanley Paul Moseley, 1924) 137.

²² Kate Meyrick, *Secrets of the 43* (London: John Long, 1933) 88.

²³ Marek Kohn, *Dope Girls: the Birth of the British Drug Underground* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1992) 125.

²⁴ Moseley, *Brightest Spots* 138.

the existence of 'coloured clubs', such as the 'Big Apple', and gives a fascinating insight into the music that could be heard in such places:

I learnt all about jazz, boogie-woogie and calypso from my coloured friends years before they became known outside the murky little "coloured clubs". When we were all in the mood - which was often - I would persuade them to give me a "jam session" that would have opened new doors to any white musician, who had cared to spare the time to listen, in those days.²⁵

It was probably only in nightclubs that jazz performers, and particularly black musicians, were able to express themselves fully through their art. However, the increasing presence of black people in this underworld environment in the 1920s meant that they could be held publicly responsible for its associated social problems, for example, dark-skinned foreigners were held responsible for supplying drugs to vulnerable young white girls, often with fatal consequences.²⁶ Although few published songs of 1919 depicted black performers of jazz, those that do are derogatory or patronising in nature, for example, 'You ought to hear those crazy tunes/Played by all those crazy coons' in the 1918 song *Jazz!* by Grey and Ayer. Similarly, the black origins of jazz were generally only mentioned in contemporary articles by those who wished to criticise jazz. Mendl suggests in the chapter entitled 'The Dislike of Jazz Music' that people in Britain were averse to jazz in the twenties because of their 'antipathy towards everything connected with the nigger' and that jazz was regularly denounced in the 1920s as 'vulgar, coarse and crude and ugly; it is

²⁵ Fabian, *London After Dark* 15.

²⁶ For example, the case of the nightclub hostess Freda Kempton, who was supplied with cocaine by the notorious Brilliant Chang. Kempton's death from an overdose in 1922 received extensive coverage in the national press. See Kohn, Chapter 8.

described as a debased product and its popularity is said to be the sign of a decadent age'.²⁷

These attitudes are epitomised in J.B. Souter's painting, *The Breakdown*, in which the corrupting influence of jazz as a black music is clearly implied.²⁸ The picture was included in the 1926 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition and was commended as 'a work of great promise executed with a considerable degree of excellence' by the President of the Royal Academy, Frank Dicksee.²⁹ However, after only five days the picture was removed from the exhibition under instruction from the Colonial Office, as the subject 'was considered to be obnoxious to British subjects living abroad in daily contact with a coloured population', showing continued governmental concern for imperial integrity.³⁰ The painting depicts a black man in evening dress playing the saxophone. In the 1920s, as we have seen, jazz was increasingly identified as a black music, and the saxophone was adopted as a distinctive new musical timbre and a clear visual symbol of modern dance music, hence this figure represents 'jazz'. A naked white woman, a shingled, androgynous figure, dances to the music of the saxophonist, representing 1920s youth. The saxophone player is seated on a shattered Greek statue, possibly Minerva, a goddess associated with virginity, wisdom and the arts, traditional values with which the figures in the painting are apparently in disregard. Similarly, it is clear that due to the increasing representation of jazz as black music, and the concurrent move of black musicians into the nightclubs, by the end of the decade jazz was firmly positioned, metaphorically and literally, as the musical accompaniment to the other perceived evils of the underworld of London.

²⁷ Mendl, *The Appeal of Jazz* 71, 25.

²⁸ The painting can be seen on the cover of Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*.

²⁹ Joan M. Matthew, *J.B. Souter, 1890-1971* (Exhibition Catalogue) (Perth: Perth Museum and Art Gallery, 1990).

³⁰ Royal Academy Annual Report 1926, 13.

