



Jazz

by Jeffrey Escoffier

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The relation of jazz to homosexual and transgendered experience has varied enormously over the course of its history since the beginning of the twentieth century. In the early twentieth century, African-American music and dance provided homosexual subcultures with expressive styles and social rituals. In the 1930s, swing and the big bands took jazz out of the speakeasies and small clubs, and popularized it with a national American audience.

However, the increased popularity of swing and big band jazz, which introduced jazz to college dances, ballrooms, and the airwaves, and thus into the mainstream, meant that homosexuals became a smaller and less significant group of jazz fans than in the past.

After World War II and the emergence of bebop, jazz lost its connection to the dance hall and ballroom, but without developing a larger gay and lesbian audience.

The postwar jazz scene, dominated by Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonious Monk, also grew increasingly macho and even misogynistic, while the postwar urban gay bar culture created its own style of entertainment around female impersonators and singers such as Judy Garland.

By the end of the twentieth century, jazz and homosexuals seemed to have little in common. In his novel, *Significant Others* (1987), Armistead Maupin writes that "Surely there were gay men somewhere who revered jazz, but Michael"--a gay man living in San Francisco--"didn't know any."

Early History

New Orleans, the busy port city on the confluence of the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico, was probably one of the first places in America where jazz, homosexuals, and transgendered people came together at the very beginning of the twentieth century. Many of the earliest and most celebrated jazz musicians were born in and around New Orleans. Early jazz grew out of the fusion of disparate sounds in New Orleans--marching bands, ragtime, spirituals, blues and other forms of African and Anglo-American instrumental and vocal music.

From the beginning of jazz, there was also a close association between jazz and the seamy side of New Orleans nightlife. Early jazz pianists such as Jelly Roll Morton, Eubie Blake, and James P. Johnson were often employed to play in the brothels in Storyville, New Orleans' fabled red light district.

There and in the sex districts of many other cities--many of which were located in or near African-American neighborhoods--both jazz musicians and homosexuals found niches and a degree of acceptance.

One gay man served as the mentor to Jelly Roll Morton. Pianist-singer-songwriter Tony Jackson was probably the most accomplished of all of Storyville's entertainers. He played and sang everything from opera to blues in their authentic idioms. As Morton recounted to music historian Alan Lomax: "Tony happened to be one

those gentlemen that a lot of people call them lady or sissy--I suppose he was either a ferry or a steamboat, one or the other."

Jackson was the author of the classic "Pretty Baby," which was originally about a man. In 1906 Jackson left New Orleans for the relative freedom, as a black gay man, of Chicago. He died from alcoholism at the age of 44 sometime during the 1920s.

In addition, the New Orleans tradition of Mardi Gras and carnival provided the opportunity for homosexuals, drag queens, and transgendered people to engage in prohibited sexual activities under the guise of masquerades and cross-dressing.

By the end of World War I, most large cities also saw the emergence of annual drag and costume balls where homosexuals danced the cakewalk, two step, and Charleston--all dance forms that had emerged from and along with African-American music.

The 1920s and 1930s

In the 1920s, Harlem was a flourishing enclave of jazz and gay life. The Harlem Renaissance was, according to literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "surely as gay as it was black, not that it was exclusively either of these." Many of the Harlem Renaissance's leading figures were either homosexual or bisexual, including such literary figures as Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Alain Locke, Wallace Thurman, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Langston Hughes.

Among Harlem's most prominent performers, Bessie Smith, Alberta Hunter, George Hanna, Moms Mabley, Mabel Hampton, Ma Rainey, and Ethel Waters were bisexual or homosexual. They sang songs with sexually explicit lyrics, incorporating homosexual slang terms such as "sissy" and "bulldagger," as in the lyric "If you can't bring me a woman, bring me a sissy man."

One well-known homosexual haunt in Harlem was the Clam House on the stretch of 133rd Street known as Jungle Alley. There openly lesbian Gladys Bentley was the headline singer. "If ever there was a gal," noted one journalist, "who would take a popular ditty and put her naughty version to it La Bentley could do it."

Despite the existence of these overlapping subcultures, however, homosexual life in Harlem remained marginal. As historian Kevin Mumford notes, "the more visible and accessible a Harlem club was the more heterosexual its patrons."

The overlap between homosexual life and jazz survived the repeal of Prohibition and continued into the next decade. According to Kevin Mumford, one University of Chicago sociologist studying homosexuals in the 1930s reported in an unpublished ethnography that at a party the men "played pornographic records sung by Negro entertainers; a homosexual theme ran through all the lyrics." He observed the men at the party "swaying to the music of a colored jazz orchestra . . . [with] two young men in street clothes dancing together, cheek to cheek."

