CHAPTER 1

Jazz in Weimar and Nazi Germany, 1918–1945

Introduction

Just as many different musical cultures gave birth to jazz in the early twentieth century, the emergence of jazz had a reciprocal impact on musical cultures across the world. This was as true of Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, key years for the growth and development of jazz, as it was of anywhere else in the West. To understand the impact of jazz during those decades, it is necessary to begin this inquiry in the politically turbulent, yet culturally creative, Weimar era – an era that was scarred by the traumas of conflict, revolution, inflation, and political fragmentation. One way to enter this time period is alongside someone who experienced it firsthand, Erika Mann, the daughter of novelist Thomas Mann, recalled the following about the era:

> After the War, there was deep disillusionment everywhere, and a nihilism created by this disillusionment. Everyone felt like they had been cheated. Young people everywhere sought compensation for the hardships of the "great times" that had just passed. Everywhere they immersed themselves in violent pleasures and excesses. New and wild music coming from America was intoxicating, but it was no longer intoxication for a "cause" (as, for instance, patriotic fervor for "the fatherland"). It was intoxication without reason, for no cause at all. In order to intensify it, all methods were allowed: music, alcohol, marijuana, morphine, and cocaine. In the back rooms of Berlin's nightclubs, narcotics were sold just like in the harbor salons of Marseille or in the nightclubs of Harlem. The "inflation-devaluation" of monetary values that took place in Germany and France alike had its moral equivalent in all countries after the War. Suddenly anything and everything was permissible. … Girls wore skirts that showed their knees if they preferred not to dress like young men in the evening. It was considered chic to be erotically perverted, to have just some slight peculiarity. But most of all, it was considered foolish, if not indecent, to believe in something, in *anything*. "We had been so terribly cheated by this

> War," young men all over the world cried out. "From now on, we just won't believe in anything." And they were proud of their nihilism. That was the atmosphere of the twenties.[1]

The experience of war and the collapse of the German monarchy demystified familial and state authorities, causing a radical break with Wilhelmine values and social norms. Young people abandoned the beliefs of previous generations and entered a time of moral, emotional, and spiritual vacuum. Renouncing traditional roles in society and the life of restraint and obedience, this generation openly demonstrated their indulgence in unconventional pleasures: the deaths of millions caused a hunger for life, in which any stimulation was welcome. At this key moment, this "wild new music" arriving from the United States met fertile ground. Reading Mann, this music – jazz – appears to have been perfectly compatible with "intoxication without reason" or with the willingness to abandon oneself. Jazz had the power to transcend the "old times," for its content had no links to the past. As such, this new genre presented something unheard of in European musical traditions, carrying zero historical baggage, for the culture of jazz offered an antithesis to the militaristic demeanor and Wilhelmine respectability found in Prussian marches, a sound that had once filled the streets of imperial Berlin. By the 1920s, this aesthetic revolution had discarded the old musical system and its heartbeat of collective obedience; instead, the ease and lightness of syncopated rhythms became the predominant feature of musical entertainment.[2]

Like Mann, the journalist Hans Siemsen also described the narcotic effect of jazz in the era. Recollecting pre-war encounters in Paris, he wrote in 1921 that "This music, with its irrational rhythms, has the same effect as drugs and alcohol." In his words:

> Jazz has another likable characteristic: it has absolutely no dignity. It defeats any attempt at comportment, correct posture, edginess, [or] the stiff-collar. No one who is afraid of making fun of themselves can dance jazz. The schoolmaster can't dance it. The Prussian reserve officer can't dance it.

[1] Erika Mann, "Don't make the same mistakes," in *Zero Hour, A Summons to the Free*, ed. Vincent Benet, Erika Mann, and McGeorge Bundy (New York, Toronto: Farrar & Rinehart, 1940), 25–26.

[2] By the mid-1920s, syncopated rhythms dominated "entertaining music" (*Unterhaltungsmusik*). Cf. Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, Studies in Cultural History (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993). Cornelius Partsch, *Schräge Töne: Jazz und Unterhaltungsmusik in der Kultur der Weimarer Republik*, M & P Schriftenreihe für Wissenschaft und Forschung (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2000).