This had a direct effect on the musical evolution of jazz in Britain in the 1920s. Jazz, as primitive, low, black culture, was perceived to be in need of an injection of ‘civilized’ white culture to elevate and improve it, and thereby rendering it suitable as mainstream entertainment. This strategy is particularly clear in the BBC’s approach to popular music in the 1920s. Jazz rarely appeared in BBC programme schedules, instead, the BBC presented ‘dance music’, which consisting of standardised arrangements of popular songs broadcast from venues such as the Savoy Hotel or performed by the BBC’s house bands. In the mid-1920s symphonised syncopation was adopted in Britain as a main form of popular music, strongly influenced by Paul Whiteman. ‘Symphonising’ meant, in effect, the white ‘civilising’ of ‘primitive’ black music through the addition of symphonic harmony and orchestration. Even Mendl, who was generally a perceptive analyst of early jazz, says that it is unfair to criticise jazz just because it is a black music, as white musicians had since civilised and improved it. He then credits ‘Whiteman, Hylton and others’ for improving the jazz band, bringing it ‘to so much higher a level that the modern syncopated dance band can hardly be put on the same footing or appropriately designated even by the same name, as the primitive organisms from which it took its origin’.³¹ The consistent presentation of symphonised syncopation on the radio, the main way in which popular music was disseminated prior to electrical recording, had the effect of standardising London’s dance music, to the extent that jazz was pushed further away from the mainstream.

Ironically, for a time, even those that supported jazz promoted the strategy of symphonising in an attempt to elevate jazz from its perceived low status. Most of the early British writing on jazz shares the common feature of the use of ‘classical’ music

³¹ Mendl, *The Appeal of Jazz* 72, 49.

to provide the criteria against which jazz is evaluated. Therefore supporters of jazz attempted to validate the music by pointing out similarities with classical music, attempting to position jazz within the canon and the evolution of music in a bid to make the music seem less radical and to emphasise its artistic qualities. This reliance on classical criteria when assessing jazz meant that it was often difficult for the traditional hierarchy of composer, performer and arranger to be reconsidered, which was necessary for the importance of improvisation in jazz performance to be recognized. Writers including Mendl and conductor and composer Constant Lambert, appealed for a better standard of composition to secure the future of jazz by providing a more possibilities for improvisation, and furthermore, pointed to the future of jazz within the work of high art composers rather than as a musical form in its own right. Lambert wrote: ‘The next move in the development of jazz will come, almost inevitably, from the sophisticated or highbrow composers’.³²

Symphonic syncopation was at its peak of popularity for a few years in the mid-1920s, but even Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924), which had been upheld as an example of excellence in symphonic syncopation, began to be criticised in the late 1920s - early 1930s. Mendl had described the piece as ‘technically an extremely efficient composition...skilful in form...the work is a kind of instrumental fantasia written for jazz band’, but in 1934 Lambert criticised the piece as being ‘neither good jazz nor good Liszt’.³³ There was a sense that the compromise was offered by ‘symphonic syncopation’ was no longer sufficient for everyone as the music was not successful as either jazz or art music. The increasing availability of American jazz on record and the high-profile visits of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington to Britain in the early 1930s were vital to this realisation and the subsequent re-evaluation of jazz.

³² Constant Lambert, *Music Ho!* (London: Faber, 1934/R1966) 198.

³³ Mendl, *The Appeal of Jazz* 177-8; Lambert, *Music Ho!* 195.

Records allowed more people to become acquainted with the sound of jazz and other popular music, as they were no longer reliant on BBC radio. It was possible for Britons to begin to understand spontaneous expression in performance as an artistic quality, particularly in relation to African-American musicians. This prompted a deeper understanding of the artistic and cultural validity of jazz that allowed it to be appreciated in its own right without persistent reference to classical music. At the same time, the growing awareness and criticism of the commercial motivation of the pervasive dance music 'industry' contrasted with the relative scarcity of American jazz records. In the early 1930s, the continuation of the 'primitivist' mode of reception of black culture meant that black musicians were now regarded as innocent of commercial motives. Although this was an essentialist notion that perpetuated stereotypical beliefs about black musicians, African-American jazz was profoundly different in sound to the overtly commercial, large, uniform and controlled presentations by dance orchestras that could be heard on the BBC and seen in established venues in the capital. The music critic Stanley Nelson, writing in 1934, described the changing perceptions of African-American jazz in Britain:

