

Race, Identity and the Meaning of Jazz in 1940s Britain

The girl-friend said, “Let’s dance” and down the stairs they walked to the dance floor, and as the band struck up ‘Oh, Johnnie’, the girl-friend stepped away from Howard Barnes, raised her right hand, executed a hep-step and cried, “Wow, Johnnie!” The bomb fell at that exact moment. (Graves, 1958, p. 121)

In his book *Champagne and Chandeliers*, Charles Graves describes a bomb falling on the Café de Paris in London on 8 March 1941, just as Ken ‘Snakehips’ Johnson and his West Indian Dance Orchestra began to play. The bomb killed the bandleader Johnson, the Trinidadian saxophonist Dave ‘Baba’ Williams and many of those dancing; further members of the band and audience were injured. This event marked a tragic end to Johnson’s burgeoning career at the helm of a unique ensemble in Britain at that time, both culturally, since all the members of the band were black, and musically, as the group was a foremost purveyor of swing in Britain. Complicating a familiar dichotomy of (imported, or closely derivative) jazz in Britain and (native, with original elements) British jazz, as I have argued elsewhere, the West Indian Dance Orchestra can also be understood as an example of British jazz (Tackley, 2013). This challenges the assertion that British national identity was only expressed in jazz from the mid-1960s in works such as Stan Tracy’s 1965 album *Jazz Suite inspired by Dylan Thomas’ ‘Under Milk Wood.’*¹

In identifying the work of the West Indian Dance Orchestra as British jazz I am not pointing towards obvious manifestations of Britishness, such as the performances of settings of Shakespearian texts (which, anyway, had been recorded previously in Chicago by Bob

¹ For a full discussion of this in connection with the BBC documentary *Jazz Britannia*, see Wall and Long (2009).

Crosby), or even the hints of the inclusion of West Indian repertoire in their performances (although not on their known recordings²) as an articulation of their identities as citizens of the British Empire, who had the right to settle in the UK and were doing so in increasing numbers at this time. The members of the West Indian Dance Orchestra were understood in a very general sense as authentic purveyors of African American swing, although none were African Americans, as well as of styles such as calypso and rumba, Trinidadian and Cuban respectively, although the musicians originated from various different parts of the Caribbean, and some, indeed, had been born and bred in the UK. Even prior to the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* in 1948, which is often characterised as heralding the start of mass immigration, jazz was part of a vivid and diverse mix of black music styles that could be heard in London clubs reflecting cultural importations from the Empire and beyond. Rather than necessarily signifying specific cultural roots or allegiances, then, ‘descriptions of a hybrid repertoire [of the West Indian Dance Orchestra] suggest a generalized perception of black music commensurate with the blurring of the black identities of the musicians who performed them, which is perhaps characteristic of the black British experience at this time’ (Tackley, 2013, p. 201). In other words, just as citizens of the British Empire often remained fundamentally and non-specifically ‘other’ in British society, jazz was one element in a repertoire of ‘exotic’ black music styles which was becoming established in Britain.

With this context in mind, this chapter examines the subsequent careers of the surviving members of the West Indian Dance Orchestra with a focus on race and identity.³

² Black British saxophonist Soweto Kinch has argued that hints of Caribbean rhythmic sensibility can be discerned in the approach of this group to swing performance (*Swinging into the Blitz*, 2013).

³ The timeframe of this chapter stretches a literal definition of ‘post-War’ with the understanding that the general characteristics of the post-War era began to be formulated during the War itself. Specifically, the 1941 bombing represents the most significant moment in the lives and careers of black British jazz musicians active immediately post-War and therefore provides the most logical starting point for this account.

Racially integrated jazz performances became more frequent during and after the Second World War, especially in recording studios, special concerts and jam sessions where this had already been established, but now extending into mainstream dance orchestras. Although not often the subject of explicit comment in attendant writing, integrated bands helped to establish the authenticity of British jazz performance, by (paradoxically) both making reference to and distinguishing it from that of America. However, the precise cultural roots of black participants were often neglected and whether appearing individually or collectively, black musicians remained novel and therefore subject to discrimination. This challenges the idea of jazz performance as a utopian expression of identity and, in fact, many of the West Indian Dance Orchestra's musicians diversified to play other forms of music in order to find economic and artistic fulfilment. This chapter draws on material from Britain's leading contemporary music trade publication, *Melody Maker*, and interviews from the (UK) National Sound Archive's Oral History of Jazz in Britain.

Background

The increasing identification of jazz as black music in the years following its introduction to Britain in the aftermath of the First World War was one of the most profoundly influential factors on British reception and perceptions of the genre. In the 1920s, while the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) sought to present a civilised, notated and controlled British version of jazz (dance music), 'hot' jazz, which appeared, at least, to be spontaneous and improvised, had considerable exotic appeal in what one contemporary writer termed 'the underworld of London.' (Felstead, 1923). Because hot jazz was often performed by (African) Americans this exoticism was reinforced. Moreover, this largely unregulated environment provided an ideal situation for British and American musicians, both black and white, to interact free from musical, social and legal restrictions. Elsewhere, I have described in detail