> If only all ministers, privy councilors, professors, and politicians were obliged to dance jazz in public! How cheerfully they would shed their dignity. How human, how jolly, how comical they would be! … If the Kaiser had danced jazz, none of this ever would have happened. It's too bad he never learned it. It is easier to be the German Kaiser than to dance jazz.[3]

Recalling his experience of a jazz performance, with its humorous and seemingly outrageous approach, Siemsen praised the absence of Wilhelmine demeanor as one of jazz's finest qualities. Indeed, throughout the 1920s, critics praised jazz as an American element of renewal within European musical traditions. After the critic Frank Warschauer heard Paul Whiteman's Symphonic Jazz Orchestra, he gushed that "jazz is the most entertaining and vital phenomenon in contemporary music … jazz filled with the youthful energy of America, it is the pregnant outburst of a changed, optimistic feel for life, and it sings a different *Lied von der Erde*, the song of a new generation."[4] In his review, Warschauer contrasted jazz's vitality as a refreshing impulse to "old" Europe's music, here exemplified by the composition of Gustav Mahler. This motif of rejuvenation permeated the positive jazz reception. But while some critics greeted and appreciated the music of a "new generation," others regarded the transnational and transracial music as an intrusion into German musical culture.

Prior to detailing the history of jazz in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), this chapter outlines the trajectory of jazz before the founding of the GDR, from the Weimar era in the 1920s until the end of the Nazi regime in 1945. The way in which jazz met fascination on the one hand and disapproval and revulsion on the other reflects the spectrum of the ideological paradigms of this period, which makes a closer look at the German jazz experience prior to 1945 essential for understanding the history of jazz in communist East Germany. In this chapter, Section One ("Jazz in a Defeated Nation") explores the defeated former German Empire's first encounters with jazz, and Section Two ("Americanization and the Crisis of Culture") illustrates the music's controversial reception within the cultural criticism of the Weimar era. Section Three ("Cultural Identity and *Bildungsbürgertum*") explains the anxieties of the bourgeoisie

[3] Hans Siemsen, "Jazzband," *Die Weltbühne*, 1921, 278–79, 17. Jahrgang, erstes Halbjahr.
[4] Martin Jay Anton Kaes and Edward Dimendberg, *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 571. Warschauer draws an analogy with Gustav Mahler's composition *Lied von der Erde* to allude to the music of the late-romantic period as the music of "Old Europe."

that most strongly identified with German musical traditions, traditions they felt that jazz violated. Then, moving forward into the wartime years, Section Four ("National Socialism, War, and Defeat (1933–1945)") explores the ambiguous, and at times contradictory, relationship of the Nazi state to jazz as a component of popular culture.

Jazz in a Defeated Nation

While one might assume that cultural life in Germany was characterized by isolation, alienation, and stagnation after the nation's defeat in WWI, the reality is far more complicated. In the immediate post-war period, Berlin's entertainment industry was eager to connect with international trends, not least because of the massive influx of foreign visitors. The capital of the former Wilhelmine Empire, which once centralized the powers that threatened the world, was of great global interest after the defeat of imperial Germany. Historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch has compared Berlin after WWI with Paris after the fall of Napoleon, arguing that both cities in their eras became a "mecca of civilization."[5] Even before the WWI, Berlin had flourished as a metropolis of international standards, offering an abundance of venues for entertainment: dozens of theaters, variety houses, and cabarets that increasingly competed with hundreds of movie theaters. The expansion in this sector was complemented by growth in Berlin's gastronomic life, with the city offering thousands of restaurants, cafés, and bars to ravenous patrons. Nor did defeat in the war curtail Berlin's nightlife, as it continued to offer everything nearby London and Paris had as well, and its restrictions on public entertainment were loosened by the abolition of preliminary censorship.[6] Visitors from the United States, France, and Great Britain flocked to the city for its culture, with sharp increases in tourism by the mid-1920s.[7]

In his recent book, *The Jazz Republic,* historian Jonathan Wipplinger has argued that there is no "singular genealogy of jazz" in the Weimar Republic.[8] Examining the years 1919–21, he has argued for a distinction

[5] Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Die Kultur der Niederlage: Der amerikanische Süden 1865, Frankreich 1871, Deutschland 1918*, Erw. Lizenzausg, ed. (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer-Taschenbuch-Verl., 2003).
[6] Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 154. Cf. also Ute Scheub, *Verrückt nach Leben* (Hamburg: Rohwolt, 2000).
[7] Michael H. Kater, *Different Drummers: Jazz in the Culture of Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
[8] Jonathan Wipplinger, *The Jazz Republic: Music, Race, and American Culture in Weimar Germany*, Social History, Popular Culture, and Politics in Germany (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 22.

