

## A critical reassessment of the reception of early jazz in Britain

### **Abstract**

*The Original Dixieland Jazz Band's visit in 1919-20 has been well documented as the beginning of jazz in Britain. This article illuminates a more complex evolution of the image and presence of jazz in Britain through consideration of the cultural and musical antecedents of the genre, including minstrel shows and black musical theatre, within the context of musical life in Britain in the late nineteenth-early twentieth centuries. The processes through which this evolution took place are considered with reference to the ways in which jazz was introduced to Britain through imported revue shows and sheet music.*

*It is an extremely significant but often neglected fact that another group of American musicians, Will Marion Cook's Southern Syncopated Orchestra, also came to Britain in 1919. Remarkably, extensive comparisons of the respective performances and reception of the ODJB and the SSO have not been made in the available literature on jazz. Examination of the situation of one white and one black group of American musicians performing contemporaneously in London is extremely informative, as it evidences the continuing influence of the antecedents of jazz and the importance of both groups in shaping perceptions of jazz in Britain.*

The established view of the history of jazz in Britain is that it began in 1919 with the arrival of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band from America.<sup>1</sup> The inherent nature of popular music dictates that certain personalities, groups and events, such as the visit of the ODJB, can achieve iconic status and exaggerated importance over time. There is then a clear tendency for narrative histories, so common in the field of popular music, to be written around these lynchpins thus perpetuating the myths still further. It is significant that writing on popular music is often undertaken by well-meaning fans and enthusiasts who may have particular agendas and loyalties and do not always bring an

objective and rigorous approach to their research. This can result in publications lacking in sufficient historical, social and cultural perspective. Indeed, many of the existing publications on jazz in Britain tend to isolate the subject both from other forms of popular music and from the nature of the society into which it was received, and present a chronological documentation of the presence of jazz with little consideration as to why the music evolved and developed as it did.

Although the ODJB's visit is undoubtedly important, this study will draw on a variety of primary source material to show that the premise that jazz began in Britain in that year is an over-simplification. Examination of newspapers and magazines shows that the word 'jazz' was in general use in Britain before 1919, and sheet music of jazz compositions, including those of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, had been published in Britain since at least 1917 and was widely available.<sup>2</sup> This essay will show that jazz had developed a clear and consistent image that was widely disseminated in Britain before jazz bands became commonplace. Significantly, to examine jazz in Britain beginning in 1919 also fails to take into account the cultural and musical antecedents of the genre, including the complex evolutionary pattern of events in the history of black American music in Britain. In particular, the banjo was an instrument that had a continuous presence in popular music in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and played a crucial role in both the actual musical and perceived symbolic evolution of black American music in Britain. This essay will seek to place the ODJB's visit into context, considering the encounters and reactions of the British public to earlier forms of American syncopated music, which fundamentally influenced the way in which jazz itself was perceived and received. Furthermore, it is an extremely significant but often neglected fact that another group of American musicians, Will Marion Cook's Southern Syncopated Orchestra, also visited Britain in 1919. Remarkably, extensive comparisons of the respective performances and reception of the ODJB and the SSO have not been made in the available literature on jazz, although to examine the situation of one white and one black group of American musicians performing

contemporaneously in London is extremely informative and vital to any consideration of the subsequent development of the genre in Britain.

### **Cultural and musical antecedents of jazz in Britain**

#### **Music hall and minstrelsy**

Contemporary writers on the Victorian music hall have not always made explicit the links between this flourishing tradition and the large numbers of visiting black American performers in Britain in the nineteenth century, ranging from complete minstrel troupes of sixty or more entertainers who performed at similar venues, to individual performers who took their place on the music hall bills alongside native artists. Although the music performed by these black musicians was not necessarily related musically to jazz, the importance of their performances as antecedents to jazz as an American music and as a significant part of popular culture in Britain cannot be over-estimated.

Negroes had been subjects of artistic and literary caricature since the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Walvin 1973, p. 159), and contemporaneously, plays were beginning to use slave life as a subject. Thus, 'the stereotype of a happy, carefree slave, dancing and strumming on the old plantation was known to English audiences well before 1800' (Epstein 1975, p. 347). British audiences became fascinated with the Negro character and culture and black minstrels developed great novelty value as entertainers. The movement for the abolishment of slavery had become extremely strong in Britain in the middle of the nineteenth century, particularly amongst the upper classes, and this meant that there was generally considerable sympathy for black performers, particularly groups such as the Jenkins Orphanage Band and the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who came to Britain in the late nineteenth century to raise funds. Despite 'a few isolated grumbles from snobbish gentlefolk about its stage inanities or street disturbances, minstrelsy was subject to very little ideological censure' (Pickering 1997, p. 183) and among the impoverished lower classes, black performers may have been regarded 'as much with self-regarding sympathy as with a self-appeasing pity' (Pickering 1986, p. 84).

Pickering reports that 'the 'nigger' minstrel remained a ubiquitous entertainer in Britain until the end of the century' (1997, p. 181) and it appears that minstrelsy was successful in Britain for two main reasons. Firstly, it fuelled the 'keen appetite for new forms of popular entertainment in the newly industrialised towns and expanding metropolis' (Pickering 1997, p. 191) and secondly, minstrelsy also fitted very well within evolving popular culture which thrived upon novelty, exoticism, sentimentality and humour, which were qualities encapsulated in the black minstrel performer. Initially, at least, minstrelsy was probably seen as an extension of the caricature, clowning and melodrama existent in the British music hall, but with an extra dash of exoticism due to the racial characteristics of the performers, who emphasised these for maximum effect on their white audiences. However, whilst the primitive 'otherness' of the presentation of the Negro in minstrel shows ensured their widespread appeal in Britain, there was a clear preference for 'diluted' versions of black entertainment presented by whites (e.g. blackface) rather than more realistic portrayals. The competition between black and blackface minstrel shows would have increased the pressure for black minstrels to conform to a white stereotype (which has been summarised as 'sexual, musical, stupid, indolent, untrustworthy and violent' (Walvin 1973, p. 160)) for their survival, and thus established this as a permanent truism in the mind of the British public. Whilst adherence to the Negro stereotype ensured short-term success for black performers, its widespread dissemination amongst different classes of people and throughout Britain via the established national chains of entertainment venues was to have a long lasting effect on the perception of black performers, including jazz musicians, in subsequent years. Although this led to racial degradation in some instances, this was most often due to ignorance rather than maliciousness, and black performers continued to be regarded with fascination by British audiences in the early twentieth century.

It was through nineteenth century minstrelsy that strong links between British theatrical promoters and American performers were established which laid a firm foundation for

subsequent visits in the twentieth century, and thus helped to pave the way for the presentation of jazz in Britain. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most American musicians and musical trends were brought to Britain through these pre-existent theatrical channels. These included musicians that were directly linked to and actively built upon the popularity of minstrelsy in Britain, such as large numbers of solo banjo players, all-black groups such as the Memphis Students, and Will Marion Cook's musical comedy *In Dahomey*. Members of the latter two groups were later founder members of the Clef Club, a society that was set up by James Reese Europe in New York in 1910 to allow black musicians to prosper and black music to develop. The exploitation of long-standing contacts between Broadway and the West End by the Clef Club was instrumental to the visits of important black pre-jazz ensembles in the early twentieth century and the strength and popularity of the stereotypical Negro certainly contributed to the continued use of the banjo as the main instrument for the performance of American syncopated music in Britain into the 1920s.