the fundamental re-evaluation of jazz and race which took place from around the end of the decade, where performances by black musicians which had previously been dismissed as inadequate began to be understood and appreciated (Parsonage, 2005, pp. 65–8). This development was supported by the growing availability of records and attendant critical writing in publications such as *Melody Maker* as well as performances of prominent African American musicians in Britain including trumpeter Louis Armstrong and composer/bandleader/pianist Duke Ellington, who first appeared here in 1932 and 1933 respectively. A critical shift can be evidenced retrospectively in two important books – *Music Ho!* by Constant Lambert and *All About Jazz* by Stanley Nelson, both published in 1934 – which specifically pointed towards the importance of performers rather than composers in jazz. This was a diversion from the conventional hierarchy of western art music which until that point had provided the criteria for evaluating jazz, especially for those who were determined to find it wanting. In the context of this new awareness, blackness was now more often celebrated as a characteristic of jazz which distinguished it not only from classical music but also the dominant popular and commercial dance music, and blackness became increasingly understood as a marker of jazz authenticity.

For the general public, this change in attitude perhaps manifested itself most obviously in developments in BBC broadcasting. The Corporation's resident Dance Orchestra, although influenced by trends in popular music including jazz, remained mainstream under the leadership of Jack Payne from 1929 and then Henry Hall from 1932 (indeed, African American multi-instrumentalist and arranger Benny Carter's work with this group, although influential on the musicians involved, had limited impact on its overall direction and concept [see Tackley, 2012a]). However, alongside this, from around 1937, with the encouragement of young, jazz-loving producers such as Leslie Perowne and Charles Chilton, the BBC broadcast programmes such as *Kings of Jazz* and *Jazz Celebrities* which

used gramophone records, and also *America Dances*, an ambitious series of transatlantic relays of band performances, and specially arranged jam sessions from New York (Baade, 2011, p. 31).

This reaching out across the Atlantic by the BBC, mirrored by visits to the States by jazz aficionados such as Leonard Feather and Spike Hughes who wanted to experience the latest innovations in the music for themselves, was undoubtedly influenced by significant developments in British governmental policies towards American musicians in the mid-1930s. Under pressure from the (UK) Musicians' Union, responding to the increasing severity of restrictions on British musicians performing in America under the influence of the powerful American Federation of Musicians, restrictions on American musicians in Britain had tightened during the late 1920s and early 1930s until American bands were prohibited from performing publicly in Britain unless as an integral part of a stage show or in a dance hall (thus prohibiting them from the highest earning gigs in hotels and restaurants). In both instances, a British band had to be employed alongside the visitors, meaning that this was an expensive prospect for producers and managers (Parsonage, 2005, p. 220). Finally, the British Ministry of Labour ceased to issue work permits to American bands altogether in 1935 (Parsonage, 2005, p. 225). Visits from individual American musicians, who would usually only be permitted to appear onstage in effect as variety "acts" backed by British musicians were possible, although often difficult to negotiate with the authorities (Rye, 1990, pp. 55–6). Demand for what was now thought of as authentic jazz, particularly as performed by the large ensembles which were rapidly defining the new sound of the swing era which was widely disseminated on record, outstripped supply in Britain.

By the mid-1930s the numbers of black musicians resident in London, both British-born, including a large contingent from Cardiff, and those who had arrived relatively recently from the West Indies, principally Jamaica and Trinidad, had made the idea of forming an all-

black swing band a realistic possibility.⁴ Jamaican trumpeter Leslie Thompson, who had been resident in Britain since 1929, would have been well aware of the potential of such a venture having already found that ‘my face was my fortune’ as ‘the only coloured trumpeter in London when Louis’ [Armstrong] records became the talk of the music business’ (Thompson and Green, 2009, p. 71), and especially since now ‘the sounds of Armstrong, Ellington and Lunceford, and all those big bands, were all the fashion’ (Thompson and Green, 2009, p. 64). But it is also likely that politics played a part in Thompson’s motivation, having fully developed ‘race consciousness’ in Britain after hearing Marcus Garvey at Speaker’s Corner and associating with Dr Harold Moody, founder of the League of Coloured Peoples (Thompson and Green, 2009, p. 67 and p. 99). A group convened by Thompson which began performing in public in 1936 and was then taken over by the dancer Ken ‘Snakehips’ Johnson (from British Guiana) in early 1937 achieved quantifiable success in terms of making broadcasts and recordings and securing a residency at the Café de Paris, an upper-class nightclub, addressing the demand for jazz performances which both looked and sounded authentic.⁵ The failure of previous all-black groups involving Thompson to secure bookings in 1929 demonstrates the extent to which social circumstances and fashions had changed in

⁴ The structures of the Empire, notably the Exhibition and the military, sometimes in combination, were initially significant in bringing musicians directly from the Caribbean to Britain. For example, the band of the West India Regiment and the Kingston Choral Union performed at Exhibitions in Britain in the early twentieth century and West Indian musicians frequently attended the Royal Military School of Music at Kneller Hall for training. While a few musicians went ‘absent without leave’ on these occasions, these experiences more often encouraged musicians to return to and settle in the UK when they left the military. Later, from the 1930s, it became feasible for West Indians to come to Britain specifically to work as musicians, particularly under the auspices of Trinidadian brothers Cyril and George ‘Happy’ Blake who were mainstays of the club scene in Soho, London.