between the situation in Berlin and occupied zones along the Rhine River, as well as against other cities such as Cologne, Bonn, Koblenz, and Wiesbaden. He stated that "though the word jazz enters simultaneously in Berlin and in the zones of occupation, Weimar jazz culture proceeds initially at least along slightly different paths within these two spaces with the greater contact with foreign citizens, soldiers and musicians more quickly producing encounters with jazz bands than in Berlin."[9] Aiding this outward spread was the fact that the emergence of jazz coincided with the invention of the technical reproduction of sound. For the first time in history, music was able to reach a large number of people in different places at once via modern recording technology. The conservation of sound was essential for the dissemination of jazz and made the genre available to audiences in disparate geographies, as well as across disparate borders of nationhood, class, and race.[10]

Jazz entered Berlin first as a dance around 1919, launching a post-war dance craze given that dancing had been prohibited during the years of the war. To ensure Germans were ready for the trend, a guide to new dance styles, *Jazz und Shimmy: Brevier der neuesten Tänze*, promised to prepare local enthusiasts for jazz. This guide, published in 1920, claimed that jazz had come to Berlin via Paris and, ever since, jazz enthusiasm had reached epidemic scale. In his introduction to the publication, the editor furthermore expressed his concern that Germans were falling behind international standards but that the *Brevier* would provide the remedy.[11] The guide consisted of three main aspects: giving step-by-step instructions for different styles, explaining the terminology involved, and citing both positive and negative opinions on the genre. Interestingly, not only did this text quote Siemsen's article, but it also suggested that jazz was a genre whose dances were, in large part, subject to individual, personal interpretation.

Despite such instructional texts, strict definitions of jazz in this time can be elusive, but contemporary accounts describing early German jazz

[9] Ibid., 30–31.

[10] As the historian Thomas J. Saunders has argued, "It was the interwar years that witnessed the convergence of the media which made music as ubiquitous as print or still photography or the moving picture." See Thomas J. Saunders, "The Jazz Age," in *A Companion to Europe, 1900–1945*, ed. Gordon Martel (Malden, Mass.; Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2006), 352. In the United States, the first jazz record – *Tiger Rag* by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band – was released in 1917, selling over one million copies worldwide and establishing the term "jazz" in the public lexicon. See Scott DeVeaux and Gary Giddens, *Jazz*, 2015 ed. (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009).

[11] F.W. Koebner, ed., *Jazz und Shimmy: Brevier der neuesten Tänze* (Berlin: Dr. Eysler und Co., 1921), 4.

bands identify rhythm and spontaneity as predominant features, imitating the original American styles of the early 1920s. In the absence of adequate equipment, rhythm was produced by beating on a variety of obscure instruments such as bells, tin cans, or any object able to produce loud and pervasive sounds. Indeed, according to some accounts, the mere presence of a bass drum seemed to have certified musical ensembles as operating jazz bands.[12] Such imaginings of jazz culture not only made it interchangeable with earlier representations of African American music in Germany such as ragtime and minstrelsy, but also created a demand for the clownesque and grotesque, reminiscent of vaudeville entertainment.[13] To convey the impression of spontaneity, trained musicians concealed their sight-reading abilities and shunned sheet music to demonstrate their skills of improvisation.[14] This eagerness to comply with the new fashion disclosed the willingness to break with musical traditions by rejecting dictation, discarding the mere disciplined reproduction of notated music in corporate settings – again, all vestiges of the Wilhelmine era.

Berlin swiftly became a magnet for the international jazz scene. By the mid-1920s, foreign jazz musicians found a lucrative market in Germany because of its new, stable currency, the *Rentenmark* introduced in 1923. The opportunity to experience jazz of international provenance also drew many German jazz players to the capital, which soon elevated Berlin into Germany's first city of jazz.[15] Here, fans could hear African American pianist Sam Wooding and his orchestra, for instance, accompanying the Chocolate Kiddies Negro Revue in the Admirals Pallast in May 1925.[16] Jazz icon Josephine Baker first performed on New Year's Eve in 1925 on Kurfürstendamm, and the Englishman Jack Hylton's Big Band became popular and remained so well into the 1930s.[17] Paul Whiteman had introduced symphonic jazz with Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, touring Berlin