### The banjo

The banjo was present in all the forms of African-American music that were heard in Britain before jazz. By the twentieth century it had developed particularly strong symbolism as the instrument of the stereotypical plantation Negro through songs and minstrel shows, genres that were well represented in Britain. Indeed, the banjo is virtually the only instrument mentioned in nineteenth century songs that describe black music-making. In the late nineteenth century, banjo music became the first American musical craze to hit Britain, permeating all layers of society, including royalty. The banjo had considerable appeal for Britons as an 'other' instrument with no place within the history of 'official' Western music and as representative of the familiar romantic and sentimental image of the plantations of the 'Old South' (Linn 1991, p. 55). At this time, there were attempts by several prominent publishers and manufacturers to elevate the banjo away from its plantation origins by making highly decorated instruments and expanding the repertoire with novelty pieces and arrangements of classical melodies

(such as the *William Tell* Overture and Dvorak's *Humoresque*), but the instrument never really lost its associations with the black musicians of the South for those that were distanced from the reality of this environment (Linn 1991, p. 36).

It was probably the strength of the racial symbolism of the banjo that resulted in a gradual decline in numbers of black solo banjoists in America from the second half of the nineteenth century. Significantly though, the banjo had developed a clear musical identity that could be evoked without using the instrument itself, for example contemporary songs frequently used features such as arpeggiated patterns and spread chords in the piano accompaniment. It was the transferring of banjo music to the piano that was to evolve into the ragtime piano style in America. Piano ragtime did not make such an impact in Britain as in America, and there is very little evidence that any of the 'big names' in ragtime piano visited Britain until the 1920s (Rye 1990a, p. 45), which is especially significant in the context of most of the top American banjoists visiting this country in the interim. Therefore, the banjo, rather than the piano, remained prominent as the main instrument for the performance of syncopated music in Britain.

### The Hippodrome revues

Imported revue shows were responsible for introducing the latest trends from across the Atlantic to Britain, including ragtime and later, jazz, both in terms of presentation of the actual music and also the attendant symbolism and metaphor. Extensive transferring of shows between Broadway in New York and London's West End, exploiting the routes of movement established by minstrel performers, had begun as early as 1898 with the presentation in London of the musical comedy *The Belle of New York*. Producer and impresario Albert De Courville was responsible for importing attractions and commissioning new musical comedies for the London Hippodrome and became a particularly important figure in the development of the American-style revue in London. He imported many important black American musicians and also wrote and produced his own material influenced by the ragtime reviews that he had seen on his

extensive travels in America. De Courville's revue *Hullo Ragtime* of 1912 was important in defining and popularising ragtime in Britain. Within the context of revue shows, piano ragtime was inappropriate both as a song or dance accompaniment, due to its lack of audibility, and also as a variety 'turn' in itself, as it lacked the visual interest of a band. Theatrical revues therefore tended to use orchestrated ragtime, which included prominent use of the banjo. As the revue was the main way in which American syncopated music was introduced and defined in Britain in the early twentieth century, the under-representation of piano ragtime in this country can be understood.

Developments in social dancing in Britain in the twentieth century can be closely linked with the use of American syncopated music in the theatre. Dancing to banjo music had been an important element of the nineteenth century minstrel show, particularly in the circular form of the minstrel show 'walk-around' finales. Later in the nineteenth century, the walk-around developed into the cakewalk, a precursor of ragtime, which was the result of complex cross-fertilization of African and European dance traditions. The cakewalk became established as a popular dance in Britain through the black American show *In Dahomey*, which was brought to London in 1903. Naturally, instrumental ragtime became the convention for dance accompaniment outside the theatre as *Hullo Ragtime* and subsequent revues brought numerous ragtime dances that were fashionable before and during the First World War to Britain. Black American banjo ensembles such as Joe Jordan's Syncopated Orchestra, Dan Kildare's Clef Club Orchestra, and the Versatile Three/Four were in considerable demand to play for dancing in London in the early twentieth century when there was 'a growing vogue for Afro-American sounds in high-class dance clubs' (Rye 1990a, p. 46) and maintained the stereotypical association between black performers and the banjo that had been so firmly established in nineteenth century songs and minstrel shows. These bands, initially at least, appeared in evening dress at exclusive venues in London, and their repertoire reflected their civilised appearance. However, the instrument still retained the strong associations with the perceived sentimentality and primitiveness of black music.

This made the banjo the ideal vehicle for the dissemination of the type of 'diluted' or 'civilised' black culture that British white audiences had preferred since the nineteenth century. Banjo-based bands and music remained popular in Britain long after the instrument was considered old-fashioned in America, and the instrument was included in almost all early ragtime and jazz ensembles in Britain into the 1920s.

### Sheet music<sup>3</sup>

It is significant that it was not primarily the musical material of the revues that defined either ragtime or jazz as musical styles, as most revue songs, including those that referred specifically to these genres, used a standardised musical idiom related to the music hall song. Rather, it was the associated verbal and visual imagery, presented in the song lyrics and dances of the revues, which provided the earliest clear descriptions of these genres for the British public. The popularity of these shows led to the importing of American sheet music and the publication of similar songs in Britain. As this sheet music could easily be disseminated outside London, it was clearly very important in establishing the image of ragtime and jazz throughout the country.

The lyrics of 'ragtime' and 'jazz' songs published in London in the period 1900-19 have many common themes, of which the link between music and dance is the most prevalent, clearly establishing jazz as part of a long tradition of American dance forms in Britain. Whilst there are specific steps associated with dancing in ragtime songs, dancing to jazz is shown to be more improvisational in nature. Ideas associated with jazz can be seen to have their roots in earlier ragtime songs, but in jazz songs the imagery is often taken further and made more explicit. For example, whilst dancing to ragtime can create a mood of reckless abandon, dancing to jazz may encourage an excessively emotional response or even illicit romantic or sexual activity (Parsonage 2001).

Significant numbers of songs specifically associate ragtime and jazz with the stereotypical 'nigger' or 'coon'. These caricatures would be familiar to the public through their use in minstrel shows and a huge body of 'coon' songs published in Britain from the late nineteenth century. Typical elements of the Negro stereotype, such as simplicity, laziness, and grotesquely large features, which had descended from the minstrel show, are presented in ragtime songs (Parsonage 2001). Interestingly though, few songs depict black *performers* of ragtime or jazz, and those that do are derogatory or patronising in nature, for example 'You ought to hear those crazy tunes/Played by all those crazy coons' (Grey/Ayer 1918, 'Jazz' [h3988yy(1)]<sup>4</sup>). The general lack of any associations between jazz and black performers in songs published in England is significant, as this indicates that jazz was *not* presented in songs as a black music, and that the origins of the music had therefore become suppressed.