⁵ For a full account of the history and the development of these groups, see Simons 2008a, 2008b and 2009.

the intervening period (Thompson and Green 2009, p. 64; Simons, 2008a, p. 43).⁶ In addition to their ambitious and no doubt expensive forays to the States, the BBC now broadcast the West Indian Dance Orchestra as ‘ultra-modern dance music’, allowing the incorporation of the latest American popular music, swing, under the banner of acceptable dance music. These musicians were not subject to the government restrictions which applied to African Americans. At the same time, West Indian musicians, especially those who had arrived recently, were not generally subject to conscription which led to the depletion of London’s dance band profession during the War. It is no coincidence then that the West Indian Dance Orchestra’s success peaked at the height of the Blitz during which the aforementioned tragedy occurred.

Precedents for Integration

The years immediately following the dissolution of the West Indian Dance Orchestra can be characterised by increased racial integration in the popular music profession in the UK. Paul Lopes has described how in America during the 1930s, prior to more overt integration by Benny Goodman and others, ‘black and white musicians did occasionally perform together in recording studios, special concerts, special jam sessions, and a few nightclubs, but ... the commercial market of live swing remained segregated’ (Lopes, 2002, p. 128). It was under similar circumstances, but probably more frequently, that black and white musicians could be found on the stand together in Britain before the War. The recording studio had long provided an environment where black and white, British and American musicians could work together as well as providing opportunities for the visitors to earn extra cash. Mixed race recording sessions were commonplace in Britain in the 1930s, with integrated British bands organised

⁶ In fact, the Thompson/Johnson band was also predated by Rudolph Dunbar’s All-British Coloured Orchestra, formed in 1933, but this group did not achieve such mainstream recognition. (Rye, 2004).

by white Britons Spike Hughes, Leonard Feather and Vic Lewis, sometimes to accompany African American stars such as Benny Carter and pianist Fats Waller. In American recording studios, there was a tendency for integration to go only as far as having a white band backing a black star, and this format was observed in live performances on the British variety stage when African-American performers such as saxophonist Coleman Hawkins appeared in the late 1930s (Tackley, 2012b, p. 19; Rye, 1981b).

The format of the ‘special concert’, usually held on a Sunday, promoted by the trade magazine *Melody Maker* and aimed at an audience of professional musicians and knowledgeable fans, had a long history in the UK extending back to a concert given by the Filipino bandleader, pianist, conductor and composer Fred Elizalde’s Anglo-American band in 1929 (Parsonage, 2005, pp. 215–6). In the 1930s, Duke Ellington and African American bandleader/singer Cab Calloway were presented in this way with their own orchestras, but Benny Carter was backed by an integrated band of resident musicians (Tackley, 2012a; Rye, 1981a). As with Elizalde in 1929, Carter’s concert was cited as a demonstration of the abilities of the British musicians who were playing alongside the American stars rather than an opportunity to celebrate the visitors’ superlative talents. As previously mentioned, racial integration was the norm in performances which took place in the nightclub environment, but this was also a characteristic of the jam sessions which took place under the more formal auspices of the Rhythm Clubs. Initially these clubs were established across the UK to provide an opportunity for British jazz enthusiasts to share their record collections. However, a standard format evolved for meetings whereby a ‘record recital’ (an illustrated talk) was often followed by a live performance, usually a jam session, where members, in London in particular, were joined by professional musicians, including visiting Americans (Parsonage, 2005, p. 72). Importantly, the activities of the Rhythm Clubs fuelled the critical reassessment of jazz and race discussed earlier, and upheld the spontaneity of the jam session (by contrast

with the tightly arranged performances of dance bands) as an authentic form of jazz performance.

Subsequently, in the early 1940s, there is clear sense that the priorities and principles of the Rhythm Club movement were becoming influential on presentations of jazz in the wider public sphere in the UK. In fact, high-profile racially-integrated bands had already been established by the time of the Café de Paris bombing on the BBC's 'Radio Rhythm Club' show which began in June 1940. Again, the context for integration drew on the precedents laid down by the Rhythm Club meetings, now replicated on the air through the show's 'informative gramophone records recitals, jam sessions, talks, and guest appearances by professional musicians and critics' (Baade, 2011, p. 105). Like the Rhythm Clubs, the show drew on blackness and the jam session as tropes of authentic jazz. Initially the producer Charles Chilton staged live jam sessions in the studio, but realised that it would be more straightforward 'to present comparatively established small combos that played improvised, jam-session inspired music' (Baade, 2011, p. 114). In October 1940 the Radio Rhythm Club Sextet led by white British clarinettist Harry Parry was installed as the resident band (Baade, 2011, p. 107). Even prior to the demise of the West Indian Dance Orchestra black British guitarist Joe Deniz was a regular member of this integrated group, and Trinidadian trumpeter Dave Wilkins and Jamaican pianist Yorke de Souza joined in 1942.