[12] Horst H. Lange, *Jazz in Deutschland* (Berlin: Colloquium, 1966).
[13] Rainer E. Lotz, *Black People: Entertainers of African Descent in Europe and Germany*, Limited ed. (Bonn: Birgit Lotz Verlag, 1997).
[14] Heinz Pollack, *Die Revolutions des Gesellschaftstanzes* (Dresden: Sibyllen, 1922).
[15] Cf. Kater, *Different Drummers*. Partsch, *Schräge Töne*. Jonathan Wipplinger, *The Jazz Republic: Music, Race, and American Culture in Weimar Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).
[16] Martin Lücke, *Jazz im Totalitarismus*, Populäre Musik und Jazz in der Forschung (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004), 53. See also Jonathan Wipplinger, "The Aural Shock of Modernity: Weimar's Experience of Jazz," *The Germanic Review* 82 (4) (2007): 309.
[17] For an excellent analysis of Baker's reception in Berlin, see Nancy Nenno, "Feminity, the Primitive, and Modern Urban Space: Josephine Baker in Berlin," in *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, ed. Katharina von Ankum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

Figure 1.1 Rehearsal of the jazz band Weintraub's Syncopators with ballet in Berlin. From *ullstein bild* via Getty Images. Editorial #549701947

in 1926.[18] In this environment, German ensembles such as the Weintraub Syncopators, who were featured in the film *Der blaue Engel* with Marlene Dietrich, directly emulated American jazz music and adopted its iconography (Figure 1.1).

In these years, the "hyperactive Weimar media" and entertainment industry propelled jazz into a catch-all buzzword, laden with images of free-swinging American lifestyles.[19] In its so-called golden years, the term "jazz" was associated with a wide range of musical offerings from American popular music, including the work of Paul Whiteman's symphonic jazz, the hot "jazz" of Louis Armstrong, and even that of the Guy Lombardi Orchestra, famed for its "sweet," slow, muted dances.[20] Whatever the public conception of the music had been in its early years, by the mid-1920s the wide array of offerings under the umbrella term "jazz" had led musical

[18] Cf. Joshua Berrett, *Louis Armstrong & Paul Whiteman: Two Kings of Jazz* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2004).
[19] Cf. J. Bradford Robinson, "Jazz Reception in Weimar Germany," in *Music and Performance during the Weimar Republic*, ed. Bryan Randolph Gilliam (Cambridge University Press, 1994).
[20] Lange, *Jazz in Deutschland,* 35.

qualities such as syncopated rhythms to dominate popular music. This aspect alone sharply differentiated it from nineteenth-century traditions. As one observer noted in 1926: "Just as operetta is defined musically by the three-quarter time of the waltz, the revue is characterized by two-quarter time, and more precisely by syncopation. A revue without syncopation seems almost unthinkable to us today."[21] Composer Kurt Weil made the same observation, noting: "A gaze into the dance culture demonstrates that jazz is an expression of our times, just as the waltz was for the late nineteenth century."[22] Critically, syncopated rhythms became synonymous with the music of a new age, a linkage that remained throughout the 1930s and 1940s. But this linkage would bring with it a particular kind of baggage: the notion of a non-European, transracial music ignited fierce controversy in listeners and critics, stirring fears of Americanization and the decline of German culture. As detailed in the next section, such friction would set the stage for the recruitment of jazz as well as its politicization throughout the following decades.

Americanization and the Crisis of Culture

As noted above, in the post-WWI era, America permeated the imagination of Weimar Germany. Images of United States offered connotations of lands of boundless opportunity, industries boasting modern innovation and efficiency, developments in the arts and culture, and burgeoning economic and technological strength. Such visions served as the antipode to the traditional European, agricultural, hierarchically organized society.[23] As historian Detlev Peukert has explained, "After the defeat in the war and more especially after the achievement of economic and political stability under the aegis of the United States in 1924, a mythicized version of America that had already been gaining currency in the earlier years of the century now emerged as a symbol of modernity."[24] America's function as a role model in the Weimar imagination thus provided fertile ground for the reception of many American cultural styles, jazz included. As the scholar Thomas Saunders has noted of the era, "Whether one refers to

[21] Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 169.
[22] Kim Kowalke, *Kurt Weil in Europe, 1900–1935* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979), 95.
[23] Cf. Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, 1st American ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992); Adelheid von Saldern, "Überfremdungsängste," in *Amerikanisierung: Traum und Alptraum im Deutschland des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Alf Lüdtke, Inge Marssolek, and Adelheid von Saldern (Stuttgart: F. Steiner Verlag, 1996).
[24] Peukert, *Weimar Republic*, 179.

