

Rhythm and Reaction: The Age of Jazz in Britain

27th January – 22nd April 2018

Two Temple Place, London

<https://twotempleplace.org/exhibitions/rhythm-and-reaction/>

Curator: Professor Catherine Tackley

In 2017, Tackley was selected via a competitive process to be the curator of an exhibition on the Age of Jazz in Britain at Two Temple Place. The selection process involved responding to a brief to present an original vision for the exhibition, including indicative content. Tackley's vision for the exhibition was inspired by J.B. Souter's painting *The Breakdown*, which depicts a black saxophonist in evening dress sitting on a shattered classical statue, while a white, naked, shingled figure (female, yet androgynous) dances, clapping her hands, her clothes discarded beside her. This work also has a rich reception history indicative of the public reception of race and jazz at this time. The painting indicates key themes in the reception and impact of jazz in Britain - technology, race, gender and dance – which were developed during the research and curatorial process.

The focus of the exhibition was on the impact of jazz on artists working in a variety of media, as well as on popular culture and society beyond music and musicians, the first time that this had been the subject of an exhibition in a British context. Although there was pre-existing research on the history of jazz in Britain, including Tackley's own work, this perspective on jazz in Britain required specific, new research and theorising about the impact of jazz on fine art and sculpture, photography, film, interior design, ceramics, textiles, technology, architecture and literature.

Tackley's research involved investigating collections (ranging from national museums and galleries to those of private collectors) to develop the exhibition narrative and themes and simultaneously draw up an object list. These ideas were refined with reference to the available spaces in the building, which as a former residential property presents particular challenges. This involved careful consideration of the proper conservation and display of objects as well as optimising the visitor experience. Particular thought was given, informed by research into curatorial practice, to issues around exhibiting sound and moving image, and to the interpretation of objects which would today be considered distasteful, misogynist or racist.

Working with the exhibitions team at Two Temple Place, Tackley had overall responsibility for the curation of the exhibition. She was responsible for writing a curatorial essay, published in the exhibition catalogue, as well as all interpretation panels for thematic areas and individual objects, and curated playlists which could be heard in the galleries as well as accessed by visitors for subsequent listening. She had input into devising associated event programming, ensuring that research was represented in everything from resources for schools to an after-show jazz party, and contributed herself in the form of public lectures, chairing discussions and performance.

Quality of the output was ensured through monthly curatorial group meetings and particularly through the input of Curatorial Advisor Martin Caiger-Smith from the Courtauld Institute of Art.

The following account uses interpretation written by Tackley which was included in the original exhibition together with commentary in *italics* which describes the curatorial rationale in more detail.

Introduction: Entrance Hall

Rhythm & Reaction: The Age of Jazz in Britain

‘the spirit of the age, written in the music of the people’ (R.W.S Mendl, *The Appeal of Jazz*, 1927, p. 186)

Jazz, imported from America around the end of the First World War, was adopted and reconfigured in Britain by musicians and also provoked reactions from artists and the wider public. Its arrival resulted in a popular music revolution. Jazz came to prominence as a new musical genre in a unique post-war cultural, social and political climate, evolved alongside modern art, literature and ‘serious’ music, was disseminated through new technology and was popularized by the related rise of mass consumerism. Jazz became strongly representative of the spirit of the era, but not only in America, where the 1920s became indelibly associated with the music after F. Scott Fitzgerald’s vivid *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922). Its sound and reputation, based on reportage and imagery, intrigued and repelled Britons; these reactions characterised a distinctively British ‘age of jazz’. Although the introduction of jazz can be understood as a radical, modern development, previous encounters with American culture influenced its reception. In particular, African American culture had long provoked both fascination and, for some, fear; resulting in some imagery which today seems problematic and distasteful. A lack of understanding of jazz led to the perpetuation of stereotypes, some of which persist today.

Rhythm and Reaction explores British responses to jazz throughout the arts in the widest sense. It shows how jazz was established in Britain not only as an imported music, but was shaped through these various reactions to become embedded deep within British popular culture.

LOWER GALLERY

Just Before Jazz

The reception of jazz in Britain was influenced to a great degree by experiences of earlier forms of American popular music established in this country before and during the First World War. Minstrel shows, which presented exaggerated and often derogatory portrayals of black life in a variety entertainment format, had been extremely popular and led to a significant trend for banjo performance in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The stereotypical image of the black banjo player provided a linking thread from these shows to the development of black musical theatre, which remained popular throughout the age of jazz, and particularly in banjo-based bands that played for dancing in some of the London’s most renowned nightspots. Ragtime, a type of syncopated music with associated dances, remained a popular musical style throughout First World War, although songs and cartoons show that it was already considered dated within a couple of years of its rise to prominence around the time of the 1912 show *Hullo Ragtime*. Most importantly, ragtime provided an impetus for new styles of social dance, and an accompaniment for lively, comedic theatrical entertainment in the form of revue and variety shows.