The 'First English Public Jam Session', 1941

The most significant public statement of racial integration in jazz in the aftermath of the Café bombing made reference to all the modes of performance in which racial integration had already been established. On 16 November 1941 the First English Public Jam Session took place at Abbey Road studios through the combined efforts of *Melody Maker* and the No. 1 Rhythm Club. The event was in effect a 'special concert' (an audience of 1000 were present)

which used the jam session format in a recording studio. The performances were recorded and parts of the session then released on record by HMV. As Alyn Shipton points out, this pre-figures Norman Granz's 'Jazz at the Philharmonic' concept (begun in 1944) in which jam sessions were presented in a concert setting and then disseminated on record. Indeed, the HMV releases of the English jam session split 'the extended performances of Tea for Two and St. Louis Blues into separate parts for the issue on successive sides of 78 r.p.m. discs, just as Granz was eventually to divide up the earliest of his issues in the pre-LP era.' (Shipton, 2008, p. 464). The English event also provides an interesting counterpart to Milt Gabler's public jam sessions in New York in the 1930s, some of which were also released on his Commodore label. More specifically, the jam session in American clarinettist Benny Goodman's 1938 Carnegie Hall concert, not released on record until 1950, in effect presented an integrated big band due to the combination of Goodman's own white sidemen and guests from the black bands of Duke Ellington and Count Basie (Tackley, 2012b, p.19). Perhaps there is some sense in which the First English Public Jam Session was an attempt to emulate these developments in the USA. However, the overwhelming emphasis in previews of the event in *Melody Maker* is the promotion of British talent: 'We believe that British musicians *can* play the right sort of jazz in the right sort of atmosphere', recalling the rhetoric which had surrounded the promotion and reviews of Benny Carter's 1937 concert in London (*Melody Maker*, 1941a, p. 1; Tackley, 2012a, pp. 174–5). This is perhaps indicative of the recognition of the need for self-sufficiency in British jazz performance in the wake of the 1935 restrictions, and in addition, latterly, the assertion of a nationalist stance at a time of war. Ironically, having been at pains to identify the qualities of informality and spontaneity that were considered essential for a jam session, the announcement of 'the greatest British jam session ever' goes on to reassure readers that the event would be carefully organised by a committee whose role included selecting the musicians that would take part, forming them

into 'bands' and editing the resultant recordings 'to provide the greatest jazz and to show British musicians in the best possible light' (*Melody Maker*, 1941a, p. 1).

Nevertheless, perhaps with authenticity in mind, the committee pursued a policy of selecting 'up-and-coming youngsters' who, although possibly not known to the wider public, had a presence on the London jazz scene where jam sessions were intrinsic. Of the twenty-four musicians first announced in *Melody Maker* as participants, five were black, and the magazine pointed out that all had been associated with Johnson's band, perhaps suggesting that this was a guarantee of their abilities (1941b, p. 1). Guitarist brothers Frank and Joe Deniz were Cardiff-born. Saxophonist and clarinettist Carl Barriteau (Trinidad) and trumpeters Leslie 'Jiver' Hutchinson (Jamaica) and Dave Wilkins were from the West Indies. Although racial integration was not specifically mentioned as an aim of the jam session, the inclusion of a significant number of black musicians was consistent with Rhythm Club ideals. Moreover, the presentation of short biographies and photographs of the musicians involved made this aspect obvious to those who were unfamiliar with the musicians or unable to attend the event in person. Although accounts of the jam session suggest a certain amount of fluidity in the line-ups, Carl Barriteau was appointed leader of an octet, which also contained Frank Deniz, thereby foregrounding racial integration. It was this group's performance of 'Tea for Two' that was included in the selection of performances released on record by HMV in December 1941. A further concert at the London Coliseum sponsored by Cavendish Music Publishers was announced almost immediately after the First English Public Jam Session. *Melody Maker* readers were invited to vote for the musicians that they wished to hear at the event, which was billed as 'Your Swing Concert.' The proportion of black musicians included in a list of 'the foremost musicians in the country at the moment' published in the magazine as a guide for voters and those that polled highest in the final vote were similar, at

around 20%, and roughly consistent with the percentage included in the Jam Session (*Melody Maker*, 1941c, p. 1; 1942, p.1).

In retrospect, it seems that the Jam Session established a precedent for racial integration which, as 'Your Swing Concert' demonstrates, was both expected and demanded by jazz fans. However, the rhetoric of the time completely fails to acknowledge this. Ultimately, the First English Public Jam Session was judged by Edgar Jackson to be proof that 'British jazz can be very, very much better than most of even the people who are in closest touch with it believed possible' and thereby this high-profile event was presented as a success in respect to the initial aim of exemplifying the best British jazz (*Melody Maker*, 1941c, p. 6). There is no recognition here that many of the musicians were from the wider British Empire, or indeed that two of them were Dutch, demonstrating, as with Benny Carter's concert, a fluidity in the distinction between 'jazz in Britain' and 'British jazz' which could be used to emphasise the strength of the latter. Racial integration and the lack of discrimination based on the race and identity of those involved in the jam session could be seen as a positive step forward. However, at the same time the particular cultural roots of the musicians involved apparently had little importance in this emerging idea of 'British jazz.' Whereas the West Indian Dance Orchestra had articulated the hybridity of black British identities, the Jam Session subsumed even black identities within a non-specific and all-encompassing Britishness, itself primarily an attempt to at once emulate, surmount and suppress the fundamental American identity of the music. These paradoxes characterised the black participation in British jazz for several years following the end of the West Indian Dance Orchestra.