clothing and hairstyles, music and dance, or media and advertising, America figures as the primary foreign element in Germany's development."[25] Yet such images provoked ambivalent and contradictory responses, leading to heated debates about the Americanization of Germany.[26] Peukert has suggested that the discourse about Germany's Americanization was "heterogeneous and inconsistent," for it was not a simple question of for or against changes of modern life. Rather, on this view, "America served as a mirror for Germany's own transformation to modernity," negotiating a complex web of embrace and rejection and representing a specific version of modernity already apparent in Germany.[27] Yet during the crisis-stricken interwar years, Peukert admits that such debates on modernity and modernization became "both more intense and ironically more inconclusive."[28] Within this discourse the term "jazz" served both to represent a general youth culture that defied Wilhelmine values and to enable a rhetoric ostracizing of this "intruder" in derogatory racist, anti-Semitic, anti-socialist, and anti-capitalist terms. This was not limited to hard-line reactionary voices. On the contrary, in the 1920s and 1930s, the moderate bourgeoisie engaged in a vigorous campaign against jazz in all its variations, reflecting the anxieties engendered by Germany's transformation into a twentieth-century modern society. To give but one example, the affinity of urban youth for jazz worried one Protestant clerical educator, Günter Dehn:

> Earning money and enjoying themselves are the twin poles of their existence, their enjoyments taking in both the high-minded and the squalid: primitive sexuality and jazz. … The nation's thinking has become indeed Americanized, through and through, … it is not socialism but Americanism that will be the end of everything.[29]

In Dehn's view, Americanization had become the predominant ideology of Germany's youth, which he assessed as a greater threat than socialism. The emancipation of women, the rising acceptance of sexual freedom, trends toward secularization, increased mobility among economic classes, and the

[25] Thomas J. Saunders, "How American Was It? Popular Culture from Weimar to Hitler," in *German Pop Culture: How "American" Is It?*, ed. Agnes C. Mueller (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 352.
[26] See Mary Nolan, *Visions of Modernity: American Business and the Modernization of Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). As well as Frank Trommler and Joseph McVeigh, *America and the Germans: An Assessment of a Three-Hundred-Year History*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985). Cf. also Anton Kaes.
[27] Peukert, *Weimar Republic*, 179.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Günter Dehn, *Proletarische Jugend*, Berlin, 1929. As cited in: Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, 178.

culture of leisure were all blamed on America's influence and particularly on jazz, commonly juxtaposed with the term "primitive sexuality."

While some critics decried modern lifestyles – and its emblem, jazz – as a negative influence on German youth, others voiced their fierce opposition against jazz's intrusion into the realm of highbrow culture. For in the 1920s, jazz did not just enter saloons and barrooms, but instead entered operas, concert halls, and institutions of higher education. Between 1927 and 1930, a new genre of opera, *Zeitoper* (contemporary opera of the time), competed with traditional ones and incorporated attributes of modern life such as new technologies and jazz elements.[30] One of the most successful works was Ernst Křenek's *Jonny spielt auf*, which thrived on German stages as a "jazz" opera. One of the reasons for *Jonny's* success was that it touched the nerve of contemporary debates about the transnational, transracial impacts on European music by presenting a story of conflict between an African American and a European musician. Furthermore, the set for the opera presented up-to-date, modern technology such as loudspeakers and film projection. Music critics were outraged – the opera's enormous popularity seemed to confirm the scenarios of cultural demise recently promulgated by Oswald Spengler, in his famous *The Decline of The West* – leading right-wing organizations to instrumentalize fears of the alleged decline of German operatic culture.[31]

This tension manifested in other ways as well. When the American conductor Paul Whiteman introduced crossover experiments between jazz and orchestral sound in Berlin in 1926, his performances ignited further controversy.[32] Whiteman disconnected jazz from dance halls and reintroduced it into a concert-hall setting, thereby violating a space reserved undisputedly for highbrow nineteenth-century orchestral works. The legendary Aeolian Hall concert in 1923, premiering Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue,* was described as "an experiment in modern music" and attempted to bridge modern genres with the classics. Yet the idea of connecting tradition to modernity by fusing symphonic sound and jazz kicked off a firestorm: critics denounced Whiteman's experiment for a variety of reasons, not least because jazz was seen as intruding into the stronghold of Germanic orchestral music.[33]

[30] Cf. Susan C. Cook, *Opera for a New Republic: The Zeitopern of Krenek, Weill, and Hindemith* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988).
[31] Eckhard John, *Musikbolschewismus: Die Politisierung der Musik in Deutschland, 1918–1938* (Metzler, 1994), 295–303.
[32] Cf. Berrett, *Louis Armstrong & Paul Whiteman*. For Whiteman's performance in Berlin, see Wipplinger, *The Jazz Republic*, 93.
[33] *The Jazz Republic: Music, Race, and American Culture in Weimar Germany*, 86–102.