

**Jazz, Gender, Historiography:  
A Case Study of the “Golden Age” of Jazz in Montreal (1925-1955)**

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March 2018

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfilment of the requirements of  
the degree of Ph.D. in Musicology with Option in Gender and Women’s Studies

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation maps the interaction between jazz, identity, modernity and nation during the so-called “golden age” of jazz in Montreal (1925-1955). Drawing on the fields of musicology, women’s studies (black feminist theory and feminist research methods in particular), critical dance studies, and cultural studies, this project provides a critical re-writing of the history of Montreal jazz, one which acknowledges various roles that racialized and ethnicized women played in the shaping of modern identities, sounds, and pleasures in Quebec.

Montreal’s particular status as a “showtown” makes it a rich laboratory to study the collaborative creative relationships between jazz music and dance on the black variety stage in the first half of the twentieth century. I also map the specific parameters that articulate the discursive relationship between jazz and vice, in particular as these relate to the gendered and racialized embodiment of morality in interwar Quebec. Finally, this dissertation produces the first extensive biographical accounts and critical listening of several prominent Montreal-based female jazz artists, including pianists Vera Guilaroff and Ilene Bourne, all-girl groups such as The Spencer Sisters and the Montreal Melody Girls Orchestra, black women performers such as Tina Baines Brereton, Bernice Jordan Whims, Marie-Claire Germain, Mary Brown, Natalie Ramirez, as well as piano teacher Daisy Peterson Sweeney and dance teachers Ethel Bruneau and Olga Spencer Foderingham.

## Résumé

Cette dissertation se penche sur les interactions entre le jazz, l'identité, la nation et la modernité durant le soi-disant « âge d'or » du jazz à Montréal (1925-1955). À la croisée de la musicologie, des études de la condition féminine (études féministes noires et méthodes de recherche féministes en particulier), des études des médias et des études culturelles, je propose une réécriture critique de l'histoire du jazz montréalais, attentive au rôle que les femmes racisées et ethnisées ont joué dans le développement de la scène jazz, et plus largement dans la formation des identités, des plaisirs, et des sons de la modernité québécoise.

Le statut particulier de Montréal comme ville-spectacle en fait un riche laboratoire pour étudier les relations de collaboration créative entre les artistes (musiciens.ennes, chanteurs.euses, danseurs.euses) actifs sur le circuit du spectacle de variété noir du début du XXe siècle. Cette recherche met également en lumière la relation discursive qu'entretiennent le jazz et le vice dans l'entre-deux-guerres québécois, en particulier quant à l'incarnation sexuée et racisée de la moralité. Finalement, cette dissertation présente la première écoute critique ainsi que les premières notes biographiques détaillées d'artistes féminines de jazz montréalaises telles que les pianistes Vera Guilaroff et Ilene Bourne, des ensembles féminins comme les Sœurs Spencer et le *Montreal Melody Girls Orchestra*, des danseuses et chanteuses de variété noires telles que Tina Baines Brereton, Bernice Jordan Whims, Mary Brown, Natalie Ramirez, et Marie-Claire Germain, ainsi que l'enseignante de piano Daisy Peterson Sweeney et les enseignantes de danse Ethel Bruneau et Olga Spencer Foderingham.

## Acknowledgements

My first thanks go to Lisa Barg, advisor extraordinaire. If “none of us is a solo act,” as you’ve said to me more than once (an expression that you borrowed yourself from other formidable “not-the-solo-types”) I could not be prouder to stand, today and always, sounding “with” a little bit of you.

To other important mentors, friends, and colleagues at McGill University and elsewhere, in particular David Brackett, Julie Cumming, Sean Lorre, Laura Risk, Mimi Haddon, Will Straw and Eric Lewis: Thank you for being such wonderful models of humility, care, and intellectual heroism. Sean Lorre: You are the absolute best writing buddy in the entire world. To Sherrie Tucker, a distant though steady academic role model: for all that you wrote, and in particular for all the care with which you do research, thank you for inspiring me and others to work hard and do good through music research. To all the women I am writing about: I may have finished the dissertation, but the way I see the world and the way I see the past will forever be indebted to all that you said that stood fiercely in the way of the histories I knew. Thank you.

I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for funding my masters and my doctoral research, as well as the Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas and the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation at McGill University for supporting various stages of the research and writing. Big thanks to the Schulich School of Music and the Institute for Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies at McGill, the Société Québécoise de la Recherche en Musique, the Music Research Alive team including Stephen McAdams, Kit Soden, Jill de Villafranca, David Kostiuk, and David Rafferty, as well as Rashida Braggs for supporting the dissemination of this project in the form of research, travel, and public musicology awards and opportunities. Another thousand thanks to Jack Litchfield and James Kidd for their generosity and friendship; to Caroline Sigouin and Alexandra Mills from Concordia Records and Archives; to Cathy Martin, Cynthia Leive, and all the other amazing helpers at the Marvin Duchow Library; to Meilan Lam, the National Film Board of Canada, Dorothy Fieldman-Fraiberg, Sylvia Sweeney, Oliver Jones, Dane Lanken, Joy Kestenbaum, Nina Raginsky, Kathy and Karen Schucher, Ralph Whims, Norman and Louise Villeneuve, and John Wilby for their invaluable help in recovering the histories I discuss below. John Gilmore, Mark Miller, David Eng: None of this is imaginable apart from your groundbreaking work. Thank you.

À ma famille: Merci maman d’être toujours là, à tisser ton grand filet en-dessous duquel tu ne me laisses jamais tomber, et merci papa de m’avoir toujours encouragée à rêver haut ! Simon-Pierre: Ta curiosité intellectuelle et ton envie de changer le monde m’ont inspirée tout au long de ce processus... Luce & Michel: Merci d’avoir rendu l’impossible possible ! Olga: Merci pour votre présence aimante auprès de mes enfants. Marilou, Manon, Marianne, et aux autres formidables femmes qui m’entourent : Je vous admire, je vous adore. Samuel & Simon, merci pour toutes les fois où vous me faites sentir comme un superhéros. À mon grand-père Robert: Merci d’avoir inspiré le chapitre 2! Et à ma grand-mère Madeleine: Faire un doctorat n’était certainement pas la meilleure manière de te démontrer à quel point tu comptes pour moi, mais sache qu’à travers ce projet, chaque jour j’ai pensé à toi. C’est toi que j’imaginai dans un club de jazz le soir, et c’est toi que j’essayais d’imiter le lendemain matin quand il était temps d’enseigner. Je t’aime tellement fort.

Finalement, je dédie ma dissertation à mes deux enfants, qui ont magnifiquement grandi entre l’écriture de ces lignes. Liam & Clara, je vous aime *à l’infini*.

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## INTRODUCTION

(sh) Speak easy, (sh) Speak easy,  
Said Johnny Brown;  
I'm gonna leave this town  
Ev'rything is closing down.  
(sh) Speak easy, (sh) Speak easy,  
And tell the bunch  
I won't go East, won't go West  
Got a diff'rent hunch

I'll be leaving in the summer  
And I won't come back till fall,  
Goodbye Broadway, hello Montreal.  
With a stein upon the table  
I'll be laughing at you all,  
Goodbye Broadway, hello Montreal.  
I'm on my way, I'm on my way,  
And I'll make whoop-whoop whoopee night and day.  
Anytime my wifey wants me,  
You can tell her where to call,  
Goodbye Broadway, hello Montreal . . .

(sh) Speak easy, (sh) Speak easy,  
Asked Tommy Gray  
I must know right away,  
Are the gals up there okay?  
(sh) Speak easy, (sh) Speak easy,  
Said Johnny Brown;  
You ain't been hugged, ain't been kissed,  
'Till you've hit that town<sup>1</sup>

In the first half of the twentieth century, more jazz was made in Montreal than anywhere else in Canada. Several factors contributed to the growth of a thriving jazz scene North of the United States between the mid-1920s and the mid-1950s. Montreal was the only large city in North America to avoid total legal Prohibition on the sale and consumption of alcohol. The city's status as the national rail center made it a hub of black porter activity and brought in a steady stream of tourists looking for entertainment. In addition, the city's tolerant attitudes towards

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<sup>1</sup> Irving Berlin Inc, "Goodbye Broadway, Hello Montreal," music by Harry Warren, lyrics by Billy Rose and Mort Dixon (New York: Irving Berlin Inc, 1928).