It can be seen through consideration of descriptions in songs that jazz had begun to develop a clear musical image in Britain from about 1918. The drums are the most frequently mentioned instrument in jazz songs, and this emphasises the centrality of 'noise' in descriptions of jazz. Indeed, from about 1919 there is evidence in song lyrics of a perceptual shift in focus from the omnipotent banjo to the drums as the provider of rhythmic drive and excitement in syncopated music. The drums are normally referred to in songs as 'pans' and 'tin cans', of which the principle characteristic is the volume of sound produced. The loud and unrefined nature of the sound, as produced by pots, pans and cans, was also the principle feature of performance of jazz on other instruments, and another important characteristic of jazz as presented in song lyrics was the ability to produce odd noises from familiar instruments:

'Hear that trombone with that peculiar moaning

That saxophone with that peculiar groaning'

(Buck/Stamper 1917, 'When I Hear that Jazz Band Play' [h3996n(22)])

'They got a funny clarinet

And a man that plays cornet in such a funny manner'

(Goetz/Flatlow 1919, 'Everybody Loves a Jazz Band' [h3993.e(9)])

Whereas very few songs refer to specific instruments in the performance of ragtime, there are descriptions of performances of jazz on instruments including trombone, saxophone, piano, clarinet, cornet, trumpet, cello and fiddle which suggests that the variety of instrumental effects was the main way in which jazz was distinguished from previous American syncopated music. The perception of jazz as instrumental colour, which is clearly asserted in song lyrics, is also the basis of an early definition of jazz, written by R.W.S. Mendl, who provides an important first retrospective account of the development of jazz from a British perspective:

Strictly speaking, jazz has nothing whatever to do with rhythm: it is solely concerned with instrumentation, and it would be possible to have jazz music that is not syncopated at all. You cannot play jazz music as a pianoforte solo: if you perform syncopated dance music on the pianoforte it is ragtime, not jazz. It only becomes jazz when it is played on a jazz orchestra.

(Mendl 1927, p. 45-6)

The image of jazz shown in song lyrics is extremely significant as it must surely bear some relation to the perception and understanding of the 'ordinary' Briton as, in a competitive market, publishers would only be able to sell songs that would either influence or reflect contemporary attitudes. Examination of song lyrics is extremely illuminating of the differences in the images of jazz and ragtime. The number of songs that emphasise that ragtime permeated society confirms the theory that increasing cross-class popularity of music hall entertainment in the late nineteenth century was fully developed through the widespread popularity of American syncopated music, for

example in 'Rag-time Crazy': 'No matter where you wander ragtime music fills the air/From the cottage to the mansion you can hear it everywhere' (Rapley 1913, 'Rag-time Crazy' [h3995.jj(30)]. Ragtime is shown in song lyrics to have infiltrated many aspects of everyday life, such as church and school, and there are also many ragtime songs about 'ordinary' people including the milkman, postman, policeman, and motor man (Parsonage 2001). Whereas ragtime was portrayed as an 'everyday' music, jazz was clearly presented in sheet music of 1919 and earlier as music with hypnotic power, provoking in the listener a sense of abandon which would allow them to escape the reality of the world, and as music for improvised dance that encouraged social and sexual freedom, particularly for women (Parsonage 2001). This clearly prefigures the social function that jazz was to develop in the 1920s, the decade known as 'jazz age'. Similarly, the high-profile presentation of jazz by the ODJB in 1919 confirmed and clarified the musical meaning of the word that had been introduced to Britain in song lyrics.

### **The Original Dixieland Jazz Band in London, 1919-20**

#### **The ODJB in variety**

The Original Dixieland Jazz Band were brought to Britain by Albert De Courville in 1919 to appear in the Hippodrome revue *Joy Bells*, and then transferred to the Palladium. In this way, the presentation of jazz in Britain was linked to earlier American syncopated music and trends that had been introduced through Hippodrome revues. The band's previous experience in vaudeville meant that they were well placed for success on the British stage. The ODJB appeared at the Hippodrome with a dancer, and their Palladium act used a male dancer, Johnnie Dale, and an unnamed lady who danced and sang. The addition of the singing and dancing to the band's performances shows their awareness of the requirements of variety theatre, in which acts had to be visually as well as aurally attractive, and ensured that this act was integrated well amongst the comedy, singing, dancing and bioscope projection which formed the rest of the bill. The

inclusion of dancing in the ODJB's act from the start prefigures the group's later development and rise to fame as a dance band in Britain.

### The ODJB as a dance band

It was as a dance band that the ODJB had most success in Britain, and this was probably as much due to the fact that their presence was timely with regard to the evolution of modern dance as to the precise nature of their music. There is evidence that whilst recreational activities had continued during the First World War, fashions of all kinds had remained rather static, with few significant new 'crazes'. This was especially true in dance and dance music, as after the War the majority of Londoners were still dancing two-steps and waltzes accompanied by banjo bands as they had been more than a decade earlier. There was a huge expansion of dance as a leisure activity during 1919, and the ODJB played at many of London's most exclusive clubs and at the new Hammersmith Palais de Danse from its opening night. The popularity of the Palais, which could accommodate almost 3000 people, shows the extent of the dance craze in Britain at this time. The admission prices were relatively small, membership, mandatory for classy dancing establishments in central London, did not exist and dancing instruction was available. Owing to the size of the Palais and the fact that it was open to anyone who could afford the entrance, the band would have performed to many thousands of 'ordinary' people. The fact that the ODJB played in the newest and largest dance venue from its opening night for six months is significant, as this ensured that their version of jazz was widely disseminated and firmly established as the new dance music in Britain.

### Reception

The fact that none of the reviewers of the ODJB at the Hippodrome or the Palladium were able to critically evaluate the music itself is surely significant. There is little overt opposition to the band in reviews, but nor is the group particularly acclaimed. Critics generally sat on the fence and avoided commenting specifically on the music itself,

preferring instead to focus on familiar aspects of the performance, such as the singing and dancing. Even in the purely instrumental numbers, attention was still focussed on visual aspects: 'The band itself gave 'The Barnyard Blues Jazz' and the 'Tiger Rag', in the latter a saucepan and bowler hat serving as accessories to the various instruments.' (*The Era*, 23 April 1919, p. 14). Indeed, there was considerable confusion amongst critics and audiences of these early performances about the music that they were hearing. Lew Davis, who was a member of Lew Stone's band in the thirties and recalled hearing the ODJB at the Palladium, stated that 'if the truth must be told [the band] was a complete flop at the Palladium. Nobody understood it. I didn't either, but I was thoroughly interested...' (1934, p. 8).

However, the music of the ODJB was generally regarded as being different in style from most extant dance music in London. In particular, the band's rhythmic drive and tempi were different to anything that dancers would have experienced before, and this seems to have thrown the conventionalists of the dancing world into panic. The ODJB's fast one-steps were probably responsible for introducing a freer style of dancing in Britain. Therefore, it was at dance clubs that their actual musical performance was appreciated, through the response of those dancing, and in this context it is hardly surprising that the music of the band became synonymous with jazz in Britain for many years to come.