Jazz Musicians

Once the jazz scene ceased to offer a countercultural haven for homosexuals, the interplay between jazz and homosexual subcultures eventually vanished. Moreover, very little is known about the homosexuality or bisexuality of jazz musicians. Whereas blues singing was a predominantly female (and often bisexual or lesbian) musical activity, jazz like other forms of American musical life was male dominated from the beginning.

The jazz scene was not hospitable to female instrumentalists or to effeminate or openly homosexual men. Openly lesbian or bisexual women initially fared better as singers. In the jazz subculture, male musical

pro prowess served as an important basis for attracting women. Duke Ellington himself noted that as a young man "I was invited to many parties, where I learned that when you were playing piano there was always a pretty girl standing down at the bass clef end of the piano." To this day, only a few jazz musicians are publicly known to be homosexual.

Billy Strayhorn

The most historically significant jazz musician known to be homosexual is composer and arranger Billy Strayhorn (1915-1967), who for most of his adult life worked closely with Duke Ellington. For many years, acknowledgment of his work was obscured by his relationship to Ellington, and some of his work was credited to and copyrighted by Ellington.

One of the most accomplished composers in jazz and popular music, Strayhorn is the author of "Take the 'A' Train," "Lush Life," "Chelsea Bridge," and "Something to Live For." From 1937 until his death in 1967, Strayhorn worked for and collaborated with Ellington. He served as Ellington's intimate partner in the composition of many of the Ellington band's most important songs and arrangements. They often passed a work back and forth, each contributing phrases and reworking others.

Ellington's support for Strayhorn and his acceptance of Strayhorn's homosexuality was invaluable. David Hajdu, Strayhorn's biographer, shows how Strayhorn was able to choose not to hide his homosexuality because of Ellington's unquestioning acceptance. Ellington's son, Mercer, told David Hajdu in *Vanity Fair* that he had always assumed that Strayhorn and his father had "experimented" at some point.

Billy Tipton

Jazz musician Billy Tipton (1914-1989) played saxophone and piano from the 1930s until 1958 when he retired and settled down to work as an entertainment agent in Spokane, Washington.

Born Dorothy Tipton in 1914, Billy lived most of his life as a man. As a young woman, Dorothy first appeared on the jazz scene in Kansas City during the late 1920s. She was moderately talented, but nevertheless after numerous auditions failed to get any bookings in the local clubs, apparently because she was female. Finally, in 1933, with the help of her cousin, she taped her chest, cut her hair, and wore a suit to her next audition. She was immediately hired as Billy Tipton and lived as a man for the rest of her life.

Tipton played saxophone with several well-known bands throughout the late 1930s and 1940s. In the 1950s, he started his own band, The Billy Tipton Trio, and made two recordings. Eventually Tipton's band worked as the house band at a nightclub in Reno, backing such well-known performers as Liberace.

In 1958 Tipton retired from the jazz scene and moved to Spokane, where he married and raised a family. He was revealed to be a female only after his death, when a coroner's autopsy was performed.

Peggy Gilbert

Another saxophone player, Peggy Gilbert (1905-2007), also challenged discrimination against women in the music business.

Although Gilbert had a career that spanned some 80 years, she reached the zenith of her popularity during the 1930s and 1940s when she headed several all-women jazz bands. "If she had been a man, she would have been considered one of the great American band leaders," contends music historian Jeannie Pool, but the music establishment "kept dismissing girl players as a novelty act, a freak show."

After World War II, the popularity of all-women bands declined and Gilbert took a day job. In 1974, however, she founded the Dixie Belles, a band composed of older women musicians, that had considerable

success after a 1981 appearance on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* and continued to perform until 1994.

The Bebop Revolution

The bebop revolution of the late 1940s and 1950s dramatically affected the relationship of jazz to its audience and players. Bebop's dissonance, complex rhythms, and free solo improvisation created a musical style that dramatically broke with the swing music that had dominated the 1930s and 1940s jazz idiom.

Bebop broke the connection between jazz and dance music. It also reinforced the masculinist sexual attitudes that exacerbated an environment already unfriendly to both women and homosexuals.