gambling and prostitution (to the point where they are advertised in Al Palmer's 1950 guidebook *Montreal Confidential: The Low-Down in the Big Town*) and Canada's lesser institutionalization of race relations in comparison to Jim Crow laws in the United States, contributed to the development of an international reputation for Montreal as a cosmopolitan city and a place of good times, "The Paris of North America."<sup>2</sup> Clubs like Rockhead's Paradise started importing Harlem showbiz in the 1920s. In the 1930s, the Terminal Club "was the kind of place where anything could happen," remembers Myron Sutton, the bandleader of the Canadian Ambassadors of Rhythm, Canada's first known all-Canadian black jazz band: "I saw Johnny Hodges come in here and blow my horn. I saw that guy puff jaws [Dizzy Gillespie] come in here. Duke Ellington came in and sat behind the bar."<sup>3</sup> By the late forties, "busloads of people stopped at Rockhead's from the States," and "cars with license plates from almost every state in the Union" were lining-

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<sup>2</sup> All this is covered, among others, in Anouk Bélanger, "Montréal vernaculaire/Montréal spectaculaire: dialectique de l'imaginaire urbain," *Sociologie et Sociétés* 37, no. 1 (2005); Sandria P. Bouliane, "Le jazz devant ses juges: Critique, presse et jazz à Montréal, 1919-1929," in *La critique musicale au XXe siècle. Tome 4. Jazz, Rock et Musiques actuelles*, edited by Timothée Picard (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2018); Magaly Brodeur, *Vice et corruption à Montréal 1892-1970* (Montréal: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2011); Marc Charpentier, "Broadway North: Musical Theatre in Montreal in the 1920s," PhD thesis, Faculty of Theatre, McGill University, July 1999; Donald Cuccioletta, "The Américanité of Quebec Urban Popular Culture as Seen Through Burlesque Theater in Montreal, 1919-1939," Doctoral thesis, Faculty of History, Université du Québec à Montréal, 1997; John Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise: The Story of Jazz in Montreal* (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1988); Adam Kuplowsky, *A Captivating "Open City": The Production of Montreal as a "wide-open town" and "ville ouverte" in the 1940s and '50s*, MA thesis, Department of History and Classical Studies, McGill University, 2015; Meilan Lam, *Show Girls: Celebrating Montreal's Legendary Black Jazz Scene*, Montreal, National Film Board of Canada, 1998, VHS; Nancy Marrelli, *Burgundy Jazz: Little Burgundy and the Story of Montreal Jazz*, e-book (Véhicule Press and CatBird Productions, 2013); Nancy Marrelli, *Stepping Out: The Golden Age of Montreal Night Clubs, 1925-1955* (Montréal: Véhicule Press; Chicago, Ill.: U.S. distribution, Independent Publishers Group, 2004); Mark Miller, *Such Melodious Racket: The Lost History of Jazz in Canada 1914-1949* (Toronto: Mercury Press, 1997); Al Palmer, *Montreal Confidential: The Low Down on the Big Town!*, 1950 (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 2009); Peggy Roquigny, "Les plaisirs de la danse à Montréal: Transformation d'un divertissement et de ses pratiques, 1870-1940," PhD thesis, Department of History, Université du Québec à Montréal, April 2012; Will Straw, "Montreal Confidential: Notes on an Imagined City," *Cine-Action* 28 (Spring, 1992): 58-64; Collett Tracey, "Montreal: Its Role in the Beginnings of Modernism in Canada," in *Culture + State: Nationalisms*, edited by Gabrielle Zezulka-Mailloux and James Gifford, 77-83 (Edmonton, Alberta: CRC Humanities Studio, 2003); and William Weintraub, *City Unique: Montreal Days and Nights in the 1940s and 50s* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise*, 80.



up in front of Café St-Michel to see the shows, remembers choreographer Chuck Hughes.<sup>4</sup>

“People came from California, from New York, from Europe just to see the shows in Montreal . . . it was all here! It was all here!” boasts drummer Dennis Brown.<sup>5</sup> In the words of saxophonist Herb Johnson: “I played in practically every club in the city of Montreal since I came here in 1935, and I tell you —you *knew* you were in show biz when you were working at Rockhead’s Paradise or the Café St-Michel. It was like transporting yourself to Harlem.”<sup>6</sup>

The history of jazz in Montreal has been documented in several monographs: John Gilmore’s *Swinging in Paradise*, his *Who’s Who of Jazz in Montreal*, as well as Mark Miller’s pan-Canadian study *Such Melodious Racket: The Lost History of Jazz in Canada 1914-1949*. All three situate jazz in Montreal primarily as an extension of the New York City scene without analyzing the new meanings which jazz gained as it travelled to Quebec. Moreover, they present Montreal’s jazz scene primarily as a homosocial male space. My dissertation takes this as a point of departure. I draw on two distinct but related trends in jazz studies, namely studies of trans/nationalism in jazz, and studies of jazz and gender. Since the early-nineties, the focus of researchers in jazz studies has been moving consistently away from analyses of musical style and form and towards greater consideration of issues of identity and socio-cultural context in jazz practices. Among the firsts to propose “an approach that is less invested in the ideology of jazz as an aesthetic object and more responsive to issues of historical particularity,” Scott DeVeaux called for a much-needed investigation of the time- and place-specific ways in which jazz had

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<sup>4</sup> Chuck Hughes, *Interview with Chuck Hughes [audio]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-11-004, November 20 1993, VHS. I would like to thank Caroline Sigouin, Alexandra Mills, and Vincent Ouellette at Concordia University Records Management and Archives for their indispensable help in navigating the archive of Montreal jazz, as well as the National Film Board of Canada for granting permission to use footage from the Meilan Lam Fonds in several conference presentations.

<sup>5</sup> Dennis Brown, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0010, April 15, 1983, audio CD.

<sup>6</sup> Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise*, 163.

been imagined, articulated, and defined.<sup>7</sup> New Jazz Studies scholars have engaged fruitful interdisciplinary dialogues and developed sophisticated theoretical frameworks to analyze the way issues of race, nation, modernism, and cultural legitimization in particular have shaped the meanings, values, histories, and practices of jazz in the United States and beyond.<sup>8</sup> As Bruce Johnson has argued, we can learn as much from local cultural practices as from global cultural

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<sup>7</sup> Scott DeVeaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography," *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 3 (1991): 553.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Scott Appelrouth, "Boundaries and Early Jazz: Defining a New Music," *Cultural Sociology* 5, no. 2 (2011): 225-242; Andrew Berish, "Negotiating 'A Blues Riff': Listening for Django Reinhardt's Place in American Jazz," *Jazz Perspectives* 3, no. 3 (December 2009): 233-264; Rashida Braggs, *Jazz Diasporas: Race, Music, and Migration in Post-World-War II Paris* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016); Jayna Brown, "Translocations: Florence Mills, Josephine Baker, and Valaida Snow," in *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Patrick Lawrence Burke, *Come in and Hear the Truth: Jazz and Race on 52<sup>nd</sup> Street* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Matthew Cohen, "Eva Gauthier, Java to Jazz," in *Performing Otherness: Java and Bali on International Stages, 1905-1952* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Penny von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: The Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006); Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble eds, *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2004); Krin Gabbard, *Jazz Among Discourses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); *Representing Jazz* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); and *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); John Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Ajay Heble, *Landing on the Wrong Note: Jazz, Dissonance, and Critical Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Charles Hersch, *Subversive Sounds: Race and the Birth of Jazz in New Orleans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Eileen Hogan, "'Earthly, Sensual, Devilish': Sex, Race, and Jazz in Post-Independence Ireland," *JRJ* 4, No. 1 (2010): 57-79; Bruce Johnson, *Inaudible Music: Jazz, Gender, and Australian Modernity* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2000) and "The Jazz Diaspora," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz*, edited by Mervyn Cooke and David Hon (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Andre F. Jones, *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2001); Matthew F Jordan, *Le Jazz: Jazz and French Cultural Identity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) and "The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 396-422; Fiona I. B. Ngô, *Imperial Blues: Geographies of Race and Sex in Jazz Age of New York* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Kathy J. Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution: Twenties America and the Meaning of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin eds, *Uptown Conversations: The New Jazz Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Burton Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz: Music, Race, and Culture in Urban America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Eric Porter, *What is this Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2002); Ronald Radano, *Music and the Racial Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); and Guthrie P. Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Bruce Raeburn, "Stars of David and Sons of Sicily: Constellations Beyond the Canon in Early New Orleans Jazz," *Jazz Perspectives* 3, no. 2 (August 2009): 123-152; and William Shack, *Harlem in Montmartre: A Paris Jazz Story Between the Great Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001)

processes in studies of jazz in the diaspora: “Jazz was not ‘invented’ and then exported, it was invented in the process of being disseminated.”<sup>9</sup>

Despite an exciting surge of interest in questions of jazz and identity in the diaspora, Nichole Rustin and Sherrie Tucker observed as late as 2008 in their edited volume *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz* that gender was still produced as a kind of “lack” in jazz studies seminars. “When gender [is] included at all,” they write, it too often takes the form of “listen[ing] exclusively to jazz records by women on week 10 of the class.”<sup>10</sup> The first scholars interested in issues of gender and jazz stood before a marked absence of women in histories of jazz to date.<sup>11</sup> They worked first and foremost towards the recuperation and integration of women’s music, voices and stories into existing scholarship, while pointing to the attitudes and practices that had led to their exclusion from the received canon of performed musical works in the first place. In her 1989 *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen* for instance, Linda Dahl already pointed to many externally-imposed constraints and internalized prejudices concerning jazzwomen. Ultimately, she refused to give in to a narrative that internalized rather than problematized these assumptions and arrangements. Dahl traces a history that is filled with the profiles of “the long line of ... foremothers to look to as [women jazz instrumentalists] attempt to forge their careers,” and she was already pointing to increasing numbers of publications, conferences, and support systems for women musicians, researchers and festivals instead of focusing on the small ratio of female-centered vs male-centered

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<sup>9</sup> Johnson, “The Jazz Diaspora,” 37.