Racial Integration in Dance Orchestras

In addition to environments where racial integration had already been established, circumstances of the time also influenced the increased incorporation of black musicians into mainstream dance orchestras. By contrast with the aforementioned regularity of integration in Britain in ‘recording studios, special concerts, special jam sessions, and ... nightclubs’ with regard to what Lopes terms ‘the commercial market of live swing’, there were only a few pre-War examples of black musicians performing with otherwise white British dance bands such as African-American pianist Garland Wilson with Jack Payne, African-American trombonist Ellis Jackson with Billy Cotton and African-American singer Alberta Hunter with Jack Jackson (Rye, 1990, p. 55; Scott, 2004, p. 316). Alongside this, there are also recollections of active discrimination against black musicians, not usually from bandleaders and other musicians but from the management of the upper class venues to which these groups were beholden to maintain the most lucrative work and status. For example, the black Cardiff-born guitarist Joe Deniz had deputised for the regular guitarist in Ambrose’s band at *Ciro’s*, but ‘lasted exactly one night’ as the club owner objected to black people on the bandstand (Deniz, 1988).

Before the War, with the best opportunities in the profession effectively barred to them, many of the black musicians in London had earned a living by working in small clubs and playing for semi-private bottle parties. The first bookings that the West Indian Dance Orchestra achieved were on the variety circuit, playing in theatres and cinemas following the long tradition of black entertainment on the British stage. Ken ‘Snakehips’ Johnson’s name on the bill and the injection of his stage presence and dancing undoubtedly aided their success in this environment. Following this, the band played at some smaller London clubs, including the Old Florida which was well known as a haunt for visiting African-American performers that continued to appear in a theatrical context despite the restrictions on their musician compatriots. The move to the *Café de Paris* was significant as this venue was in a

different class, and in practical and economic terms this degree of stability in employment was unprecedented for these musicians. However, the venue had a long-standing policy of booking black cabaret performers which meant that it was not such a radical breakthrough as it might seem. It seems unlikely, for example, for an all-black band to have achieved a residency at a significant London hotel at this time.

Indeed, it is clear that the *degree* of racial integration exhibited in the First English Public Jam Session and the following swing concert was the exception rather than the rule, following the Café de Paris bomb. In his unpublished autobiography, the white British bandleader Bert Firman, who preceded Ken Johnson at the Café de Paris, recalled a conversation where Johnson asked him if he would ever consider employing a coloured musician ‘when playing for dancing in the swank hotels and restaurants.’ Firman replied: ‘Sure. One. He would be a novelty. But a second one? I’m afraid he’d have to be better than anybody else. I’d do it, but I’d have to work hard on selling him to the management [sic].’ Johnson responded:

That’s exactly the point. He’d have to be better than. Not as good as. Better than. So what real chance has your ordinary, competent but day to day coloured musician got unless, of course, he is American? There is such an inferiority complex about Americans that a lousy musician would still get by so long as he had a Yank accent. ... But I’m talking about West Indians. What real chance has a West Indian got? Not much. But put us all in a group, stress that we are a West Indian Dance Orchestra and then we become a big novelty. Those clever fellows with their natural rhythms. Just to make sure everybody gets the point, call me Ken Snakehips Johnson! (Firman, 1984, p. 278).

For the most part, the participation of black musicians in mainstream dance bands was restricted along the lines indicated by this conversation.

Race, novelty and authenticity

Following the Café de Paris bomb the careers of Johnson's former musicians veer between being the novelty of the only black musician in an otherwise white band and, conversely, grouping together as a 'big novelty', and often developing, in musical terms at least, the 'Yank accent' which was necessary for their success. Initially, there was a tendency towards the former, the vital catalyst being the circumstances of war which meant that the availability of proficient musicians was limited. Peter Powell, who was good friends with many of the West Indian musicians in London around this time, recalled that 'the bandleaders came down on them like vultures' following the bomb (Powell, 2012). Even as early as April 1941, when the dance band leader Bert Ambrose returned to broadcasting after five months absence, it was with a 'white-coloured band' incorporating musicians formerly with Johnson – 'a thing he would probably have thought impossible in pre-war days' (Detector, 1941, p.2). As indicated by the biographies appended to the announcement of the personnel of the First English Public Jam Session, in addition to Joe Deniz's continuing work with white bandleader and clarinettist Harry Parry, Dave Wilkins joined Ambrose, Leslie 'Jiver' Hutchinson was with Geraldo, Carl Barriteau had played with Lew Stone and Ambrose and was at that point 'at Hatchett's' where he played in the Swingtette led by Dennis Moonan alongside violinist Stephane Grappelli (*Melody Maker*, 1941b, p.1). In practice, there was considerable interchange and borrowing between groups during the war, especially for broadcasts when a full sound was desired. Although Hutchinson was loyal to the bandleader Geraldo, he also played with '[white bandleaders] Bert Ambrose, Sid Phillips, Joe Daniels, Lew Stone, Eric Winstone, [and] Frank Weir' and 'between April 1941 and the latter part of 1944 he appears to have taken part in more than 50 separate recording sessions with various bands or groups' (Powell, 2000, p. 11). Practical considerations aside, the incorporation of

black musicians was perhaps also indicative of the continued development of understanding jazz as black music, as exemplified by the discourse of the Rhythm Clubs, arguably to the point of fetishizing blackness. This suggests a new version of a tendency in the 1920s when similarly limited numbers of (white) American musicians were included in British dance bands to assure the authenticity of performances in both musical and cultural terms (Parsonage, 2005, pp. 198–9).