Jazz arrives

Although jazz was already established as an idea by this time and some bands had adopted the term into their names, it was the Original Dixieland Jazz Band’s performances in Britain from April 1919 that confirmed the musical characteristics of jazz for a British audience. The ODJB was originally imported by the ambitious theatrical producer Albert de Courville to appear in the revue *Joybells* at the London Hippodrome; the group later appeared at the London Palladium. William Roberts’s painting of the audience at the Hippodrome indicates the challenges of presenting this new music to

a mainstream British variety audience. Certainly the band's performances were received with some confusion: it was arguably more successful as a dance band, providing jazz at the Hammersmith Palais de Danse from the venue's opening night. However, it was group of African American performers, the Southern Syncopated Orchestra, also resident in Britain from 1919, that influenced the development of British jazz performance: the fragmentary nature of the group led to many influential interactions with British musicians. The SSO's repertoire included spirituals, blues, and classical music, presenting jazz as part of a musical lineage. This approach was often employed by commentators seeking to explain the new music as it emerged.

Dance was crucial to the early adoption and appreciation of jazz; the music in turn inspired visual, architectural, choreographic and musical responses from contemporary artists. Grace Golden's sketches of Sherry's Dance Hall in Brighton provide first-hand images of the new venues established for social dance across the country. Often called 'palais de danse', they offered the working classes the chance to dance to live music. But jazz also became the entertainment of choice for the capital's most fashionable venues, many of them decorated in a modernist style – the interior of Fischer's restaurant was designed by Raymond McGrath, who was Australian-born but set up his practice in London, to include a dance floor. The BBC frequently broadcast bands direct from central London venues, but also commissioned a design for a new recording studio by McGrath from which dance music could be transmitted.

Commentary: Visitors were drawn into the room by a display of banjos immediately opposite the entrance. Continuity from pre-jazz to the emergence of the genre was shown through objects demonstrating the presence and representation of black performers and the development of London's club scene. One wall was devoted to the impact of jazz on the design of venues constructed post-WW1. Opposite, a cabinet exemplified early depictions of jazz in postcards and newspaper cartoons. A cabinet contained a crowd-sourced collection of early jazz photographs demonstrating the rapid dissemination of jazz across the UK. The Lower Gallery was dominated by a specially designed and constructed platform, intended to reference a stage, on which a variety of drum-kits were displayed. An inset screen displayed footage of early jazz (silent film) to compliment the static display.

The room featured a soundtrack of pre- and early jazz music recorded in Britain. Visitors were able to scan a QR code to access this on their own mobile devices and listen again after their visit.





UNDER STAIRS

Commentary: A player piano was displayed in this area, and demonstrated by a specialist throughout the run of the exhibition. This introduced visitors to the importance that technology was to play to the increasing automation and availability of music in the home over the period under consideration.



LANDING

Commentary: A series of display boards featuring rare archive photographs addressed various facets of the emergence of jazz performance in Britain. Themes included: American visitors, bands, soloists, and vocalists; British dance bands, and the West Indian influence.



LIBRARY

Jazz in the Home

New technology enabled jazz to spread across the country and especially and into the home. The gramophone and wireless became established in living rooms and reflected affordable modernist design. Dance music broadcast by the BBC's was central to the public experience of popular music, but for jazz fans with the means to buy, records of 'hot' sides by British dance bands and American jazz could be obtained from specialist record shops such as Levy's of Whitechapel in the East End of London. By the mid-1930s record collecting had become a popular hobby, supported by a nationwide network of Rhythm Clubs where collections could be shared and discussed.

More extensive public transport allowed easier access to entertainment venues in town centres, but live jazz was often provided more locally, especially in newly-established dance halls. Periodicals such as *Melody Maker*, *Rhythm* and *Tune Times* provided information for professionals, as well as practical advice for amateur musicians and fans. These were supplemented by 'tutor' books relating to specific instruments; Billy Mayerl even ran a correspondence school for aspiring syncopated pianists.

Commentary: In contrast to the grandeur of the Lower Gallery and the Great Hall, the Library at Two Temple Place has a more domestic feel and more modest proportions. The focus here was on the domestic experience of jazz, exemplified by a 'jazz' coffee set and Art Deco-style radios and gramophones. Cover designs for music periodicals and books are indicative of the rise of jazz fandom

in the period. Finally, by contrast, posters from London Transport evidence the impact of infrastructure in allowing access to London's nightlife – these are the last objects encountered by the visitor before emerging into the visually impactful Great Hall which contained a selection of striking jazz-inspired objects and design.

The Library included a listening 'post' with headphones where visitors were able to listen in depth to the tracks represented by the 78rpm discs on display in the room.





GREAT HALL

The Impact of Jazz

Jazz was firmly established in Britain between the Wars and by the end of the 1930s, a distinctly British response to jazz had evolved in other artistic media as well as music. Jazz could provoke strong reactions, especially as its roots in African American culture began to become more well-known. It significantly changed the music profession, and musicians who could adapt to the new style were able to profit from the demand for live performances, broadcasts and recordings of the music. Jazz also inspired British artists and designers, whose work conveyed the essence of the music to a wider community of fans. Its greatest influence, though, remained through its use as dance music. So it is unsurprising that social dancing was a great source of inspiration for British artists and designers - many of them women - who depicted or responded to vibrant jazz age nightlife. Novelty dances receded in favour of new styles of couple dancing, and this had a significant influence on fashions of the period, which allowed for individual expression of identity alongside more improvisatory styles of dancing.