<sup>10</sup> Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker, *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 3, 9.

<sup>11</sup> See in particular Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1989), 43, 187; Leslie Gourse, *Madame Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Mary Unterbrink, *Jazz Women at the Keyboard* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1983).

activities.<sup>12</sup> In 1995, Leslie Gourse was taking from where Dahl had left out (around 1980) and provided with *Madame Jazz* an even more enthusiastic portrait of female jazz instrumentalists. In the 1990s, she writes, “quite a few lucky women could even say they had rarely encountered overt discrimination.”<sup>13</sup>

The recovery of women’s music, voices, and stories has been of critical importance to the field. Until the early 1990s it was a central strategy used by feminist writers and historians to challenge the masculinist status quo. Feminist scholars also recognized that the segregation of jazzwomen in alternative anthologies contributed little to how the understanding of the kinds of structures that framed women’s participation or exclusion from certain music scenes and as specific kinds of music-makers. Several studies of women jazz musicians and singers which explicitly incorporate critical frameworks borrowed from feminist theory have appeared since the early 2000s and taken this lacuna as their point of departure.<sup>14</sup> Sherrie Tucker’s work on all-

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<sup>12</sup> Dahl, *Stormy Weather*, 43, 187.

<sup>13</sup> Gourse, *Madame Jazz*, vii.

<sup>14</sup> On jazz instrumentalists (other than pianists) see in particular Franya J. Berkman, *Monumental Eternal: The Music of Alice Coltrane* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2010); Antoinette D. Handy, *Black Women in American Bands and Orchestras* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1998; Ottawa: Le Nordir, 2006); Kristin McGee, *Some Liked it Hot: Jazz Women in Film and Television, 1928-1959* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2009) and “The Gendered Jazz Aesthetics of That Man of Mine: The International Sweethearts of Rhythm and Independent Black Sound Film,” in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, edited by Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker, 393-421 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); The Melba Liston Research Collective, *Black Music Research Journal* 34, No. 1, “Special Issue on Melba Liston,” (Spring 2014); Jill M. Sullivan, *Women’s Bands in America: Performing Music and Gender* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); Yoko Suzuki, “Two Strikes and the Double Negative: The Intersections of Gender and Race in the Cases of Female Jazz Saxophonists,” *Black Music Research Journal* 33, no. 2 (2013): 207-226; and Sherrie Tucker, “Beyond the Brass Ceiling: Dolly Jones Trumpets’ Modernity in Oscar Micheaux’s *Swing*,” *Jazz Perspectives* 3, no. 1 (April 2009): 3-34, and *Swing Shift: All-Girl Bands of the 1940s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). On pianists see in particular Karen Chilton, *Hazel Scott: The Pioneering Journey of a pianist from Café Society to Hollywood* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008); Linda Dahl, *Morning Glory: A Biography of Mary Lou Williams* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Paul De Barros, *Shall we Play that One Together? The Life and Art of Jazz Piano Legend Marian McPartland* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2012); Monica Hairston, “Gender, Jazz, and the Popular Front,” in *Big Ears*, eds. Rustin and Tucker (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Tammy Kernodle, *Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004); Nichole T. Rustin, “‘Mary Lou Williams Plays Like a Man!’ Gender, Genius, and Difference in Black Music Discourse,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 104, no. 3 (2005): 445-462; Alyn Shipton, *Handful of Keys: Conversations with Thirty Jazz Pianists* (London: Equinox, 2004; and Jeffery Taylor, “With Lovie and Lil:

girl big-bands stands out in particular, along with studies of questions of identity and biography in jazz pianists like Mary Lou Williams and Hazel Scott, as well as jazz singers such as Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith. In all of the above cases, scholars insist on the way time- and place-specific economies of gender, race, and sexuality have left very material impressions on the lives and on the legacies of jazzwomen. They have also produced pointed critiques of the gendered categories of jazz history, in particular how such categories are implicated in the exclusion and marginalization of women's voices and histories. Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker's *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies* investigates precisely how issues of gender have shaped questions of value in jazz criticism and histories. The collection attracted a markedly high ratio of studies about jazzwomen—a central strategy, as Rustin and Tucker argue, to identify and “‘listen differently’ to areas of jazz cultures that are too easily dismissed as ‘outside’.”<sup>15</sup> As Jeffrey Taylor suggests in this volume, the masculinist focus on instrumental soloists in jazz anthologies, particularly the value accorded to virtuosity, boldness, and experimentation in the solo sections of jazz recordings, has halted proper appraisal of the role of pianists like Lillian Hardin Armstrong and Lovie Austin in helping formations like Louis Armstrong's Hot Five to take flight.<sup>16</sup> Lara Pellegrinelli's article in this collection also stands out as she tackles the gendered narratives of the myth of origins in jazz.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, asking “where are the women?” in jazz, as Tucker argues, “is not only a useful question for uncovering ‘lost’ or ‘hidden’ histories

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Rediscovering Two Chicago Pianists of the 1920s.” In *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, edited by Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker, 48-63 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Rustin and Tucker, *Big Ears*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Taylor, “With Lovie and Lil,” in *Big Ears*, edited by Rustin and Tucker.

<sup>17</sup> Lara Pellegrinelli, “Separated at ‘Birth’: Singing and the History of Jazz,” in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, edited by Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 31-47. On gender and origins myths in jazz historiography, see also Susan Cavin, “Missing Women: On the Voodoo Trail to Jazz,” *Journal of Jazz Studies* 3, no. 1 (Fall 1975): 4-27.

of women's achievements, but it is a useful question for finding out how gender structures a field." By revealing areas that are commonly discarded as "feminized, marginalized, and devalued sub-categories of jazz," including dance, singing, "not-the-solo-type" instrumentalism, and teaching, researching women in jazz can allow us to reflect on the way parameters of identity interact with questions of historiography, aesthetics, and delineations of musical genre in jazz narratives.<sup>18</sup>

The story of jazz in Montreal continues to be told and represented by critics and historians who have underestimated the impact that women's voices could have on the parameters that articulate the narrative. Only one woman is discussed at any length in John Gilmore's *Story of Jazz in Montreal*: pianist Vera Guilaroff. A handful of other women pianists who worked in theatres—Miss Leo Claude and Marion Burns—appear in endnotes, and two other female ragtime pianists—Vera Millington and Olga Spencer—"remain undocumented."<sup>19</sup> Ilene Bourne, Gertrude Waters and Nina Brown also make fleeting appearances in lists of Canadian-born or Montreal-based jazz musicians who were members of the Canadian Clef Club

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<sup>18</sup> Sherrie Tucker, "Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies," *Current Musicology* 73 (2002): 396. On teaching, see in particular Dahl, *Morning Glory*; Kernodle, *Soul on Soul*; Dianthe Spencer, "Smile Orange: Melba Liston in Jamaica," *Black Music Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (Spring, 2014): 65-83; and Sherrie Tucker and Monica Hairston O'Connell, "'Not One To Toot Her Own Horn (?)': Melba Liston's Oral Histories and Classroom Presentations," *Black Music Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (Spring, 2014): 121-158. On accompanying, see Jeffery Taylor, "With Lovie and Lil: Rediscovering Two Chicago Pianists of the 1920s," in *Big Ears*, eds. Rustin and Tucker, 48-63. On dance, see in particular Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) and Danielle Robinson, *Modern Moves: Dancing Race During the Ragtime and Jazz Eras* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015). On jazz singers, see in particular Angela V. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If you Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York: Free Press, 2001); Tammy Kernodle, "Having Her Say: The Blues as the Black Woman's Lament," in *Women's Voices Across Musical Worlds*, edited by Jane A. Bernstein (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004); and Eric Lewis, "This Ain't A Hate Thing: Jeanne Lee and the Subversion of the Jazz Standard," *Jazz and Culture* 1 (forthcoming, Spring 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Gilmore, *Who's Who*, 75-76. Olga Spencer was a theatrical dancer and a dance teacher. Gladys, her sister, was the pianist in the family, as I discuss in Chapter 5.