### Musical style

It was the timbre and volume of sound produced by the ODJB that struck audiences most forcefully. Lew Davis described the impact that this sound made upon him:

They started playing when the curtain was still down, and, from the first note, I felt strangely stirred and exhilarated. To my uneducated ears, the music sounded like nothing on earth, but it certainly was exciting to listen to...

(1934, p. 8)

As we have already seen, the banjo was fundamental to the evolution of syncopated music in Britain, and remained an important part of most British bands into the 1920s.

Lew Davis explained:

Just to show how far in advance this band [the ODJB] was of the English conception of dance music at that time, I must mention that when the Dixieland Band had a night off, I used to go and dance at the Elysée Ballroom, Bayswater-quite a good class place. Music was supplied by a typically English combination of the day. It consisted of piano, violin, drums and two banjos!

(1934, p. 7)

The ODJB's drummer Tony Sbarbaro also commented that 'the average band that we had to buck up against [in London]...was two banjos, piano and a drum' (Sbarbaro and Christian interview 11 February 1959, HJA transcript p. 47). The fact that the ODJB did not include a banjo, or indeed any string instrument (violins and string bass were often found in contemporary British bands) and featured a front line of cornet, clarinet and trombone, surely meant that the band would indeed seem louder and brasher than more familiar native ensembles. Bernard Tipping commented that he heard the band at the Hammersmith Palais and 'was amazed. I had never previously thought that dance music could be produced by such a combination' (*Rhythm*, April 1930, p. 20).

In addition, early 'jazz' bands in Britain such as those of Murray Pilcer and John Lester had established jazz as a superficial novelty and comic entertainment, full of eccentricities; with the music consisting mostly of popular melodies or marches with the addition of unrefined noise from numerous percussion instruments and mainly used as an accompaniment to unusual dancing. The fact that the ODJB was initially presented in Britain as a variety act meant that the extra-musical and novelty aspects of their performance were emphasised. This provoked critics to make a superficial comparison with earlier jazz bands, fitting the ODJB within their existent understanding of jazz rather than providing anything more than a basic recognition of the musical differences involved. In this way, the ODJB reinforced the perception of jazz as 'noisy' music, primarily concerned with instrumental colour that had been established before their arrival.

### Race

The omission of the banjo, an instrument that was strongly symbolic of black music-making, from the group implied a rejection of the origins of jazz in black music, which they also stated more blatantly:<sup>5</sup>

They will not have it that the word [jazz] is of Red Indian origin, or that 'jazz so' is a term of praise in the dialect of the negroes in the Southern States...

*(Daily News, 4 April 1919)*

Interestingly, however, black performers are rarely mentioned in contemporary jazz songs, suggesting that the black origins of the music were not a significant part of the British image of jazz at this stage. The fact that the members of the ODJB were white was certainly very significant in the way in which they were received in Britain, and probably meant that their music made a much greater impression on the public than if they had been black. Essentially, racism in Chicago and New York, the northern American cities that acted as springboards to Europe for jazz bands, would have made

'a similar success for a comparable Negro group impossible' (Schuller 1968, p. 179), and thus only a white group could have been similarly precipitated into the international spotlight. In Britain, as we have seen, black performers were inevitably compared or linked, consciously or subconsciously, to the minstrel stereotype that had been embedded in the public perception; but these white men could perform without any 'cultural baggage' other than their American nationality. This meant that the focus was more on the content of their act rather than on the people performing it, and whereas such strange music played by black performers could be put down to their perceived eccentricities, this was less easy for British audiences to reconcile when the performers were white. This in turn meant that the music that the ODJB performed was easily comparable to the performances of similar music by familiar, native white musicians and as we have seen, there were enough similarities between the ODJB and the few existent British 'jazz' bands that the ODJB was more easily able to influence the performance of these white bands.

#### Image and authenticity

Crucially, the members of the band, and particularly the leader Nick LaRocca, were conscious of the image that they presented not only when they were performing, but also through what they said off stage, and in this way were early examples of popular musicians who exploited media interest for their own publicity. By billing themselves as the 'creators of jazz' and stressing that the band was the 'real original', the band established an image of authenticity. The consistency between jazz imagery and its manifestation in the form of the ODJB ensured the band's claims of originality were widely believed by the majority of the British public, for whom the word 'jazz' had yet to develop a clear meaning as a musical style. It is interesting that LaRocca was always at pains to stress the band's musical illiteracy, as if to prove their natural ability and spontaneous approach; a feature normally associated with the oral tradition of black musicians whose role in jazz LaRocca was generally so keen to reject.

The band's claims of originality have generally been treated with scepticism by modern authors. Critics include Christopher Small, who states that the ODJB 'simplified the idiom of the black musicians, substituting crude melodic formulas for their often subtle and flexible improvised melodic lines, and mechanical patterns for their vigorous rhythms' (1987, p. 328) and Gunther Schuller: '[the ODJB] took a new idea, an innovation, and reduced it to the kind of compressed, rigid format that could appeal to a mass audience' (1968, p. 180). These authors imply that because the group was white and commercially successful this somehow diminishes their authenticity as a jazz band, and this view, fuelled by the ODJB's exaggerated claims and the open rejection of the black origins of jazz by their vociferous leader, has clearly influenced many previous evaluations of the ODJB.

However, what is most significant when evaluating the role of the ODJB in the evolution of jazz in Britain is that the musicians themselves and the music that the band performed in London were clearly rooted in and representative of the New Orleans musical tradition. The ODJB was influenced by the many different types of music that the musicians would have encountered due to the racial mix in their home city of New Orleans and several of the members of the band began their careers in Papa Jack Laine's various parade bands. There is evidence that the repertoire and style of the ODJB had been influenced by march music, particularly in the structure of numbers and in the decorative clarinet obbligato parts. Ironically, one of the biggest criticisms levelled against the ODJB is that they claimed to have written tunes themselves that were in fact part of the standard New Orleans repertory, but this provides further evidence in support of the claim that they were authentic. Laine claimed that the origin of many ODJB numbers was in the repertoire of his Reliance Band, indicating that these pieces must have been well-known standards in New Orleans (Laine interview 26 March 1957, HJA; transcript p.18-19). Therefore, it can be seen that British audiences were experiencing in the performances of the ODJB music that was not only

new to them and perceived to be 'the real thing' but was also, basically, *actually* authentic.

### The role of recordings

In addition to their much-publicised image, the fact that the ODJB were the first jazz band to record, and that so many of their recordings were made in London, certainly assisted in establishing the band as representative of jazz as their records sold many thousands of copies. Although it was with the up-tempo, brash and to an extent formulaic performances on numbers such as *Tiger Rag* and *Sensation Rag* that the band was and continues to be mainly associated,<sup>6</sup> careful analysis of the whole group of recordings shows that the band did not produce a noisy cacophony all of the time, although it was this feature of their playing that naturally attracted public attention and provoked some extreme reactions. Although many of the recorded numbers sound loud and brash, this was probably the result of the primitive recording technology than carelessness. Indeed, there is compelling evidence that the members of the ODJB were aware of appropriate dynamic levels for different numbers and venues, as Eddie Edwards stated that 'The Original Dixieland Jazz Band frequently played soft and ratty...so that the shuffle of [the] dancers' feet could be heard (Edwards interview 1 July 1959, HJA transcript p.2) and LaRocca mentioned that as the Hammersmith Palais was such a huge hall, the band had to play loudly (LaRocca interview 26 May 1958, HJA transcript p.84). Close analysis of the band's recordings show that they had greater variety within their repertoire and performance style than many modern day writers are prepared to acknowledge.