Despite the demand for Johnson's sidemen in the British dance band profession it is perhaps surprising that the West Indian Dance Orchestra did not reform and continue in the aftermath of the bomb considering the success that group had already achieved. However, there seems to have been some difficulties in negotiation and organisation without Johnson acting as a front man both on and off the bandstand. As early as 22 March 1941, only a fortnight after the bomb, the band's manager Leon Cassel-Gerrard wrote a full page article in *Melody Maker* under the heading 'Who is there to take Ken Johnson's place?', concluding: 'If my present plans mature, I feel he will be happy in the knowledge that his boys are still together playing his kind of music and perpetuating his memory by using the title "THE KEN JOHNSON ORCHESTRA"' (1941, p. 3). Cassel-Gerrard's intentions are further clarified by a telegram sent to Johnson's mother in Guiana requesting rights to use Johnson's name. However, this seems to have come to nothing. Perhaps the musicians were reluctant for a manager to take over ownership of the band which was previously run by a fellow performer. The West Indian Dance Orchestra did perform again on two occasions: for the 1941 Jazz Jamboree where the programme states 'reformed by Carl Barriteau' and included several white British musicians, and for a memorial broadcast in February 1942, again led by Barriteau.

The failure of the West Indian Dance Orchestra to reform permanently no doubt contributed to Barriteau's aspiration to lead a band of his own. After playing with a number

of groups in London he formed a band which was often resident in Scotland, consisting entirely of white musicians with the exception of his compatriot, saxophonist George Roberts. In this respect, Barriteau's approach post-Johnson extends the 'novelty' dichotomy proposed above in that he foregrounded his individual novel status rather than, as with his former colleagues, being more fully absorbed as a sideman within an existing white British dance band. Barriteau's band was successful during the War, made regular BBC broadcasts and achieved third place behind the Squadronairs (sic – the usual spelling was Squadronaires) and Geraldo in a 1944 *Melody Maker* Dance Band Poll (1944b, p. 1). Despite his popularity, the prominence of his position as a black musician fronting groups which were otherwise mainly white seems to have left him particularly susceptible to racial abuse. White Scottish saxophonist Bobby Thompson recalled that an audience member approached Barriteau ostensibly to make a request but instead took the opportunity to call him a 'black bastard.' Thompson was also asked why he worked for a 'coon', to which he replied 'If I could play like that I'd be black tomorrow.' (Thompson, 1995). Another white British (Scottish-born) saxophonist, Tommy Whittle, described Barriteau's stage manner – he was an 'entertainer', danced 'like he was on rubber strings' and made 'movements of a showman' when he played – suggests Johnson's influence (Whittle, 1992). Like Johnson, Barriteau was also business-savvy, opting for the stability of a residency in Leith as the War ended, then folding his first band and reforming with a smaller and more economically viable group.

For other musicians, there was, unsurprisingly, an element of trauma connected with reforming an all-black band modelled on the West Indian Dance Orchestra. According to Powell, the surviving musicians did not discuss the Café de Paris and would not play 'Dear Old Southland', Johnson's theme tune (Powell, 2012). The extent to which the West Indian Dance Orchestra had uniquely addressed a clear demand for an all-black swing band in Britain is further confirmed by Trinidadian bass player Rupert Nurse's recollection of the re-

emergence of a void in the British music scene after March 1941. This was temporarily addressed by Al Jennings' Trinidadian All-Stars but this band rapidly broke up. (Nurse, 1992). It was in early 1944 that some of Johnson's former sidemen, Jamaican saxophonist Bertie King and Yorke de Souza, began to talk about putting a band together under the leadership of Leslie 'Jiver' Hutchinson. The main motivation behind the idea was 'some unease at the constant working with no fixed base and frequently with different colleagues in varying locations' (Powell, 2000, p. 12). But just as Leslie Thompson's original motives in forming an all-black band were both musical and political, so Hutchinson and the others were initially concerned that the band should be an exclusively West Indian group. This suggests that the band was in some way intended as a particular assertion of collective identity, although this aim was quickly found to be impossible owing to the shortage of culturally appropriate players of particular instruments. Similarly, Powell says that 'the term West Indian was not to be used' in the ensemble's name (Powell, 2000, p. 12). This was possibly because a 'West Indian Orchestra' recalled Johnson's group too precisely, and so the less specific term 'coloured' was adopted instead. As Powell recalls: 'The immediate post-war years were difficult for those who had maintained the music scene during the war. Musicians who had been in the forces were available ...' (Powell, 2000, p. 12). With white British musicians returning to the dance bands it may have been that 'coloured' musicians felt that their efforts were, once again, best focussed on providing a 'big novelty' with a 'Yank accent.'