(eventually, local 11 of the Canadian Federation of Musicians) in the late 1920s and 1930s.<sup>20</sup> As for singers, “I have completely excluded [them],” states the author in his preface: “Despite their intimate working relationship with musicians and their frequent use of jazz-style phrasing and techniques, few, if any, Montreal singers during the period under study regarded themselves as jazz musicians, participated in jam sessions, or improvised at any length.” Gilmore argues himself that “each of these subjects . . . merits further study in its own right.” Yet the parameters that articulate such a “process of selection and omission” reinforce a long tradition of jazz scholarship in which similar decisions have led to the misrepresentation and misrecognition of the importance of women in the development of the genre.<sup>21</sup> While Gilmore acknowledges that it wasn’t until the 1960s that musicians in Montreal began to be hired on a regular basis to play “unadulterated jazz, rather than show music or dance music,” *Swinging in Paradise* includes only ancillary and largely anonymized evidence of the presence of dancers and entertainers.<sup>22</sup> Dancing, singing, and teaching were the positions that women occupied with the greatest frequency in North American jazz cultures of the first half of the century.<sup>23</sup> A story that begins on the premise that musicians “made their best jazz on their own time, out of the spotlight and largely ignored by society” will exclude by definition the vast majority of women participants.<sup>24</sup>

As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has explored in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, we can work with the palpable instability of such narratives and listen for the voices that resist seamless incorporation into a narrative. Sedgwick calls such voices “textured,”

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<sup>20</sup> Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise*, 284.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 14-15. Bernice Jordan, Arlene Smith, and Rita Gail are named.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 216-217.

<sup>23</sup> See Hattie Gossett and Carolyn Johnson, “jazzwomen: they’re mostly singers and piano players, only a horn player or two, hardly any drummers,” *Heresies* 10 (1980), 65-69.

<sup>24</sup> Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise*, 13-14.

in the sense that they “bear the scars and uneven sheen of their making” and are “dense with offered information about how, substantively, historically, materially, [they] came into being.”<sup>25</sup> A number of “seams” between the “textured voices” and an overall narrative that disarticulates between entertainment and art are apparent in *Swinging in Paradise*. Pianist Art Roberts for instance, a student of jazz legend Harold “Steep” Wade, describes one engagement where Wade appeared as such:

[Wade’s band] was a commercial band, playing for shows and strippers. But the chords Steep played behind those singers —and sometimes he didn’t even play the melody line on top— they had to be *good* singers to stay in tune, because he played jazz all the time. No compromise! His eyes would be squinting shut as he was about to hit an altered chord, because he knew it was a dissonant chord, but he played it anyway.<sup>26</sup>

Gilmore also reprints a picture of Wade playing the piano with what appears to be a dark teasing female body leaning on his shoulder —an unusual shoulder angel, to be sure. Clearly, jazz and entertainment, including singers, strippers, and dark shoulder angels in this case, seem to have had much to do with each other.<sup>27</sup> Dark, semi-clothed female dancing figures and exotic names of entertainers also appear elsewhere in-between the lines of the narrative, including painted on the walls of the Café St-Michel in the most iconic picture of Louis Metcalf’s band and advertised in virtually every jazz performance where the Ambassadors are featured, begging to be written-in and yet mute, fixed, decorative in the current historical record.<sup>28</sup> Bodies that once mattered, yet have been effectively written-out of the history of Montreal jazz.

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<sup>25</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 14.

<sup>26</sup> Art Roberts, quoted in Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise*, 153. Italics in the original.

<sup>27</sup> See picture in *ibid*, 151.

<sup>28</sup> See picture in *ibid*, 122.



Similarly, May Oliver is quoted as such in Gilmore's book to explain the significance of Louis Metcalf's tenure at the Café St-Michel between 1946 and 1949:

People expected that if they went out to a club, sometime during the evening they would dance. For them to listen to something other than dance music was quite a thing. It was amazing that Metcalf was able to do it . . . Louis knew where he wanted the band to go but he'd been in the business long enough to know that you couldn't force it down people's throats. You led them there. It was like an education in jazz.<sup>29</sup>

As Gilmore comments, "his audiences needed time to feel comfortable with the new music—and with their new role as seated spectators at a jazz performance."<sup>30</sup> It is easy to sense eagerness with which moving bodies are reduced to an educated ear, a domesticated throat, and a still(ed) bottom. Yet until the late 1940s, jazz must have been primarily understood as music for dancing for Montreal audiences. The photographers picturing the musicians onstage must also have been surrounded by social dancers. What role did dance play in the development of a scene for jazz in Montreal in the first half of the twentieth century?

Finally, an informal picture of the Canadian Ambassadors of Rhythm on tour in North Bay also appears *Swinging in Paradise*, which features Bernice Jordan listed in as "vocals."<sup>31</sup> Despite the fact that Jordan worked as a singer and dancer in all of the major jazz nightclubs in Montreal and that she toured in rural Quebec and in Ontario from the time that she was a young teenager until she had her second child, she has almost entirely disappeared from the current historical record. "If they had pictures," Jordan told interviewer Meilan Lam in her oral history,

I don't remember seeing any pictures of myself, with them you know. Pictures where all of them are standing. I think I seen it at the time, they had a take, and then [she pauses] My nie

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<sup>29</sup> May Oliver, quoted in Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise*, 124.

<sup>30</sup> Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise*, 124.

<sup>31</sup> See picture in *ibid*, 79.

Sutton had it but [she pauses] now when I see everything advertised it always shows the, just the men. But I was the girl singer with them all through their, all through the North.<sup>32</sup>

Official pictures of Myron Sutton's band such as the one featured on the online platform *Burgundy Jazz* as well as the handful of other band pictures included in Gilmore's monograph feature indeed only the instrumentalists. Clearly, in a number of places the historiographical disarticulation between jazz and commercial music comes close to the surface—and it is often a woman's voice or body that blurs the assumed boundary between the two.

Arguably, the project to cleanse jazz of the presence of the body has been the guiding narrative of most traditional histories of jazz in the first half of the twentieth century, and the instability of jazz as a category of musical genre in the early decades of the twentieth century arguably made this disarticulation easier. Louis Metcalf's venture into jazz as sound art was aligned with an emerging critical discourse in jazz, gender, and race associated with bebop in the United States that sought precisely to legitimize jazz by disarticulating the music from the entertainment world in which it had emerged. As Scott Deveaux, Krin Gabbard, John Gennari, Ingrid Monson and others have pointed out, the new kind of jazz broke from the conventions of the variety stage and of the dancehall specifically in order to be reclaimed as art.<sup>33</sup> As critical discourse though, severing the bodies from the sound also means severing most of the women in the archive from the historical narrative. And as Lucy Green explains in *Music, Gender, Education*, having to read in between the lines of historical narratives in order to find the women has very material impacts on the legacies of subjects that historical narratives circumvent.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Bernice Jordan (Whims), *Interview with Bernice [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0002 [7109], 1993-1994, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Bernice Jordan also come from this source.

<sup>33</sup> Deveaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition;" Gabbard, *Jazz Among Discourses*; Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool*; and Monson, "The Problem with White Hipness."

<sup>34</sup> Lucy Green, *Music, Gender, and Education* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Women face forms of alienation when they engage with a narrative that is produced as male, where their identities can simply not be made sense of. In this sense, the invisibility of women in the canon of jazz instrumentalists, as Marcia J. Citron has argued in *Gender and the Musical Canon* regarding the absence of women instrumentalists in the Western music canon at large, severely limits the potential for women to feel interpellated by jazz. The unmarked invisibility of women in jazz narratives thus functions as an apparatus of power when readers engage those narratives.<sup>35</sup> The virtual absence of legitimate models of jazz womanhood in histories of jazz can make it difficult for the female jazz student—and the retired female jazz performer alike—to feel like they could, and even that they ever did belong to that scene.