Indeed, there is a danger of basing judgements about the ODJB solely on the evidence of the recordings that can be heard today, and generalisations have been made by writers as to the nature of their performances and their role in the evolution of jazz. According to John Chilton, the fact that the band recorded at all ensured that the

musicians achieved 'a degree of eminence that was out of proportion to their musical skills' (2001, p. 200) and Gunther Schuller has stated:

It is typical of the kind of nonsense perpetrated in the name of jazz in those early days that La Rocca and the other members of the ODJB could claim they could not read music and that therefore their playing was *ipso facto* improvised and inspired during each performance, when in truth their recordings show without exception exact repetitions of choruses and a great deal of memorization...Contrary to being improvised, their choruses were set and rehearsed, and they were unchanged for years...The ODJB thus did not actually improvise.

(Schuller 1968, p. 180)

Contextual analysis of the band's background, activities and recordings establishes these ideas as overly simplistic. Firstly, most of the musicians in the ODJB were untutored in a formal sense, and would have learnt their instruments and the music upon which their repertoire was based through the musical and cultural mixing-pot that was New Orleans in the early years of the twentieth century. As they could not read music, they would have had to formulate an arrangement of a particular number through improvisational processes. Brunn, the band's biographer, suggests that improvisation was a significant part of the rehearsal process of the band, where arrangements and 'contrapuntal interest' developed as a number was played more often (1963, p. 31) and this is confirmed by Tony Sbarbaro and Emile Christian who stated that the 'tunes were written as a group while you were playing together' (Sbarbaro and Christian interview 11<sup>th</sup> February 1959, HJA transcript p. 45). LaRocca was apparently the driving force behind the arrangements according to Brunn, (1963, p. 90), as improvisation was 'in his blood' and compositions would evolve out of music that he heard in New Orleans.

Secondly, a 'set and rehearsed' approach would have been necessary when the band were part of variety shows or making recordings. In variety, the band was merely one act on a bill and presumably was given a set length of time in which to perform. As their act often, apparently, involved dance routines that may have been choreographed, these would have also required a precise musical structure and length. When the band came to the recording studio, they would have had to work out a rigid structure for each number, firstly, and most basically, in order to ensure that the music would fit onto the limited time span permitted on the disc. Sudhalter suggests that this limitation also influenced the manic speed of the band's recordings (1999, p. 17) and Squibb, in a 1963 review of the re-released recordings, points out that these ODJB records become 'more listenable' when the turntable speed is reduced, and that this slower speed may be a more accurate reflection of the band's live performances (1963, p. 16-17). It would also be necessary to encompass in each number a sufficient variety of features such as solos and ensemble choruses to make the piece interesting. A pre-arranged structure was important bearing in mind that unlike in the modern recording process, there were no editing facilities and there were presumably limited numbers of 'takes'. LaRocca recalled the pressure and restrictions on improvisation when recording as 'there was no way of me throwing in an extra lick here or there, because if I did and I missed out, that matrix was ruined and the whole thing was ruined' (LaRocca interview 26 May 1958, HJA; transcript p.64). Sudhalter also comments on the early studio conditions where 'a combination of factors- mechanical, temporal, atmospheric, acoustic and especially supervisory- could make the environment downright inhospitable for the kind of spontaneous interaction which lies at the heart of all good jazz' (1999, p. x).

Fundamentally, it is important to realise that many more people in Britain in 1919-20 would have heard the ODJB's live performances than their recordings. It is likely that on their many nights as a dance band, the ODJB musicians would have extended the numbers which they performed, and may well have improvised extra choruses to keep

themselves interested and to fill up time. The fact that the band did not perform from music certainly indicates that such flexibility was possible. Thus, the recorded performances that can be heard today were probably distilled versions of the numerous choruses that had been initially improvised, and then gradually refined during these rehearsals and dance engagements. Therefore, the band's recordings should be evaluated with care and in context as specific versions of particular numbers, rather than necessarily accurate documentation of what occurred in live performances. Hence the ODJB's performances, and particularly their use of improvisation, cannot be judged solely from listening to recordings.

### **The Southern Syncopated Orchestra in London, 1919-22**

The Southern Syncopated Orchestra was formed by Will Marion Cook in late 1918, with the specific aim of elevating the status of black music as an art form, following in the footsteps of James Reese Europe's Clef Club Orchestra. In March 1919, the promoter André Charlot negotiated a contract for the Orchestra to come to London (Rye 1990b, p. 139), and approximately 24 instrumentalists 'who played violins, mandolins, banjos, guitars, saxophones, trumpets, trombones, bass horn, timpani, pianos and drums' (Rye 1990a, p. 48) and 12 singers arrived in three groups in June 1919 (Rye 1990b, p. 142). The group were engaged to perform two 2-hour shows each day at the Philharmonic Hall in London from 4<sup>th</sup> July until 6<sup>th</sup> December 1919 (Chilton 1987, p. 36).

#### **Musical style and reception**

The performances of the SSO encompassed a wide variety of musical styles including spirituals, ragtime, plantation and coon songs, formal compositions by black composers such as Samuel Coleridge Taylor and Cook himself, and classical pieces by Brahms, Grieg, Dvorak and others. Contemporary reviewers wrestled with the problems posed by the stylistic plurality of the group, and generally opted to assess the performances

within the context of earlier styles of black music that had been heard in Britain, and relating the entertainment to minstrelsy specifically, for example:

...some of the singing brings back the palmiest days of Mohawk and Moore and Burgess...<sup>7</sup>

(*The Times*, 9 December 1919, p. 12)

It is important to note that the reviews are generally complimentary and largely free from overt racism or racial stereotyping, and instead seem to indicate that there was a genuine interest in the music and its performers. In addition, reviews indicate awareness that what was being heard was in some way a genuine cultural experience as opposed to the mere 'imitations' that had been presented previously. A review in the *Referee* concluded: 'We have had so much imitation coloured music that it is refreshing to hear the real thing rendered in the true manner, and the opportunity of doing so should not be missed' (6 July 1919, p. 4). Earlier black music genres were now beginning to be recognised as the fundamental roots of contemporary ragtime and jazz, and were perceived as more significant and permanent than the present day syncopated styles that they had spawned:

[The performances of the SSO] can bring us back to the darkie folk-songs and melodies that will live long after jazz and rag-time have enjoyed their spell of popularity

(*The Times*, 9 December 1919, p. 12)

[The music of the SSO] serves to demonstrate how very far from its original sources nine-tenths of the ragtime we get howled at us has strayed

(*Musical Standard*, 2 August 1919, quoted in Rye 1990a, p. 49)

Interestingly, the performances of the SSO provoked an increased appreciation of the evolution and developments that had taken place in black American music since the minstrel shows and performances of spirituals in the nineteenth century. The juxtaposition of plantation songs and spirituals with instrumental ragtime and blues thus provided in effect an illustrated lineage of the evolution of black American music. It is significant that the SSO linked the new styles of syncopated music with black American musical forms with which the British public would already be familiar.