In March 1944, then, *Melody Maker* announced a 'most sensational piece of news' that Hutchinson was leaving Geraldo's dance band to lead a new 'all coloured' group under Ambrose's management. As the article indicated, demand for such a band had persisted in the years since 1941: 'Here, at last, is an attempt to evolve something on the lines of the old Ken Johnson outfit' (*Melody Maker*, 1944a, p. 1). Although using many of Johnson's former

personnel, and achieving comparably high musical standards as demonstrated on four surviving recorded sides, the rapidly evolving social and cultural circumstances were influential on the band's fortunes between 1944 and eventual disbandment in 1949. Most obviously, in terms of the musical context, this period saw the jazz establishment become more concerned with an essential split between two fields of more limited interest to the general public than swing: the trad revival and emergent bebop. As such, the brand of big band jazz perpetuated by Hutchinson was situated more firmly in the middle of the road than Johnson had been a few years earlier. Hutchinson was undoubtedly well placed to achieve success in this context and his group secured a number of votes in the 1944 *Melody Maker* Dance Band Poll (in which Barriteau's band came third) within only a few weeks of its existence. In addition, several of the instrumental categories had black musicians in the top three places, whereas the previous nationwide poll conducted by the magazine in 1937 saw no black musicians in these positions (*Melody Maker*, 1944b, pp. 6–7). This demonstrates the extent to which Hutchinson's band, and its individual musicians, were well absorbed, even integrated, within the mainstream dance band profession although undoubtedly a statement of black collective identity remained a 'big novelty.' This dichotomy is further demonstrated by an article published in *Melody Maker* a year after the founding of the band. This reported that the band included two white musicians, accompanied with a picture of the band with their music desks decorated with spades, emphasising their race (1945, p. 5). This negotiation between the articulation of difference and a need to belong might be understood to typify, in the terms of W. E. B. Du Bois's (1903) idea of double consciousness, the twoness inherent in the black British experience.

Hutchinson's band was undoubtedly successful, since, initially at least, there was no shortage of work. However, the majority of the engagements were 'one night stands' in theatres and dance halls up and down the country and so they were unable to limit travelling

in accordance with their initial aim. Indeed, the Coloured Orchestra undertook an Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) tour to India and also performed in continental Europe. The group never achieved a central London residency at a venue with the status of the Café de Paris and consequently the opportunities to broadcast and record were also limited. Hutchinson down-sized and eventually disbanded in 1949, but as early as 1946 he painted a bleak picture in *Melody Maker* under the heading ‘Colour Bar May Cause Jiver Break-Up’ (1946, pp. 1–2):

... we find ourselves up against a stone wall. The big [variety] circuits are closed to us; hotels won’t even contemplate hiring our services; restaurant jobs are few and far between. Vaudeville engagements are out of the question since stage acts require to place the accent on comedy, and we’re a jive outfit pure and simple.

As Hutchinson recognised, there were particular expectations of bands performing in vaudeville which required close attention to presentation, particularly comedy and visual aspects, in order to achieve an entertaining ‘act.’ Whereas Johnson, and then Barriteau, had developed ‘band acts’ that were suitable for this format, Hutchinson was, as Powell recalled, ‘no showman’ and recognised that the demands of these engagements were not compatible with his serious musical and political aims for the group (‘to maintain the profile of black musicians in the UK’ as recalled by Powell [2000, p. 13]). The exclusion from variety circuits, hotels and restaurants which would have provided the most stable and lucrative employment is more likely indicative of the continuing manifestation of racial prejudice in the UK outside the music profession. It seems that although managers of hotels and restaurants were now more prepared to tolerate limited integration in bands than before the War, the prospect of an entirely black band was still problematic. This serves to highlight once again the particular fortuitous circumstances of the nature and timing of the Café de Paris engagement in Ken Johnson’s success. Certainly, as John Solomos has pointed out, the

presence of ‘black workers and soldiers from the colonies to fight in the British army or to help with the war effort’ and the arrival of black American GIs had brought racial issues to the fore (2003, p. 49). The use of the term ‘colour bar’ in the *Melody Maker* article is significant in pointing towards particular circumstances in the aftermath of war where the presence of growing numbers of West Indian immigrants in Britain led to tension, discrimination and even riots. As Hutchinson pointed out in relation to his situation, this seemed particularly unfair since ‘all members of the band are West Indians and therefore British subjects. Many of them are ex-Servicemen’ (*Melody Maker*, 1946, p. 1). In 1948 the British Nationality Act reaffirmed the legal rights of colonial citizens to settle in Britain. The same year saw the much-publicised arrival of the *Empire Windrush* and, subsequently, further West Indians arrived to assist with the post-War labour shortage. However, as Fryer states, by the 1950s ‘more than two-thirds of Britain’s white population, in fact, held a low opinion of black people or disapproved of them’ (1984, p. 374). With this in mind, it is not surprising that Hutchinson eventually disbanded his ‘Coloured Orchestra’ in 1949 and returned to Geraldo.

Alongside these societal developments, the aforementioned trad/bebop dichotomy increasingly dominated the British jazz scene. The trad revival, although based largely on the music of African Americans, had little participation from black musicians in Britain. By contrast, there was considerable involvement in the burgeoning bebop scene in London, especially from those who had arrived more recently such as saxophonist Joe Harriott and trumpeter Dizzy Reece, both Jamaican, and trumpeter Shake Keane from St. Vincent, who made significant contributions to subsequent innovations in the music. Some West Indian instrumentalists collaborated with recently arrived calypsonians, including Lord Beginner and Lord Kitchener who had come over on the *Windrush*, producing a fusion of calypso and contemporary jazz. However, most of the musicians whose careers we have tracked in this