This project engages those seams and textured voices to reposition the role that gender played in shaping the history and meanings of jazz in Montreal. There is a wide discrepancy between the current state of histories of Montreal jazz and its archives, which are literally filled with records of women's presence: singers and dancers headlined in newspaper ads while the band itself is often misspelled or unnamed; entertainers whose autographs were preserved in the scrapbooks of musicians and journalists; and women instrumentalists who accompanied acts and taught the jazzmen-to-be. Dancers, singers, "not-the-solo-type" instrumentalists, and teachers, all of them hiding in the feminized and devalued margins of jazz as a category of musical genre, who regarded themselves as belonging to that community, and who improvised in other ways and in other places than on a solo jazz instrument in a jam sessions spot. I seek to clarify specifically what women's voices and bodies had to do in the articulation of jazz' meanings, and to engage the ways in which their particular subject positions impacted their participation in the scene, as well as their legacies. My very premise thus challenges views of jazz as a strictly sonic

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<sup>35</sup> Marcia J Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and "Gender Professionalism and the Musical Canon," *Journal of Musicology* 8, no. 1 (Winter, 1990): 102-117.

phenomenon. In this, I am particularly indebted to David Brackett's thinking on genre and identity in popular musics. The kind of structure that he identifies between musical genre and identity, "though unstable" in his own words, opens up the possibility to discuss the meaning of a musical genre beyond its sonic phenomena.<sup>36</sup> By extension, I am also influenced by Keith Negus' intervention into essentialist and constructivist debates in analyses of popular music, in which he argues that looking at the conditions in which meaning emerges in popular music provides a fruitful approach to consider the processes through which music and people relate to each other.<sup>37</sup> What kinds of meanings was jazz associated with in a nation that saw Americanization as its most immediate cultural threat? What conflicting delineations of jazz did French-Canadian nationalists, social and theatrical dancers, show-loving musicians and bebop converts articulate, and what strategies of cultural legitimization did they harness? Closer to this project, Ingrid Monson's study of swing as "conversation" explores how the very sound of swing is mediated by conversations about and around race in North American jazz cultures.<sup>38</sup> How did these conversations about identity differ in Montreal, and in what way did this affect the kinds of sounds that jazz musicians made, and that audiences in Montreal heard? It is finally from Suzanne Cusick's codification of "the Mind/Body problem" in musicological research, and more directly from the work of Sherrie Tucker, Jayna Brown, Danielle Robinson and Susan C. Cook among others that this project takes its most important cue regarding the gendered history of jazz as a genre.<sup>39</sup> Following their work, I insist that dance should not be neatly excised from the study

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<sup>36</sup> See in particular David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Identity in Popular Music* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015) and "Questions of Genre in Popular Music," *Black Music Research Journal* 25, no. 1/2 (Spring 2005).

<sup>37</sup> Keith Negus, "Identities," in *Popular Music in Theory: An Introduction* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997), 99-135.

<sup>38</sup> Monson, *Saying Something*.

<sup>39</sup> See in particular Brown, *Babylon Girls*; Susan C. Cook, "Watching Our Step: Embodying Research, Telling Stories," in *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music* (Zürich; Los Angeles: Carciofoli, 1999), 177-212; Robert

of music in general and popular musics in particular, and that standing in the historiographical margins that Montreal jazz scholarship has produced for the bodies of jazz dancers allows us to challenge a delineation of the genre in strictly sonic terms. As Bruce Johnson has argued,

The global spread of dancing as a public and private recreation in the early twentieth century . . . drew largely on US models linked with the ragtime and jazz performed in specialized spaces such as restaurants and dance halls . . . The significance of this connection is profound . . . in its earliest diasporic manifestations, jazz was not simply music made by musicians . . . jazz was imagined and practiced as a dance, like the ‘foxtrot’ or the ‘tango.’<sup>40</sup>

How does an account of a primarily dance-based jazz scene problematize dominant chronologies in jazz history as well as the jazz vs commercial music discourses that were activated in centers of musical production such as New York City? How can we re-think current relational models between dance and sound in jazz to account for the fact that in a city like Montreal, musicians spent their professional lives working almost entirely with, behind, or for dancers?

I also consider the role that jazz discourses played in articulations of Quebec nationalism and modernity, and by extension the reasons why jazz is not included in anthologies of *musique québécoise* despite the fact that dancing ‘*le charleston*’ belongs to the memories of many Quebecers who came of age in the interwar period. This of course poses delicate challenges to narratives of Quebec history and nationalism even as they stand today. Benedict Anderson’s characterization of nations as “limited imagined communities” was helpful to Line Grenier when

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P. Crease, “Divine Frivolity: Hollywood Representations of the Lindy Hop, 1937-1942,” in *Representing Jazz*, edited by Krin Gabbard, 207-28 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) and “Jazz and Dance,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz*, edited by Mervyn Cooke and David Hon, 69-82. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Suzanne G. Cusick, “Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem,” in *Music/Ideology: Resisting the Aesthetic: Essays* (Amsterdam: G + B Arts International, 1998); Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. “African American Dance and Music,” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 13, No. 3 (Fall 1989): 130-138; Brian Harker, “Louis Armstrong, Eccentric Dance, and the Evolution of Jazz on the Eve of Swing,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 61, No. 1 (Spring 2008): 67-121; Robinson, *Modern Moves*; Howard Spring, “Swing and the Lindy Hop: Dance, Venue, Media, and Tradition,” *American Music* 15, No. 2 (Summer 1997): 183-207; and Sherrie Tucker, *Dance Floor Democracy: The Social Geography of Memory at the Hollywood Canteen* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>40</sup> Johnson, “The Jazz Diaspora,” 37, 44.

she sought to articulate how collective memories in Quebec worked retrospectively to create nationalist narratives and articulate sentiments of belonging.<sup>41</sup> Nations are always imagined communities, Anderson writes, because “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, Grenier’s study enlightens us little on the ways in which certain aspects of a shared past actually escape those historical narratives. Above all, Montreal’s jazz scene was fueled by the artistic agency of racialized and ethnicized subjects, in the sense that it is virtually impossible to tell the story of Montreal jazz without engaging notions of language, race, ethnic nationalism, and white privilege. “The Corner,” where the two most famous jazz clubs in Montreal were located, was located at the very heart of Montreal’s black community, around the Windsor train station, then the headquarters of the Canadian Pacific Railway. As I discuss in Chapter 3, the very neighborhood where Montreal jazz developed was engineered by racist economies that channeled black men’s lives towards railroad work; and as I explore in Chapter 2, the black variety stage, where most black women-in-jazz were hired, activated racist and sexist technologies that had very material consequences on black women’s lives. In other words, *le nationalisme de survivance* that typified French-Canadian nationalism until the end of the reign of prime minister Maurice Duplessis (1936-1939; 1944-1959) was directly at odds with the apex of “otherness” that The Corner represented in particular. Arguably, it is precisely when the myth of Canada’s more tolerant attitudes towards immigration and blackness is not properly scrutinized that it gains potency.<sup>43</sup> “In Canada we don't have those segregation signs, that's one

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<sup>41</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1991); Line Grenier, “Je me Souviens en Chansons: Articulations de la Citoyenneté Culturelle et de l'Identitaire dans le Champ Musical Populaire au Québec,” *Sociologie et Sociétés*, XXIX, no. 2 (1997): 31-47.

<sup>42</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 15-16.

<sup>43</sup> Paulette Regan makes a similar claim in her book *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), where she urges Canadians to relinquish the

sure thing,” explains performer Bernice Jordan in her oral history, “But they do it in a, what’d’ya call it, diplomatic way?”

Quebec historians Diane Lamoureux, Joan Sangster and Jeffery Vacante have also made the strong case that current accounts of the rise of Québécois nationalism are systematically and problematically aligned with narratives about women’s sexual liberation.<sup>44</sup> Andrée Lévesque’s *Making and Breaking the Rules: Women in Quebec, 1919-1939* provides invaluable insights as to how the discourse of Quebec nationalism provided legitimacy to normative constructions of masculinity and femininity during the interwar period. Lévesque maps the ways in which discourses of gender and sexual deviancy were produced to stave off “a modernism that threatened to swallow up a Québec based on long-established social and sexual roles.”<sup>45</sup> Montreal sat uncomfortably between attempts to consolidate heteropatriarchy and the intensification of nationalist sentiments in *La Belle Province*—both of which, as other scholars interested in the relationship between feminisms and nationalisms have argued, tend to be mutually constitutive.<sup>46</sup> How did conventions of the black variety stage interact with anxieties

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“persistent myth of themselves as peace-makers and acknowledge the destructive legacy of a society that has stubbornly ignored and devalued Indigenous experience” (backcover).

<sup>44</sup> See Diane Lamoureux, *L’Amère Patrie: Entre Féminisme et Nationalisme* (Montréal: Éditions du Remue-Ménage, 2001) and “Nationalism and Feminism in Quebec: An Impossible Attraction,” in *Feminism and Political Economy*, edited by Heather Jon Maroney and Meg Luxton (Toronto: Methuen, 1987); Joan Sangster, “Archiving Feminist Histories: Women, the ‘Nation’ and Metanarratives in Canadian Historical Writing,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 29 (2006): 255-264; and Jeffery Vacante, “Writing the History of Sexuality and ‘National’ History in Quebec,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 39, no. 2 (2004). See also Nancy Janoviček and Catherine Carstairs, *Feminist History in Canada: New Essays on Women, Gender, Work, and Nation* (Vancouver; Toronto: UBC Press, 2013); and Helen Smith and Pamela Wakewich, “Trans/forming the Citizen Body in Wartime: National and Local Public Discourse on Women’s Bodies and ‘Body Work’ for Women During the Second World War,” in *Contesting Bodies and Nation in Canadian History*, edited by Patrizia Gentila and Jane Nicholas (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

<sup>45</sup> Andrée Lévesque, *Making and Breaking the Rules: Women in Quebec, 1919-1939* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1994), backcover.