In the early days of jazz the Negro exponents were usually condemned by the experts as too crude ... their jazz had a blatancy which was far from pleasing to white ears ... in our opinion, their jazz was a poor thing beside the refined product of the best white bands. ... It is my belief that most of the future development of Jazz will come from the coloured race themselves, and not from us... We lack the spontaneity of the coloured people and their innate feel for the jazz idiom... Their playing is characterized by its extreme fervour;

instead of playing in the detached manner of white bands, these coloured artists subordinate every feeling to the job in hand.’³⁴

The discourse of primitivism remains inherent in Nelson’s description of the ‘spontaneity’, ‘feel’ and ‘fervour’ of black musicians, whereas their white counterparts have been responsible for ‘standardization’ and a ‘detached’ style of playing. However, it can be seen that black music held similar escapist appeal as a cultural alternative to the complexities and failings of Western civilisation as in the immediate post-war period. Constant Lambert wrote in *Music Ho!*:

‘... the only jazz music of technical importance is that small section of it that is genuine Negroid. The ‘hot’ Negro records still have a genuine and not merely galvanic energy, while the blues have a certain austerity that places them far above the sweet nothings of George Gershwin.’³⁵

Black music was now being appreciated in its own right for its complexity and quality, and ‘civilising’ impulses were beginning to be recognised by many people as being unnecessary, superficial and even racist.

Despite this intellectual re-evaluation of jazz, African-American jazz performers were generally under-represented on records and in live performance in Britain in the early 1930s. Black musicians generally came to Britain to accompany music theatre productions, and unlike their white compatriots, their participation in British dance bands was very limited. Recordings by black musicians were often not as readily available as those by white Americans, and British critics could treat their

³⁴ Nelson, *All About Jazz* 162-3.

³⁵ Lambert, *Music Ho!* 186.

work disparagingly. Although Louis Armstrong's records could be obtained by determined enthusiasts and musicians, it is likely that Nat Gonella's imitations of them might have been more familiar to British audiences prior to Armstrong's 1932 visit. British audiences, even those who had encountered Armstrong's recorded performances, were generally unprepared for the impact of his live performances, and fascination, fear and the discourse of primitivism are very much in evidence in the audiences' responses.

Armstrong's performances at the London Palladium, a leading variety theatre, in July 1932 certainly provoked extreme reactions.³⁶ Whilst several audience members left the theatre in disgust, others hailed him as a virtuoso genius. In comparison, Duke Ellington performing at the same theatre in the following year (commencing in June 1933) was more consistently well received. Ellington's publicity machine had been in action to enhance his profile in Britain since the previous November. This was aided considerably by reports of his performances in the Cotton Club in *Melody Maker* by the British musician, critic and Ellington fan Spike Hughes. Ellington's performances were appropriate for the Palladium, as the polished and controlled presentation related to the familiar aesthetics of dance bands in variety. Ellington also selected balanced programmes of his own compositions and popular songs, for which he was roundly criticised by Hughes, but which appealed to the variety audience.³⁷

The reactions to Armstrong were partially due to his musical performance, which was extreme in comparison to the dance band music normally presented at variety shows. Reviewers who attempted to validate Armstrong's performances as art

³⁶ Armstrong remained in Britain until October 1932, and returned in July 1933 for a visit that lasted a year. See Howard Rye, 'Visiting Firemen 2: Louis Armstrong' in *Storyville* (89), pp. 184-7.

³⁷ Extensive comparative analysis of Armstrong and Ellington at the Palladium can be found in Chapter 9 in Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*.

often emphasised quantifiable or technical aspects in an attempt to highlight his virtuosity in line with the qualities valued in the performance of Western art music:

[Armstrong said] "This tiger runs very fast, so I expect I'll have to play five choruses to catch him up!" He played *eight*- all different!...Top F's bubble about all over the place, and never once does his miss one. He is enormously fond of the lip-trill, which he accomplished by shaking the instrument wildly with his right hand.³⁸

'His phrasing is unique by reason of his quaint manner of breaking up four bars, for example, by singing the first bar, remaining tacet for the next two, and suddenly singing all the words in the last bar! It is ludicrous, yet astoundingly rhythmic.'³⁹

Armstrong's performance style and stage presence particularly prompted a continuation of the primitivist mode of reception. This was at the root of both positive and negative reactions depending on the weighting of 'fascination and fear and even envy' in the psychology of audience members when faced with this latest example of black culture. A combination of these emotions is exemplified in the 'fascination' that led to so many people going to see Armstrong, but the 'fear' that prompted them to leave during his performances. Here these fluctuating emotions are described:

³⁸ *Melody Maker* (August 1932) 617.