Initially, none of the material that the group performed was specifically designated as jazz. It is possible, as John Chilton suggests (1987, p. 35), that Cook deliberately avoided the nomenclature, as its connotations would compromise his intention of securing serious appreciation of black music. Indeed, early reviewers applied definitions of jazz that were based on their previous limited experiences of the music, and the performances of the SSO were seen to be appreciably different, described as 'Ragtime but not Jazz' in the *Daily Graphic* (9 December 1919, p. 6). Reviews dating from 1920 begin to mention jazz in connection with SSO performances, but a review in *Sound Wave* suggests that the SSO's performances of jazz were rather different to the noisy and unrefined jazz with which Britons were familiar:

The wildest orgy of jazz effects [in the SSO's performances] never reveals for an instant any real discord, for each artist plays with the harmonious objective of the complete performance uppermost in his mind.

(October 1920, p. 698)

### The later activities of the SSO

George W. Lattimore, who dealt with the group's finances, had gained increasing control of the SSO from October 1919 when Will Marion Cook returned to America. This situation was to result in numerous lawsuits between the two men and ultimately led to the disintegration of the orchestra. Lattimore influenced the venues in which the

group performed, as after Cook's departure the orchestra moved from the serious surroundings of the Philharmonic Hall to the more light-hearted atmosphere of the Coliseum, a variety hall. The SSO was not a success as a variety act, as their performance was judged to be too long and serious. The group also began to play for dancing, notably for the Armistice Ball in the Albert Hall, where they were warmly received, but their dances were described as 'tantalisingly short' (*Dancing Times*, Christmas 1919, p. 213), illuminating their inexperience as a dance band.

Lattimore also made significant changes in the way that the SSO was presented and marketed to the public in Britain; in particular, he exploited the connection that critics and the public had already made between the SSO and minstrelsy. An advertisement in the *London Amusement Guide* emphasised stereotypical characteristics of black performers, promising 'Life, pulse, rhythm, tears and laughter' and 'Southern negro music...[with] an honest native sense of rhythm and a spontaneous blending of the humor and pathos in music.' (*London Amusement Guide*, August 1920, p. 63). Indeed, the increasing emphasis on the connection between the SSO and minstrelsy also influenced the content of the show, described in October 1920 as 'an Entirely New Musical Entertainment Depicting Scenes of Southern, Colonial and Plantation Life' (*London Amusement Guide*, October 1920, p. 64). By this time, the music was no longer the principal focus of the show, and the visual aspect was becoming more significant with musical numbers dramatically staged and enhanced by new coloured lighting effects (*The Referee*, 7 November 1920, p. 3; *The Stage*, 16 December 1920, p. 12). These changes to the show, together with the marketing style and new engagements, certainly do not seem in keeping with Cook's original aim to promote respect for black music as a serious art form.

#### The effects of the break-up of the SSO

After Will Marion Cook's return to London in January 1920, the dispute with Lattimore over the ownership of the SSO intensified and the group fragmented, some musicians

showing loyalty to Cook and others remaining with Lattimore. Ironically, the result of the gradual breakdown of the SSO meant that both individuals and the group as a whole had more influence on the evolution of jazz in Britain than they otherwise might. The split between Cook and Lattimore meant that there were at times two groups in operation in Britain at practically the same time, and as a result groups were forced to tour more widely outside London increasing the circulation of the music and musicians. Performances by SSO groups have been traced until as late as 1922 (Rye 1990b, p. 231), but after the disputes of 1920 the orchestra never regained its initial integrity and coherence. However, the disillusioned musicians who left the SSO sought alternative work in Britain and thus disseminated the music more widely around the country and into Europe, remaining active in Britain long after the demise of the SSO. Native British musicians, both black and white, were absorbed into the group to replace those who left, and were able to learn about jazz techniques first-hand, especially through the jam sessions which took place during orchestral strikes and periods of inactivity. Bertin Depestre Salnave, a flautist recruited by Cook in Britain, recalled that 'It was during the orchestra's various strikes that I really began to play true jazz. Then I could vie for honours with the other coloured musicians. It was at this time also that I bought my first saxophone...' (Rye 1978, p. 215). Indeed, it is in the accounts of the more 'unofficial' and informal activities of the musicians of the SSO, such as dance band work, rehearsals and jamming, that compelling evidence emerges which establishes the direct importance of this ensemble to the evolution of jazz in Britain.

#### Associated dance bands

As we have seen, the SSO was largely unsuitable for playing for dancing and opportunities for extended extemporisation were limited within the large ensemble. However, certain musicians who were clearly more proficient improvisers than others formed small groups and eventually ceased playing with the main orchestra (Rye 1990b, p. 144). Several small groups were drawn from the SSO to play for dancing in London, most significantly, a group called the Jazz Kings began a residency at the

Embassy Club<sup>8</sup> on Bond Street on New Year's Eve 1919 under the leadership of Benny Peyton, the SSO percussionist.

The Jazz Kings were clearly much more commercially successful than the SSO, for a number of reasons. Firstly, they played dance music proficiently, and were praised by the magazine *Dancing World*: 'This combination of talented artists can certainly render dance music (much of it being of their own composition) in the most inspirited, lively and pleasing manner' (October 1920, p. 4). Peyton had a good choice of experienced musicians for his band including Sidney Bechet. The format of clarinet, alto saxophone, violin, banjo, piano and drums was similar to that of a standard dance band in Britain, but as it consisted entirely of black musicians and was called 'jazz' band, the latest trend in dance music, it thus represented a desirable balance of the familiar and the exotic. The group was clearly popular, as they recorded some numbers for Columbia (although these were never issued) (Averty 1969, p. 23) and performed at the most important dance venues in the capital including the Hammersmith Palais de Danse and Rector's Club.

The Jazz Kings were ambitious, and achieved musical and material autonomy from the SSO as when they found out that Lattimore had been taking a large share of their earnings, having stated that he was not making any money from the engagement, they negotiated their own contract with Albert De Courville, the proprietor of the Embassy Club. They also seem to have paid careful attention to their image. A photograph shows them resplendent in matching striped costumes complete with turban-style hats, probably as part of the 'carnivals and frolics' that were included in the weekly programme at the Embassy Club (*Dancing Times*, January 1920, p. 307). There is evidence that Peyton had picked up on the prevailing idea of jazz as novelty entertainment in Britain, as in an interview he stated that 'We do our best to render Jazz music in a manner sufficiently good, we hope, to make the public like it, and to free it from monotony. But further than that, the 'Jazz Kings' can entertain with tricks,

stunts, solos and so on' (*Dancing World*, October 1920, p. 4). Indeed, from the evidence of their costumes, financial deals and stated aims, the Jazz Kings were far more commercially astute and successful than the SSO.