<sup>46</sup> See in particular Tamar Mayer ed., *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*. (London: Routledge, 2000); Mrinalini Sinha, “Gender and Nation,” in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, edited by Carole R. McCann and Seung-kyung Kim (New York; London: Routledge, 2013), 227-245; Lois A. West, ed., *Feminist Nationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997) and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nations* (London: Sage, 1997).

surrounding issues modernity, nationalism, and women's sexuality in Quebec? What specific challenges did black urbanity pose to discourses of female respectability in a nation that was imagined/idealized primarily as homogenous, white, agrarian, catholic, and francophone?

Roderick A. Ferguson has argued that "as African American urban communities of the North were created out of the demands of northern capital in the early 20th century, they gave birth to vice districts that in turn transformed gender and sexual ideals and practices in northern cities."<sup>47</sup>

What role might black women performers have played in the transformation of gender and sexual ideals and practices three and a half decades before Quebec's so-called "sexual revolution" in the 1960s?

In asking these questions, I am also indebted to feminist historians like Linda Nicholson who insist that a history of feminism that is neatly divided into three successive waves of sexual liberation obscures a century-long history of real gradual changes in gender roles and relationships that occurred in marginalized spaces.<sup>48</sup> The work of intersectional feminist historians also influences my thinking here for the ways in which it challenges traditional delineations of the Second Wave by looking at women-of-color and white antiracist feminisms. Recognizing the color-blindness of narratives that align sexual liberation and *québécois* nationalism in the 1960s, and allowing for the three and a half decades that preceded it to witness significant challenges to the social order through the kinds of "sexually liberated" models of black womanhood present on jazz stages is an essential step to understand the role that jazz

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<sup>47</sup> Roderick A Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 13.

<sup>48</sup> Linda Nicholson, "Feminism in 'Waves': Useful Metaphor or Not?," in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, edited by Carole McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim (New York; London: Routledge, 2013), 49-55. See also Becky Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism," in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, edited by Carole R. McCann and Seung-kyung Kim (New York; London: Routledge, 2013), 56-67.



played in the mutual constitution between articulations of gender and nation in early-twentieth-century Quebec.

### *Methodology*

As a feminist inquiry into the past, my methodology combines feminist modes of historical analysis and writing, and a praxis of listening and doing research that is attuned to women's voices, stories, and particular positionalities. At the root of my investigation is the question "Where are the women in Montreal jazz (and elsewhere)?" Following black feminist standpoint theorists and intersectionalist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks, I understand the point of view of women-in-jazz to be a "privileged partial perspective" that can challenge hegemonic discourses of jazz, in particular the notions of jazz as sound, musician-centric, masculine and male-driven, as well as dominant chronologies of jazz and current ethnocentric articulations of Quebec history.<sup>49</sup> To paraphrase Leslie McCall, considering the margins which Montreal jazz history has created for women—she quotes bell hooks here—as a "site of radical possibility, a space of resistance" involves recognizing the "compoundedness" of collective lived experiences, and therefore the partiality and positionality of knowledge itself.<sup>50</sup>

As a project that centers on the voices of women, this project draws primarily on oral history as an archival resource. The Meilan Lam Fonds at Concordia University Library, Special

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<sup>49</sup> See among others Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," in *The Black Feminist Reader*, eds Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Malden: Blackwell, 2000), 208-238; and Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 3 (2005): 1776; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000); and "Learning from the Outsider Within," in *Beyond Methodology*, edited by M.M. Fonow and J.A. Cook, 35-56 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984).

<sup>50</sup> Quoted from bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), 149.

Collections, holds several interviews realized with black women performers who worked extensively on the black variety stage in the first half of the twentieth century, in Montreal, rural Quebec, Ontario, New York City and elsewhere. Realized in 1993 and 1994 in the context of the National Film Board of Canada production *Show Girls: Celebrating Montreal's Legendary Black Jazz Scene*, the unedited original interviews had not been transferred onto an accessible and viewable format for researchers until I worked with archivist Caroline Sigouin to do so in 2014.<sup>51</sup> Only the short excerpts included in the film had been considered in previous scholarship and criticism.<sup>52</sup> My project is therefore the first to consider the critical significance of these documents in relation to jazz historical narratives. These interviews, as well as the conversations I had with Meilan Lam, have been crucial in the development of my understanding of Montreal's particular location on the North American black variety stage circuit and of the aesthetic and discursive relationship between jazz and the black variety stage in this time period. Additionally, these sources uniquely address questions of creative agency in early-twentieth-century black woman performance: they provide a critical means to reposition black women's outlook on the conventions of the black variety stage, particularly on the technologies of racism, ethnocentrism, and sexism which it activated, as well as the ways in which parameters of gender, sexuality, race and class interacted with issues of jazz participation to impact their lives and their legacies.

I did not expect to work with oral history beyond this collection of interviews. Unfortunately, public records were of limited use in locating Montreal-based women instrumentalists. As Sherrie Tucker argued in *Swing Shift: All-Girl Bands of the 1940s*, using only the same tools that are used to articulate dominant jazz narratives—recordings, mass-

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<sup>51</sup> The transfer was done at my own expense.

<sup>52</sup> See for example Joanna Mansbridge, "In Search of a Different History: The Remains of Burlesque in Montreal," *Canadian Theatre Review* 158 (Spring 2014), 7-12.

mediated criticism, current histories—also led, for me, to the finding of few women instrumentalists.<sup>53</sup> The Spencer Sisters, interviewed primarily as dancers in the context of *Show Girls*, turned out to be instrumentalists who had travelled abroad during the Second World War and entertained in USO-camps. In addition, I drew on two oral histories of pianist Vera Guilaroff and two oral histories of piano teacher Daisy Peterson Sweeney to explore how these women articulated their particular relationship to Montreal's jazz scene. The statuses of the Spencer Sisters, Guilaroff, and Sweeney are all contested in dominant jazz historical narratives: The Spencer Sisters were labelled “novelty” and performed within the parameters of wartime all-girl entertainment; Guilaroff was a white novelty-style woman pianist who retreated from the recording industry and radio broadcasting when she became a mother; and Sweeney is an African American piano teacher who, by her own account, didn't play jazz.<sup>54</sup> Their oral histories provide a rich and fruitful standpoint to look at hegemonic discourses of jazz from the margins of feminized spaces such as the all-girl group, the home, and the teaching studio. In addition, they offer a welcome alternative to articulations of the musical contributions of these women coming primarily from men and positioning them chiefly in the shadow of other men. Guilaroff, for example, continues to remain in the shadow of her piano partner in the Piano Ramblers, Willie Eckstein, who transitioned to the jazz clubs (and picked another piano partner) as she retreated from public paid performance; and Sweeney continues to be discussed primarily in relation to the two international jazz pianists she mentored, as “Oscar Peterson's sister” and as “Oliver Jones' first piano teacher.” Similarly, while all-girl groups tended to be compared to all-male bands in

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<sup>53</sup> Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 27.

<sup>54</sup> Sweeney's exact words are: “I don't play jazz.” Daisy Peterson Sweeney, *20 ans de jazz. Entrevue avec Daisy Peterson Sweeney*, interviewed by Clodine Galipeau, Amérimage Spectra, BAnQ Vieux-Montréal, P945, S1, PXX00-026 and P945, S1, PXX00-027, November 23, 1999, VHS.

mid-century criticism, the oral histories of the Spencer Sisters provide a welcome opportunity to foreground black women collaborating together.<sup>55</sup>

Finally, this project also draws on several interviews carried out by John Gilmore between 1981 and 1983 with musicians who worked on the black variety stage. In contrast to narratives that aim to sever the music from the entertainment world in which they spent most of their working lives, show musicians describe their professional relationship with entertainers as collaborative, not hierarchical. They also celebrate women instrumentalists, teachers, dancers and singers in ways that have not been emulated in the historical record nor in recent criticism. Pianists Ilene Bourne, Gertrude Waters, Nina Brown and Daisy Peterson Sweeney are all remembered by their peers as influential mentors and as effective musicians, and black women performers are described as belonging to the same scene, not as deserving of an alternative history. Finally, the oral histories of show musicians problematize dominant chronologies in jazz history, New-York-centric narratives of music-making, as well as questions of value in jazz performance.