The modernism of jazz continued to be reflected in the design of the surroundings in which it was most readily associated: nightclubs. The dancer Josephine Bradley recalled a venue where 'the floor was black ebony and the walls and furniture were in the prevalent jazz fashion of black and orange'. Shoes, ceramics and textiles reflected similar jazz-inspired designs, adopting a bright colour palette, reflecting the instrumental colours of the music, and serial angular motifs such as the chevron, which provided an inherent rhythm.

Souter

Both the subject matter and the narrative of J. B. Souter's painting *The Breakdown* (1926) vividly represent attitudes to jazz in Britain at the time. A black saxophonist in evening dress sits on a shattered classical statue, while a white, naked, shingled figure (female, yet androgynous) dances,

clapping her hands, her clothes discarded beside her. The work was displayed in the 1926 Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, where it was commended by the Academy's President as 'a work of great promise executed with a considerable degree of excellence'. However, the picture was removed from the exhibition after only five days, under instruction from the Colonial Office as (according to the Royal Academy Annual Report) the subject 'was considered to be obnoxious to British subjects living abroad in daily contact with a coloured population'. The artist subsequently destroyed the work; only sketches remain. In 1962 Souter repainted the work in a somewhat stylised version, perhaps an indication of the artist's nostalgia for the age of jazz itself.

Jazz and race

During the interwar period the importance of the African American contribution to jazz was increasingly recognised as the dominance of Paul Whiteman's 'symphonic syncopation' as a model for jazz performance began to be questioned. For some this led for a preference for jazz that was perceived to be more authentic. British jazz musicians, critics and fans such as Spike Hughes and Leonard Feather travelled to America to experience African American jazz for themselves, as did the artist Edward Burra, whose paintings vividly depicted the street life of New York's Harlem. The author and activist Nancy Cunard, who also visited Harlem, encountered racist attitudes first-hand due to her relationship with the African American jazz musician Henry Crowder. In 1934 Cunard published her impressive *Negro Anthology* which included a chapter on dancing by the artist John Banting, whose work was inspired by African American music and dance.

Just at the point when the African American roots of jazz were becoming better and more widely understood in Britain, access to the sources of the music became limited through government restrictions which prohibited whole American bands from visiting Britain from 1935, a 'ban' that lasted for some twenty years. However, by this point the infrastructure for jazz including periodicals, rhythm clubs, venues, record labels and broadcasting was sufficiently established to ensure that jazz was not only able to survive, but also thrive in Britain as a cosmopolitan art form during and beyond the Second World War. West Indian and black British musicians made their mark through the music, and the British Council sponsored New Zealand-born Len Lye's film which collages vividly interpreted jazz versions of the British popular song 'The Lambeth Walk'. Although the circumstances of the 'ban' together with the subsequent onset of the Second World War brought the jazz age proper to a close, jazz in Britain since then has often continued to reflect, and also provide an escape from, the realities of modern life.

Dancing

Dancing was a key leisure pursuit in Britain between the Wars, as the notorious nightclub proprietor Kate Meyrick recalled: 'Everyone in London, young and old alike, had caught the dancing craze; almost any place with a respectable band and a decent floor was bound to make money.' The dancing craze spread beyond London via large palais de danse with well-known bands and smaller, local, halls where the music was provided by semi-pro or amateur musicians. Although by no means all of the music performed by dance bands was jazz, these groups were primarily responsible for providing a taste of this style for the mainstream British public. The limitations of the dance band format on jazz performance, particularly improvisation, were sometimes a source of frustration for the musicians involved, but at the same time the dance bands provided stable and even lucrative employment. Musicians who wanted to develop their jazz skills indulged in 'out-of-hours' jamming in smaller underground clubs, which attracted those seeking to dance to 'hot jazz'. Visiting Americans could often be found improvising alongside their British colleagues in these venues.

While the colours and rhythms of jazz inspired abstract responses from British designers of the period, for artists the focus seems to have been the figurative depiction of the dancing body. Works depict the diversity of dancing situations at this time, from a sedate tea dance, live bands in a raucous nightclub and an upper-class club, and even dancing to gramophone records. Towards the end of the period artistic responses to dance became more abstract and somewhat dystopian, reflecting the prominent 'death dance' metaphor whereby jazz became linked with social deviance.

Commentary: Versions and sketches of Souter's picture, and the story of its problematic reception, were positioned immediately opposite the entrance to the Great Hall. This was complemented by some period saxophones and art which responds to jazz as black music. The opposite wall was dominated by large floor-to-ceiling fabric samples and a selection of jazz-inspired ceramics.

Paintings depicting social dance in different surroundings are clustered together, inviting comparison. A selection of shoe designs were complemented by period footage shown on a screen immediately above, again to animate the static objects mirroring the approach to drum kits in the Lower Gallery.

Also included on the screen was Len Lye's Lambeth Walk – the room soundtrack of British dance bands (again available to visitors via a QR code) was programmed to stop to allow Lye's short film to become the focus of the room, visually and aurally, periodically.