#### Jazz in the rehearsal process and performance style of the SSO

There is strong evidence to suggest that the improvisatory essence of jazz was not only present in the small group and leisure time playing of musicians in the SSO, but as an integral part of the rehearsal process and performances of the full orchestra. Examination of subtle references to the performance practice of the SSO is fundamental to an understanding of the way in which the whole group and individual players influenced the evolution of jazz in Britain. White pianist Natalie Spencer, who played with the group in 1921, found that 'playing in an orchestra composed of people of an entirely different race was a unique, and, as it transpired, a pleasant experience' (1921, p. 409). Her account provides a fascinating insight into the way in which the orchestral players 'with an artistic and elastic conductor' were able to introduce 'highly original bits...not necessarily at rehearsals, but, should the spirit move one, at a show' (1921, p. 410). Spencer's account suggests that although the band normally performed from printed music there was considerable flexibility for innovation and improvisation, governed by 'Mr. Cook's expression' that 'formed an unmistakable gauge of the success or otherwise of one's attempt' (1921, p. 410). Indeed, improvisation was clearly part of the rehearsal and arrangement process, in which very good improvised embellishments were rewarded with a quiet smile 'and you knew that bit was 'in for keeps' and would be expected more or less in future' (1921, p. 410). Her account leaves no doubt as to both the musical and humorous capabilities of her colleagues: 'An amusing occupation is 'answering each other'-taking a phrase or bit of embellishment that you heard someone else put forth, and putting it in, (usually in another key) in another part of the tune' (1921, p. 410). Spencer's account suggests that although not all of the music that the orchestra played was jazz, the ability to improvise spontaneously was clearly important and expected from members of the

SSO. Her description of SSO performances is confirmed by Ernest Ansermet, who stated that 'there are very few numbers I have heard them execute twice with exactly the same effects' (1959, p. 4).

#### Individual jazz musicians in the SSO

The jazz elements of the SSO's show were most clearly demonstrated in the performances of the musicians that Will Marion Cook chose to feature, Buddy Gilmore and Sidney Bechet, who were to all intents and purposes jazz musicians working in an orchestral context. As such, both made strong individual impressions on the public, even before they branched out into small group work. It was Gilmore's performance that led *The Times* critic to conclude that 'the Southern Orchestra [*sic*] can provide jazz entertainment when required' as they had 'a drummer who fascinated yesterday's audience- and more important still, the Coliseum's own expert- by his lightening dexterity and his knack of juggling with his drumsticks.' (9 December 1919, p. 12). When Gilmore left the Southern Syncopated Orchestra for a time, he placed a large advertisement, complete with illustration, in *The Performer* to advertise his own act, 'The Quintessence of Jazz' (12 August 1920, p. 27) which had been the name adopted for his solo in the SSO show. British trombonist Ted Heath, who joined the band for a tour to Vienna, recalled learning from Buddy Gilmore (who had by this time returned to the SSO) 'something about the different approach and technique necessary for jazz' (1957, p. 30), thus leaving little doubt as to Gilmore's credentials as a jazz musician.

Sidney Bechet was undoubtedly the most significant member of the Jazz Kings and the Southern Syncopated Orchestra. Cook must have recognised Bechet's potential as he was recruited to the SSO even though he could not read music. Although it was probably in the small group situation that Bechet could really shine, his improvisational abilities were immediately put to good use in the SSO, particularly his own solo feature playing *Characteristic Blues*, and he seems to have been happy to be in the spotlight. Bechet's improvisational abilities and apparently already distinct sound made a great

impression upon those that heard him in London, and this led to him being one of the first individuals to be appreciated as a jazz musician in Britain. Bechet's extemporisations were probably truly spontaneous and were certainly recognised as such. Bernard Tipping recalled that Bechet (*sic.*) 'would conceive the most weird and clever ideas quite spontaneously while he was playing, and out they used to come all on the spur of the moment as it were' (November 1930, p. 57). The reviewer in *The Cambridge Magazine* linked the performances of Bechet, 'who extemporizes a clarinette solo...[and] compels admiration, so true is his ear and so rhythmical and vital his conception' with the abilities of slaves who 'having a great sense of rhythm they extemporised on any tunes, using subtle dissonances which are characteristic of them' (*The Cambridge Magazine*, 1919 quoted in Rye 1990a, p. 49). Thus, the origins of jazz and improvisation in black music were clearly understood by some, and the use of the term 'subtle dissonances' suggests an awareness of the 'blue' notes must have featured in Bechet's solo.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, Bechet's playing of 'perfectly formed blues' prompted one of the earliest essays that recognised the significance of jazz by the Swiss conductor, Ernest Ansermet (contained in Williams 1959, *The Art of Jazz*). Bechet recalled Ansermet's numerous visits to the Philharmonic Hall: 'Many a time he'd come over to where I was and he'd ask me all about how I was playing and what it was I was doing, was I singing into my instrument to make it sound that way?' (Bechet 1960, p. 127). Ansermet recognised that what he was hearing was more than just a one-off novelty. Firstly, he understood the lineage of black American music that was being laid out before him by the SSO, in which spirituals, rags, dances and blues were inextricably linked. Most significantly, however, he also recognised that this evolution was set to continue into the future, remarking that Bechet's improvised solos 'already show the germ of the new style' and suggesting that this may be 'the highway along which the whole world will swing tomorrow' (Ansermet 1959, p. 6).

## **Conclusion**

Fundamentally, it is clear that rigorous analysis of the activities of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band and the Southern Syncopated Orchestra establishes both these groups as vital to the evolution of jazz in Britain. Although the two ensembles performed very different repertoire, both were rooted in American music and were on the cutting edge of where jazz began to evolve from earlier American genres as a separate, new musical style. Although improvisation was not as central to the performances of the SSO and the ODJB as it was to become in later jazz, it was nevertheless very much present as a significant aspect of the way that both groups worked. The similarities between the way that the two groups extemporised new ideas in rehearsal, that were then rejected or adopted in performances, are very striking, and it is clear that this provided a foundation for the development of improvisation in jazz. Modern writers on early jazz can be restricted by the difficulty of defining 'jazz' as a musical style. Indeed, the Southern Syncopated Orchestra has not often been considered in depth in the existing literature, probably because very few numbers that the group performed were specifically designated as 'jazz'. The neglect of the SSO within writing on early jazz has undoubtedly contributed to development of the established view of the evolution of jazz in Britain in which the ODJB is wholly central. Whether or not we now consider the music of either group to be jazz, their performances were clearly seminal and definitive for those that heard them in Britain in the early twentieth century.