Oral history is an important resource to recover the stories of women, as well as to better understand, and hopefully challenge, the ways in which dominant narratives and hierarchies of value marginalize the contributions of women in jazz, and black women in particular. I also understand oral history as a particularly rich archive to provide an entry point into discussions of agency. Paul Gilroy has written about the political and ethical meanings of a distinctive doubleness in black performance, which he describes as “the effort involved in trying to face (at least) two ways at once . . . black musics and other expressive cultural forms derive their special

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<sup>55</sup> On this, see in particular Tammy Kernodle, “Black Women Working Together: Jazz, Gender, and the Politics of Validation,” *Black Music Research Journal* 34, No. 1 (Spring, 2014): 27-55.

power from a doubleness, their unsteady location simultaneously inside and outside the conventions, assumptions, and aesthetic rules which distinguish and periodize modernity.”<sup>56</sup>

Following a long line of feminist intersectionality scholars like bell hooks and Kimberlé Crenshaw, Jayna Brown argued that the bodies of black women performers

have been traversed, surveilled, excluded, and claimed in multiple ways, from many directions. The theoretical framework of double-consciousness *may prove insufficient* to account for black women’s relationship to racial and national belonging.<sup>57</sup>

Surely, attention to parameters of identity can help us understand how technologies of racism, sexism, classism, ageism, ethnocentrism and others worked simultaneously to channel these women’s lives in certain directions and not others. Yet adding more parameters, more axes of discrimination, more mirrors in order to “fix” the theoretical framework does not open up quite enough space to discuss the strategies that these women found to deal with such particular combinations of oppressive forces. In other words, theories of identity are helpful to understand where individual subjects were located on intersecting fields and to provide historical context to that location. But they don’t make visible the strategies that individual subjects developed to resist the specific combination of expectations around gender, race, and class that policed and politicized their bodies on the variety stage and at other times when they were asked to write themselves into the narrative of Montreal jazz. When the bodies of black women performers are being made sense of primarily as sums of axes of oppression and outside gazes, when we root our understanding of their artistic contribution in the so-many eyes of the so-many audiences before whom they performed, claimed in multiple ways, from multiple directions, fragmented in the multiple mirrors they dressed themselves in, we pay attention to the ways an oppressive

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<sup>56</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 73.

<sup>57</sup> Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 17. Italics mine.

regime worked to channel their lives in certain directions and not others, not to how they survived it.

As Scott Appelrouth, Burton Peretti, Sherrie Tucker and scholars in the Melba Liston Research Collective have suggested, oral history methods also come with their own difficulties, mediations, and problems.<sup>58</sup> There are a number of ways of working with oral history: those I am working with are not interviews that I conducted myself, but they were conducted by others in a context where interviewees were asked to write themselves retrospectively into the story of Montreal jazz. It was a particularly humbling experience, and also a privilege, to be observant to the changing dynamics between different interviewers and interviewees. As I discuss in Chapter 3, black women performers deploy a range of strategies to consider or deflect questions about aspects of their performing careers such as erotic routines and interaction with audience members. Tina Baines Brereton's eyes seem both amused and confident when she tells Meilan Lam that she doesn't need the camera turned off to answer questions about tassel dancing.<sup>59</sup> Mary Brown on the other hand objected, while still laughing, to questions about "mixing" with the audience: "You want to hear the dirt! . . . That was after my husband."<sup>60</sup> Being placed in the position of witness to such dynamics was particularly revealing in cases when the interviewee

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<sup>58</sup> On oral history in jazz see in particular Appelrouth, "Boundaries and Early Jazz;" Chris Becker, *Freedom of Expression: Interviews with Women in Jazz* (Houston, Texas: Beckeresque Press, 2015); Deveaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition;" Wayne Entice and Janis Stockhouse, *Jazzwomen: Conversations with Twenty-One Musicians* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Wayne Entice, *Jazzwomen Speak* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Burton Peretti, "Speaking in the Groove: Oral History and Jazz," *The Journal of American History* 88, No. 2 (September, 2001): 582-595; The Melba Liston Research Collective, *Black Music Research Journal* 34, No. 1, "Special Issue on Melba Liston," (Spring, 2014); Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift; Dance Floor Democracy*; and "Jazz History Remembered and Remade by the Women in the Band," *The Oral History Review* 26, No. 1 (Winter-Spring, 1999); and *Swing Shift*.

<sup>59</sup> Tina Baines (Brereton), *Interview with Tina [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0001 [7108], December 2, 1993, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Tina Baines also come from this source.

<sup>60</sup> Mary Brown, *Interview with Mary [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0004 [7111], 1993-1994, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Mary Brown also come from this source.

remained the same while facing two different interviewers. In Chapter 5, I describe Daisy Peterson Sweeney's interviews with Clodine Galipeau and with Arlene Cambell as particularly rich repositories of the kinds of hesitations, strategies, refusals and willingnesses that can surface in the process of shaping a relationship between an interviewer and an interviewee. These interviews also bear witness to how much knowledge production interacts with questions of identity and processes of cultural legitimization across the color line.

I am not writing myself out of that relationship either. In the process of engaging these oral histories, I transcribed hundreds of pages of selected excerpts, which I printed into a gigantic binder, and which I then color-coded according to broad themes and subthemes that were recurrent and that challenged the assumptions I had in relation to the histories I knew: "practice" (performance types, travelling, collaboration, sound), "vice" (eroticism, sex work, respectability), "biography" (data, issues with autobiography), "identity" (articulation of individual and collective identities, resistance to stereotypes), as well as a series of handwritten notes in the margins that included "public = private?," "teaching/mentorship," and a pink-color-coded subtheme called "mothering" that all eventually coalesced into "care." In other words, the very organizing principle of my dissertation, and the selection and omission of oral history excerpts, were all guided by whether or not the stories and worldviews I heard challenged the historical record as I knew it when I came to the archive. During the course of this project, I was reminded often that I am not black, and although I wrote every sentence trying to be mindful of the histories that separate black and white citizens in North America and elsewhere, much of the excerpts reprinted below would not have "challenged the histories I knew" had those histories not all been written, and been told primarily by white educated men. The arguments below are therefore deeply enmeshed with my positionality as a subject, on the particular ways in which I

came to the archive entangled, in my own distinctive way, in structures of gender, race, sexuality, class, age, ethnicity, nation, and motherhood/care. My interest in the ways in which women entertainers and instrumentalists negotiated their professional lives and the changing social expectations as they became mothers cannot be disarticulated from my own attempts to finish Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* while nursing a one-month-old.<sup>61</sup> Etcetera.

In the face of so many inherent perceptions, distortions, and appropriations already, I sought to avoid paraphrasing from the oral history as much as I could while still hoping to argue for the value of putting these oral histories in dialogue with each other, with mainstream discourses, with the historical record, and with theories of identity. I drew on these oral histories for the data they provided, in particular with regards to the ways in which black women performers and show musicians interacted onstage, as well as for the strategies that differently-located subjects developed to push against the powerful structures that influenced the ways in which they saw themselves and were seen. Above all, I tried to be sensitive to each interviewee's affective constructions of their own chronologies. For instance, I had underestimated the importance of children for jazzwomen not so much in their lives but as an affective structuring tool in their self-narration. The personal and professional decisions they made and the strategies they developed to resist mainstream discourses often relied, not exclusively but significantly, on their understanding of their roles as care-givers in broad community networks—a topic I explore in Chapter 5. The particular argument I make about the relationship between black women performers and erotic labor in Chapter 3 is also dependent on the interviewees' own wish to appear on the record as workers who loved their jobs. While they describe eroticized and exoticized performance as a space of both opportunity and devaluation, abuse is always

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<sup>61</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994).



recuperated into broader narratives of empowerment (Mary Brown: “I just knocked him right off the bus”), amusement (Tina Baines: “But they see all the little bums going and, [she laughs] can’t help it those guys, they can’t help it, they get crazy”), indifference (Baines: “we paid no mind”) or reconciliation (Baines: “I used to be furious. . . Now I understand more”). We may be wary of the trope of the “happy African American” for its long-shared history with minstrelsy and with the sugarcoating of racism in white nostalgia, but being sensitive to issues of agency also involves being mindful of what is offered, how, and why, and not insisting to unveil what is willfully left veiled. It is of course important to acknowledge that what black women performers shared with Meilan Lam is dependent on the fact that the interviewer was not black, nor was she related to Montreal’s black community in any way. But the particular way in which their narrative is articulated is also reflective of a particular affective relationship with their past and with the broader context in which they agreed to donate their oral history to an institutional archive, one which would be accessed primarily by scholars, students, by their families as well as members of their community. In this case as well as in the case of the John Gilmore interviews, interviewees shaped their narratives with a specific interviewer in mind, but also with the awareness that their oral history was to be archived, preserved, and considered for inclusion in the historical record.