chapter continued to represent jazz as part of mainstream popular music. They were sometimes not willing or able to engage in bebop and the Rhythm Clubs that had formerly supported them were becoming more concerned with revivalism. For those that were prepared to diversify, a less itinerant living than dance band work could be made in the same Soho buildings which had fostered inter-racial jazz performance while providing facilities for visiting African Americans a few years earlier. These clubs now fulfilled a similar function for the growing West Indian population with a soundtrack of calypso but also Latin American styles. The demand for musical flexibility was not unfamiliar, since Louis Stephenson, Yorke De Souza, Bertie King and Leslie 'Jiver' Hutchinson, possibly the first West Indians to migrate to Britain specifically to further their musical careers, had begun by playing a mixture of jazz and rumba in the Blake brothers' Cuba Club band. Now these well-established but yet still first generation immigrants could often manage to continue to earn a living in dance bands. However, musical diversification was a particular feature in the careers of British-born black musicians, who had more often been called up to fight and therefore were not as easily able to sustain a profile which would lead to job offers from major bandleaders, as well as a realistic alternative for black musicians that had dropped out of the swing scene. For example, Jamaican saxophonist Louis Stephenson, who had a brief tenure with the early Johnson/Thompson band, then played Latin music at the Embassy Club under the leadership of Cuban pianist Don Marino Barreto and Trinidadian drummer and vocalist Edmundo Ros and later returned to the Cuba Club (Stephenson, 1987). When Ros formed his own band at the Coconut Grove he included Leslie Thompson on bass until the latter's call-up in 1942 (Thompson and Green, 2009, p. 105). When Thompson returned to the profession following his demobilisation in 1946 he continued to play Latin American music rather than jazz, now on trumpet again (Thompson and Green, 2009, p. 122–3). Ken Johnson's former

Cardiff-born vocalist Don Johnson (no relation) recalled that when he was demobbed in 1946 he secured a job with Monty Tyree as a maraca player and singer (Johnson, 1988).

Although in 1944 the Deniz family formed their ‘Spirits of Rhythm’ group playing jazz material, they too retained strongly hybrid musical personae. In 1947, *Melody Maker* described how these musicians responded to rapidly changing trends in popular music: ‘Add two extra musicians – button-up open-neck shirts – exchange the Hawaiian Lei for the knotted silk chord of Cuba – and the Deniz Hawaiian Trio becomes overnight the Deniz Rumba Quintette’ (1947, p. 2). This represents a step towards the formation in 1949 of Hermanos Deniz Cuban Rhythm band, which incorporated all three Deniz brothers. Here they focussed on Latin American music, particularly Brazilian styles which were not dissimilar to the Portuguese music that their father had played. Although they continued to perform in various styles as session musicians, for Frank particularly, as articulated in his oral history, this group marked the end of a search for a musical direction which, unlike superficial imitations of jazz or Hawaiian music, he felt that he could pursue with integrity and authenticity (Deniz, 1989; Tackley, in press).

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the West Indian Dance Orchestra’s residency at the Café de Paris was a quite unique coincidence of band and venue which was then abruptly shattered, all within the particular circumstances of World War Two. The subsequent careers of the musicians illuminate the complex interactions between race, identity and jazz in post-war Britain. Drawing on previously established models for racial integration in jazz performance, the circumstances of the war and its aftermath influenced a marked increase in racially integrated ensembles from 1941. However, despite being included within otherwise white British dance bands (and in Barriteau’s case, even leading such a group) and being widely

accepted and lauded as musicians in their own right by the music profession and jazz audiences, the opportunities for black British musicians remained limited, both practically and artistically.

Having stood in for missing African American jazz musicians in the aftermath of the 1935 restrictions, black British musicians, including those who were citizens of the British Empire had a complex dual insider/outsider status. On one hand, their particular cultural roots could be subsumed within an all-encompassing notion of Britishness from the jazz establishment which sought to legitimise and authenticate British jazz. On the other, both collectively and as individuals, they remained novelties. Both circumstances continued to deny the musicians the opportunity for specific expression of their cultural roots/routes, instead continuing to reflect the black British experience in general terms as the West Indian Dance Orchestra had done. These limitations were exacerbated by their music becoming increasingly mainstream at a time when racial tension in British society was increasing. For Leslie Hutchinson and others, music was not only a way of earning a living but a way of life; as Peter Powell recalled, Hutchinson's 'aim and practice was always to maintain the profile of black musicians in the UK and his actions were consistently directed to this basic aim' (Powell, 2000, p. 13). Frustratingly, the seriousness of his endeavours through jazz and swing were increasingly incompatible with the most stable engagements that were open to him, meaning that disbandment was almost inevitable.

The Jazz Warriors, formed in 1985, has been described by Val Wilmer as 'the first black British big band since those of Ken "Snake Hips" Johnson and Jiver Hutchinson' (Wilmer, n.d.). Undoubtedly changes in musical fashions and socio-economic circumstances contributed to the lack of large, all-black ensembles in Britain in the intervening period, but this perhaps also highlights that jazz as a musical expression of blackness once again returned to the 'underworld of London' for a time post-World War Two. For the musicians of the

West Indian Dance Orchestra, jazz, as a flexible form for self-expression in musical terms, had represented an opportunity to achieve material success which was, through its African American roots, culturally relevant to the experiences of being a black Briton. The return of both music and musicians to the periphery from the mainstream prompted a (re)connection with diverse musics from the Empire and beyond in the context of an emerging multicultural society. This was to inform some important new directions in British jazz.

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