This essay has shown that ideas about the image of jazz and the Negro stereotype that had been firmly established before widely cited beginning of jazz in Britain in 1919 were extremely influential on the reception of the ODJB and the SSO. The image of jazz that developed before most Britons had heard what it actually sounded like was extremely significant to its reception, and the performances of the ODJB were established as seminal through their consistency with the way in which jazz had already been presented in Britain. At dance clubs, the band presented the first version of jazz that was appreciably different from current dance music in Britain, the main

difference being the instrumentation (omitting the banjo and adding the drums) and resultant 'noisy' timbre, which therefore became understood in Britain as the main characteristic of jazz. The group was understood to be performing authentic jazz, leading to British bands continuing to perpetuate this version and image of jazz after the ODJB had left Britain. Modern criticisms of the ODJB are based mainly on retrospective analysis that can place the claims of originality and authenticity into perspective within the context of a wider knowledge of the development of jazz, which was impossible for Londoners at the time. The reality, that the ODJB presented a version of jazz that was indebted to the music of New Orleans, lies somewhere between the understandable naivety of these early audiences, who accepted the band as unequivocally representative of the new music called jazz, and present day critics that write the band off in retrospect for their commercial appropriation of what they see as an essentially black art form.

The performances of the SSO immediately prompted comparisons with earlier instances of black entertainment in Britain, most notably the minstrel show. The Negro stereotype introduced by minstrel shows had a significant effect on the British reception of black musicians in the early twentieth century and as it became an expected part of all black entertainment. The popularity of the stereotypical Negro in Britain became a useful marketing tool for promoters such as George Lattimore but was also a straitjacket to which black performers were often forced to yield for their own commercial survival in Britain. However, the feature of the SSO's performances that was most appreciated by audiences was that the group, initially at least, represented an authentic cultural experience, unlike previous imitations. The SSO's performances led to some recognition of the fundamental roots of modern syncopated styles in black music. However, the word 'jazz' was not used by the main SSO until later in their time in Britain, by which time the idea of jazz that had been disseminated by the ODJB had been widely adopted. This meant that reviewers had trouble in defining anything that

the SSO played as jazz, as the music was said to be too melodious and not noisy enough.

The difference between the reception and relative success of the two groups in Britain can be put down as much to the way in which they were presented as to the nature of the music that they performed. Cook's group was called an 'orchestra', appeared in black tie, included works by established classical composers, initially appeared at the Philharmonic Hall and were well received by audiences who were interested in music and culture. The attempts to adapt SSO's show for variety theatre were largely unsuccessful, as in doing so the presentation of black music, which had been the backbone of the show and had attracted discerning audiences, became less important and the whole orchestra was simply not suitable for providing dance accompaniments. The ODJB performed from the start in London's most popular variety theatres and dance venues, to audiences who were merely expecting whatever was the latest novelty or dance band, and thus quickly permeated the British entertainment world. The fact that the ODJB were able to present jazz as dance music when new dance music was just what Londoners required in 1919 would ultimately ensured their success over an unwieldy orchestra, irrespective of race.

A more meaningful comparison can be made between Benny Peyton's Jazz Kings and the ODJB as similar sized dance groups, both of which claimed to be performing jazz. These groups performed in similar venues, which appears to indicate a lack of racial discrimination at this time. However, the extent of the influence of the nineteenth century minstrel stereotype meant that black musicians of the SSO were always destined to perform in the shadow of minstrelsy, and the Jazz Kings were probably only as successful as it was possible for them to be as black musicians. The ultimate success of the ODJB was due to long-standing white supremacy, and the fact that the population of Britain was predominately white. Most importantly, the fact that the ODJB

were white meant that they were able to make recordings that gave them an emblematic status as the 'first jazz band' for years to come.

However, the high-profile success of the ODJB in introducing jazz to Britain was clearly a transient phenomenon, and its importance has been to an extent exaggerated by writers over the years. The group was small, close-knit and impenetrable, and after they left Britain, their demise was rapid, and their reputation was disseminated in the proceeding years through their recordings, which can easily give a misleading impression of the band and of jazz. Indeed, the aftermath of their appearance spawned numerous imitators, keen to fill their shoes, but without a real understanding of the music, merely picking up on the superficial elements of their performances. Although the group was significant in shaping an initial understanding of jazz and fundamental to the development of modern dance, the extent of their impact on the long-term musical development of jazz in Britain is arguable.

The SSO and associated small groups disseminated jazz widely through Britain, performing in most main cities and in parts of Europe over a three-year period. Hence, many more people heard the SSO than ever heard the ODJB live, as the latter performed in a limited number of venues in London and were only in Britain for just over a year. The SSO established their authenticity and credibility through simply presenting the music of their own culture and this quality was recognised by those that heard them. Although the music of the SSO was viewed with interest and appreciated by audiences, it remained an experience outside white British culture and did not yet have the power to permeate and influence it, except through one vital route- the musicians themselves. The essential paradox in the history of the SSO was that collapse of the ensemble was vital in allowing the SSO to disseminate black ideas on jazz in Britain, and especially to British musicians. Several of the original American musicians found jobs elsewhere in Britain, disseminating their music more widely; British musicians were absorbed in the band in their place, and could therefore learn

about jazz first-hand; and after the eventual demise of the orchestra, many of its musicians remained in Britain, and thus helped to ensure the long-term development of jazz in this country. Significantly, it was the SSO, not the ODJB, which received serious musical criticism that began to establish black music and jazz as significant art forms in the twentieth century.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Godbolt, J. (1986) *A History of Jazz in Britain: 1919-1950*.

<sup>2</sup> The British Library Collection contains three compositions by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band published in Britain in 1917; *Ostrich Walk: Jazz Foxtrot*; *Sensation: Jazz One-step*; and *Tiger Rag: One Step* (contained in h3828.yy). Recordings made by the band were probably also available in Britain prior to their 1919 visit.

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed analysis, see Parsonage (2001) 'The Evolving Image of Jazz in Britain in Sheet Music' in *British Postgraduate Musicology Online* Volume 4, March 2001 [<http://www.bpmonline.org.uk/>]

<sup>4</sup> Songs will be referenced in the text using the British Library volume number.

<sup>5</sup> Many years later, in 1936, Nick LaRocca was to unequivocally reject the Negro roots of jazz in an article 'Jazz Stems from Whites Not Blacks' in *Metronome* magazine (October 1936, p. 20) and in numerous letters attacking Marshall Stearns and Hughes Panassie who advocated the importance of black musicians in the development of jazz. Similarly, as Schuller has pointed out (1968, p. 175n), Brunn's book on the band also avoids mentioning the black musicians of New Orleans that must have had an influence on the musicians of the ODJB, and LaRocca clearly intended this publication as another way of making his position and views clear.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Lyttelton in *The Best of Jazz: Basin Street to Harlem* (1980, p. 15-25), who bases his evaluation of the ODJB solely on an analysis of *Tiger Rag*.

<sup>7</sup> These were British blackface minstrel companies that amalgamated around the turn of the century.

<sup>8</sup> The 'Embassy Club' was in fact the 'Dixie Club', named after the Original Dixieland Jazz Band who had played there earlier in 1919. The Jazz Kings were known as the 'Syncopated Orchestra' until later in 1920, but they are referred to here as the Jazz Kings for clarity.

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<sup>9</sup> If Bechet's later recording of this piece is anything to go by, these early twentieth century audiences certainly experienced a blues performance, full of characteristic elements, which was unprecedented in Britain.