³⁹ *Rhythm* (September 1932) 11.

The business for Armstrong's first visit to the Palladium was said to be a record for the theatre at that time. So that every performance would be full at Louis' opening, but by the time he had to finish the theatre was half empty.⁴⁰

Armstrong ... was heartily applauded ... although the reception at the conclusion of the act was somewhat mixed, some booing being noticeable.⁴¹

As Jones and Chilton have suggested, the fact that Armstrong was 'an extremely fervent exponent as well as an unbridled presence on stage' was the main reason for the exodus of the Palladium audiences.⁴² However, Armstrong's performances could be found to be variously attractive and mystifying as well as threatening. Many critics simply noted that Armstrong 'puts a tremendous amount of energy into his work'.⁴³

All the time he is singing he carries a handkerchief in his hand and mops his face - perspiration positively drips off him. He puts enough energy in his half-hour's performance to last the average man several years.⁴⁴

Robert Goffin, the Belgian poet and music critic who dedicated his book *Aux Frontières du Jazz* to Armstrong, came to London to hear Armstrong play in 1933 and provided a particularly vivid description:

⁴⁰ Gonella, quoted in Max Jones and John Chilton, *Louis: The Louis Armstrong Story 1900-1971* (St. Albans: Mayflower, 1975) 161.

⁴¹ *Performer*, (20 July 1932) 10.

⁴² Jones and Chilton, *Louis*, 162.

⁴³ *Stage*, (21 July 1932) 3.

⁴⁴ *Melody Maker* (August 1932) 617.

In action Armstrong is like a boxer, the bell goes and he attacks at once. His face drips like a heavy-weight's, steam rises from his lips ... the whole right side of his neck swells as though it must burst; then, summoning up all the air in his body for another effect, he inflates his throat till it looks like a goitre.⁴⁵

Descriptions such as Goffin's, although intended to be affirmative, nevertheless suggest that Armstrong would have had the ability to shock and threaten British sensibilities. Reviewers such as the famous journalist Hannen Swaffer reacted viciously to Armstrong's performances:

'Armstrong is the ugliest man I have ever seen on the music hall stage. He looks, and behaves, like an untrained gorilla. He might have come straight from some African jungle and then, after being taken to a slop tailor's for a ready-made dress-suit, been put on the stage and told to 'sing'.'

'Armstrong's head, while he plays, is a unique as his music. Gradually, it is covered by a thousand beads of perspiration...He tries in vain to keep dry with a handkerchief. He is a living shower-bath.'

'And his neck swells out like a gorged python.'⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Goffin, trans. Beckett in Nancy Cunard, *Negro: Anthology made by Nancy Cunard 1931-1933* (London: Nancy Cunard at Wishart and Co., 1934) 292.

⁴⁶ *Daily Herald* (25 July 1932).

Louis Armstrong's reception in Britain was often dependent upon the way in which the aspects of his performance that were understood as 'primitive' were received: with fascination or fear. It is interesting to note some similarity in the description, but not in meaning or intent, of Armstrong in Swaffer's and Goffin's accounts. Indeed, the primitivist evaluations of Armstrong were not confined to his critics, because for writers such as Goffin, one of Armstrong's most devoted supporters, a performance style that suggested unmediated emotional expression had the effect of confirming Armstrong's artistic originality and creativity, qualities which were perceived to be inherently linked with his race: 'Armstrong is primarily a trumpeter, a stylist and a creator. No white man could have evolved such a style. It is as colourful as he is coloured.'⁴⁷

Rhythm magazine noted that Swaffer's review of Armstrong 'adequately describes the whole show as it must have appeared to anybody who did not understand how perfectly amazing is Armstrong's trumpet work.'⁴⁸ It is interesting to note that in general those that wished to acclaim Armstrong tended to focus on his trumpet playing, regarded as a more 'artistic' feature of his performances, whilst those that sought to criticise it neglected this aspect in favour of consideration of his singing, which could more easily be regarded as 'primitive', as when the criteria of value of Western classical music were applied: 'To the listener oriented to 'classical' singing, Louis's voice, with its rasp and totally unorthodox technique, usually comes as a complete shock'.⁴⁹ An article in the *Daily Express*, in summarizing the questions being asked by Londoners about Armstrong's performances, contrasted these two modes of performance: 'Louis Armstrong! For or against? Can he play the trumpet or

⁴⁷ *Rhythm* (September 1932) 11.