When Melba Liston, a pianist and arranger, was hired by Dizzy Gillespie, Linda Dahl recounts, the men in his band complained that he had "sent all the way to California for a *bitch*." He then asked one of his men to hand out the music he had written for the band. He told the man to "Pass it out to these muthafuckas and let me see what a bitch you are." [Gillespie] said, 'Play the music, and I don't want to hear no fuckups.' And of course they got about two measures and fell out and got all confused and stuff. And Dizzy said, 'Now who's the bitch? "

Though Gillespie had insisted on hiring Liston, such a hostile atmosphere was not conducive to the open acceptance of men or women who were sexually unconventional.

Post-bebop Jazz

The myth of the macho jazz musician continues to exercise a hold on the world of jazz. Still, there have been several post-bebop musicians who have been rumored to be gay, and some who have actually come out publicly as homosexual.

Miles Davis (1926-1991), for example, exemplified the masculine self assurance and "cool" style of post-bebop jazz. He conducted well-known relationships with French singer Juliet Greco and actress Cecily Tyson, but according to biographer Ian Carr, there were also persistent rumors of his bisexuality, and his death from pneumonia, stroke, and heart failure was attributed to AIDS.

Avant-garde jazz pianist Cecil Taylor is another post-bebop musician with a very muscular style of playing the piano. However, John Gill records that Taylor gave an interview in 1985 to a San Francisco newspaper that stressed the importance to his music of his race and his homosexuality.

Taylor, who was born in Boston in 1929, is, along with Art Tatum, Earl Hines, Bud Powell, and Thelonious Monk, one of the five most important jazz pianists to emerge since the end of World War II.

Vibraphonist Gary Burton (b. 1943) is another contemporary jazz musician who has publicly come out of the closet. A prominent composer and bandleader, Burton has had an exemplary career working with many of the leading figures in contemporary jazz, such as Stan Getz, George Shearing, Carla Bley, Keith Jarrett, and Pat Metheny. Although married twice, Burton had always known that there was a gay side to his personality. He had gay relationships before and in between each of his marriages.

The 1993 announcement by pianist Fred Hersch (b. 1955) that he was both HIV-positive and gay shocked the jazz community. For years after moving to New York from Cincinnati in the late 1970s, Hersch was so terrified that the celebrated jazz musicians with whom he was working might discover his homosexuality that he felt compelled to suppress his own identity. In order to protect himself from any damaging disclosures, Hersch radically divided his social world between gay friends and fellow musicians.

In 1996, Andy Bey (b. 1939), a suave African-American musician who, like his idol Nat King Cole, sings and

plays the piano, also came out as an HIV-positive gay man.

[In a 2004 interview in *The Advocate*, saxophonist Dave Koz (b. 1983) came out as a gay man. Koz, who has been nominated multiple times for Grammy Awards, is a leading practitioner of "smooth jazz." His albums regularly place high in the *Billboard* charts. He frequently appears on radio and television programs and regularly collaborates with leading jazz musicians and singers.

In 2011, Koz issued an album entitled, *Hello Tomorrow*, which features a cut of his rendition of the Burt Bachrach-Hal David song, "This Guy's in Love with You," in which he sings as well as plays the saxophone. The music video of "This Guy's in Love with You," directed by Graham Streeter, features Koz performing in historic Figueroa Plaza in Ventura, California, where he is joined by a "love mob" of numerous couples assembled in support of marriage equality. Herb Alpert, who had a No. 1 hit with the song in 1968, performs alongside him as they walk the street, surrounded by the crowd.]

gltq Audiences

Jazz is one of the America's most significant cultural contributions. Yet homosexual and transgendered audiences in the second half of the twentieth century have expressed little interest in the contemporary developments of this vibrant cultural tradition.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the jazz scene has seemed to become less and less hospitable to gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people. Indeed, in an interview with John Gill, musician Gary Burton has argued that today "of all the forms of music, jazz is the least tolerant of homosexuality." Nevertheless, even despite a hostile atmosphere, the contributions of gay jazz artists such as Billy Strayhorn, Cecil Taylor, and Gary Burton have been significant.

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About the Author

Jeffrey Escoffier writes on glbtq history, politics, culture, sexuality, music, and dance. One of the founders of *OUT/LOOK: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly*, he has published widely. Among his books are *American Homo: Community and Perversity* and a biography of John Maynard Keynes in the Chelsea House series on the Lives of Notable Gay Men and Lesbians. He co-edited (with Matthew Lore) Mark Morris' *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato: A Celebration*. His most recent book is *Sexual Revolution*, an anthology of writing on sex from the 1960s and 1970s. He is currently working on a book on sexual politics and writing about the production of pornography.