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Jazz in the Catbird Seat: It Wasn't Always So

By BEN RATLIFF

Today jazz is routinely treated with reverence. It has equal billing with opera and classical music at Lincoln Center. Academics write scholarly treatises on the subject. And when something jazz-related pops up on the larger radar screen of American culture, it tends to be discussed in deeply respectful tones.

Consider Ken Burns's "Jazz," the 19-hour documentary that starts at 9 p.m. Monday on PBS. The high-flown tone Mr. Burns uses is so pervasive that one would think jazz had always been seen this way. Not at all. It is only in the last 40 years that jazz historians, not to mention people at large, have gotten a proper handle on the subject.

In the beginning jazz was widely seen as an unwanted African virus — something that gave the fevers, led to sexual deviation and dementia. The only jazz group most people had heard was the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, which was conscious of playing a kind of wild hokum, imitating barnyard noises on their records. In American newspapers — including The New York Times, as you can see from the accompanying excerpts — scientists, ministers and politicians were called on to explain and condemn jazz. In 1926 The New York Herald Tribune published a 10-count "indictment" by Dr. Henry Coward, conductor of the Sheffield Medical Union in England, that included "atavistic tendencies" and "irritating pling-plongs by banjos."

Ernest Newman, the respected biographer of Wagner, wrote in 1926 in The Sunday Times of London (and republished in The New York Times) that the typical jazz composer was a "musical illiterate." "At present jazz is not an art, but an industry," he protested. "No real composer would touch it because it is too feeble and limited an instrument of expression for anyone who has anything to express."

It took a black musician and a war hero to counter some of these perceptions so that people might rethink their positions, and that was James Reese Europe, the powerful and popular society bandleader. In 1919 he returned from the war in France and wrote "A Negro Explains Jazz." Published that year in Literary Digest, it presented jazz as a sort of manifest destiny of the black popular musician.

"The Negro loves anything that is peculiar in music," he wrote, "and this 'jazzing' appeals to him strongly. ... I have come back from France more firmly convinced than ever that Negroes should write Negro music. We have our own racial feeling, and if we try to copy whites we will make bad copies."

In those days, popular culture, let alone

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By World War II, swing was prompting people to rethink their view of jazz.