⁴⁸ *Rhythm* (September 1932) 9.

⁴⁹ Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968) 100.

is he a crazy, enraged negro blurting noises at a long suffering public?'.⁵⁰ Gabbard has noted the difference between Armstrong's performance style when singing and playing with reference to films of the early 1930s, in that 'when he puts his trumpet to his lips, he becomes a different man'.⁵¹ Even Armstrong's singing could be perceived diversely, as noise or art. Whereas Swaffer wrote 'His singing is dreadful, babyish, uncouth...he makes animal noises into the microphone...',⁵² another critic evaluated Armstrong's singing in a more positive light, still resorting to the jungle metaphor, but emphasising the artistic nature of primitivism:

'Singing, indeed, is hardly an adequate description of those incoherent, ecstatic, rhythmical jungle noises which none of Armstrong's imitators have yet succeeded in rivalling...This savage growling is as far removed from English as we speak or sing it - and as modern - as James Joyce.'⁵³

Armstrong did begin to receive more overt praise by his second week at the Palladium, albeit still vague in detail, suggesting that after the initial shock audiences and critics had indeed taken him to their hearts, or that those that attended the later performances had a better idea of what to expect:

... the reception accorded Louis Armstrong is now considerably warmer than it was on the first night

⁵⁰ *Daily Express* (28 July 1932) 9.

⁵¹ Krin Gabbard, (ed.) *Jazz Among the Discourses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) 210.

⁵² *Daily Herald* (25/7/1932)

⁵³ *Daily Express* (20/7/1932) 15.

[Armstrong] was a great hit with his admirers, the applause completely holding up the interval.

Louis Armstrong is retained, and the King of the Trumpet too had an enormous reception. There is no doubting the cleverness of Louis' playing, I have never heard anything quite as good.⁵⁴

According to *Variety News*, Armstrong 'worked a little more piano than last week and was, consequently, more acceptable to English audiences', suggesting the possibility that Armstrong might have responded to the initial criticism of the extreme nature of his performances.⁵⁵

There is evidence to suggest that by the mid-1930s, the availability of recordings and the high-profile visits of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and others led to some dominance of fascination over fear in the reception of black jazz musicians in London. Nelson recalled a change in attitude, whereas in the past famous Negro bands 'were all very well in their way, in our opinion, but their jazz was a poor thing beside the refined product of the best white bands To-day Ellington, Armstrong and the other coloured bands have practically assumed the position of arbitrators of modern rhythmic style' (Nelson, 1934:162). Indeed, it can be seen that by the time of the 1935 restrictions on American musicians in Britain, there was a demand for black musicians to provide performances of jazz that were appreciated as 'authentic' by the British public. This need was met by musicians from the resident black population in Britain, including many from the ethnically diverse Tiger Bay area of Cardiff in Wales, and immigrants from the West Indies. The presence of so

⁵⁴ *Stage* (28 July 1932) 3; *Performer* (27 July 1932) 10; *Era* (27 July 1932) 19.

⁵⁵ *Variety Music, Stage and Film News* (27 July 1932) 4.

many talented black musicians in London allowed the trumpeter Leslie Thompson, who had been resident in Britain since, to realize his dream of forming an all-black dance band which was later taken over by Ken 'Snakehips' Johnson. The Johnson/Thompson band was to contribute to the re-definition of the artistic status of jazz in Britain as entertaining and exhilarating dance music. Although Britain was by no means free from racial discrimination, the performances and reception of black musicians could now transcend the stereotypes that were the legacy of blackface entertainment and their music could be appreciated seriously.