In this sense, the fact that all of the oral histories I work with were done late in the interviewees’ lives had a significant impact on how the narratives were told. The two oral histories of Vera Guilaroff were conducted in 1963 and 1964 when she was nearly fifty years removed from the start of her professional career, and those realized with show musicians and entertainers were realized in the 1980s and 1990s looking back thirty to fifty years earlier as well. Clearly, the narratives articulated in these interviews were shaped by the particular way in

which interviewees wanted to be remembered—by historians, readers, by their families and their communities, and not necessarily in that order of importance. Black woman performer Bernice Jordan’s statement in her oral history that “I hope I’m doing what’s right, ‘cause that’s what I wanna do when I close my eyes, for good” cannot be disarticulated from the enthusiastic and empowered narrative she offers about a life that, as she also acknowledges here and there and as I document in Chapter 3, was also filled with hardship. Guilaroff’s understanding of the role that gender played in her professional career cannot be excised either from the context in which she was grappling retrospectively with her “failure” in relation to male contemporaries—her 1963 oral history was recorded at a tribute event to Willie Eckstein no less, and in 1964 for a record collector on a mission to save her from anonymity.

Ultimately, these oral histories, with all that is valuable and questionable about them, constitute in most cases the only archival resource currently accessible. The project to recover the story of Montreal-based jazzwomen is therefore as dependent on the question “Where are the women?” as it is dependent on my current ability to access particular resources. Beyond oral history, I also draw on recordings, transcriptions, scores, jazz criticism from various media, advertisement, as well as vice reports in order to make the connection between the kinds of sounds that Montreal audiences heard and the meanings that came to be associated with jazz in this era. Such texts provide a critical means to access aspects of early-twentieth-century jazz as it travelled outside of the United States and took root in Montreal.

### *Chapter Breakdown*

The first three chapters in my dissertation explore the aesthetic and discursive relationship between jazz music and dance in the so-called “golden age” of jazz in Montreal. In all three, I position Montreal as a nodal point on the North American black variety stage circuit,

where acts travelled and exchanged knowledges with local bands of jazz musicians whose primary function was to accompany them, as well as with local groups of entertainers who would fill in the rest of the evening's bill. I describe the ways in which Montreal's particular status as a "showtown" exacerbate several traits of black transnational performance in comparison to contemporary scenes in New York, Kansas City, or Chicago. Chapter 1 deals specifically with the collaborative creative processes between exotic dancers and jazz musicians on the black variety stage. Chapters 2 and 3 explore the processes of cultural legitimization for jazz-as-dance in Quebec. In Chapter 2, I outline the specific ways in which discourses of jazz and vice interact in Montreal jazz historiography, and I review various archival media (a 1930 catholic pamphlet on modern dance, a 1949 novel written by a Montreal nightlife chronicler, parlor songs published in French-Canadian magazines that drew on African American dance forms) to document the particular construction of jazz as a gendered, racialized, ethnicized, and sexually-threatening sound-body complex in French-Canadian criticism. I also explore relationships between the moral panic that modern social dances triggered and the emergence of a French-Canadian nationalism that saw the Americanization of culture as its most immediate threat. In Chapter 3, I address the strategies of cultural legitimization articulated by those who wished to challenge dominant discourses of jazz—chiefly, the jazz dancers themselves. I explore questions of agency in opposition to the issues of representation, parody, and victimization that more commonly emerge in scholarship of exotic dance on jazz stages. I describe the ways in which dancers on each side of the color line produced difference between an imagined self and imagined others in ways that reinforce tropes of racial difference while simultaneously challenging mainstream vilifying discourses. I suggest that jazz provided actors and critics in Quebec with a liminal zone where theories about the gendered and racialized embodiment of morality and vice, particularly

as they intersected with ideas about the French-Canadian nation, could be articulated, resisted, and challenged in the public sphere.

The final pair of chapters is concerned with Montreal-based women jazz instrumentalists and the ways in which parameters of gender, race, class, sexuality, and care impacted their participation in Montreal's jazz scene. Chapter 4 deals specifically with the sounds produced by novelty-style pianist Vera Guilaroff (1902-1974) in relation to her contested status in jazz historical narratives. As a pianist, composer, improviser, radio broadcaster and recording artist who enjoyed a musical career of international standing that lasted more than half a century, Guilaroff currently stands as the first Canadian woman to have made a record of popular syncopated music. Yet assumptions with regards to questions of gender and musical genre have complicated her inclusion into existing historical narratives. I draw on two surviving histories of Guilaroff in which she articulates her own narrative of music-making as an upper-class white woman in the early decades of the twentieth century, and I offer a close analysis of five different takes of Guilaroff's "Maple Leaf Rag" to map the specific ways in which identity factored into the kinds of sounds that she made when she improvised.

Lastly, Chapter 5 explores the impact of motherwork, othermothering, and other gendered care-giving on early-twentieth-century jazz participation. I focus on important figures in Montreal's jazz scene such as instrumentalists Ilene Bourne and the Spencer Sisters, piano teacher Daisy Peterson Sweeney, as well as dance teachers Olga Spencer and Ethel Bruneau to analyze how gender, race, sexuality and class intersected with motherwork and other gendered care-giving in the shaping of these women's careers and legacies. In this chapter, I argue for a move towards care ethics in jazz historiography, where jazz artistry and care-giving are not mutually exclusive categories to be superimposed on a public vs private dichotomy, and where

the activity of teaching is shown to occur at the nexus between jazz participation, motherwork, and othermothering in early-twentieth-century urban black communities. In this, I attempt to answer Sherrie Tucker's call for narratives that eschew the two most common representational tropes associated with women-in-jazz, namely that of the overwhelmed victim of gendered environmental and educational obstacles, and that of the "exceptional woman," a discourse often structured on a "one-of-the-boys" rationale that insists on gendered deviance at the same time as it justifies the lack of attention that other women-in-jazz have received.<sup>62</sup> Without casting aside the power dynamics at play in maintaining women, mothers and teachers at the margins of jazz historical narratives, a focus on care ethics in jazz uncovers extended matricentric networks of women who sustained gendered practices of jazz apprenticeship and participation in the early decades of the twentieth-century.

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<sup>62</sup> Tucker, "Big Ears."

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Gorgeous Girlies in Glittering Gyration! Jazz and Exotic Dance on the Black Variety Stage*

Meilan Lam (interviewer)—Did you ever have a musical-dance conversation with a drummer?  
A challenge?

Tina Baines (shake dancer)—Well of course! When you start shaking your hips, he does, you know, you tell him ‘Do exactly like that!’ And it goes! Just fun! You know about that, eh? Oh, that’s the best part of the drumming. When you just let your bum do the work, hah! In those days I was tiny, but I had a whole lotta bum! And my bum did all the work, which was great!<sup>1</sup>

Jazz histories haven’t had much to say about whose bum it was that did the drumming. As late as 2008, Brian Harker argued that the relationship between sounding jazz bodies and moving jazz bodies is a topic more neglected than most in jazz scholarship.<sup>2</sup> While Gunther Schuller conceded that “by and large, the most successful pieces in terms of jazz came out of the category of music written for dancing,” the first jazz histories drew on an emergent critical discourse on jazz, gender, and race associated with bebop in the United States that sought to sever its previous connections to the entertainment world from which it emerged.<sup>3</sup> If jazz was to be legitimized as an object of academic study and reclaimed as an art form, it had to be cleansed of the presence of bodies—and most undoubtedly of the work of bums.

Thanks to the work of Brian Harker, Sherrie Tucker, Kristin McGee, John Wriggle, John Howland, Lisa Barg, Howard Springs, Christopher J. Wells, Jacqui Malone and others, jazz narratives are increasingly sensitive to the status of pre-1940s jazz as music that accompanied

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<sup>1</sup> Tina Baines (Brereton), *Interview with Tina [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0001 [7108], December 2, 1993, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Tina Baines also come from this source.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Harker, “Louis Armstrong, Eccentric Dance, and the Evolution of Jazz on the Eve of Swing,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 61, No. 1 (Spring 2008), 67.

<sup>3</sup> Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 345.

dancing. Within jazz studies, much of the scholarly attention on jazz dance has been centered on forms that sustain heteronormative coupling rituals, in particular studies of social dance and of the modern dancefloor, a topic I explore in Chapter 3.<sup>4</sup> By comparison, extended analyses of the aesthetic relationship between jazz and theatrical dance continue to be few.<sup>5</sup> Through the first half of the twentieth century, jazz did not only accompany dancers on the dancefloor, but also those who performed on the variety stage. Nightclubs and cabarets across North America featured both social and theatrical dance in an evening of entertainment: social dance took place during the intermissions between the two to three nightly shows, which consisted in sixty to seventy-five-minute-long, loosely-tied together strings of acts that included comedy skits, magicians, jugglers, animal trainers, novelty acts (including instrumental soloists and band

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<sup>4</sup> See in particular Robert P. Crease, "Divine Frivolity: Hollywood Representations of the Lindy Hop, 1937-1942," in *Representing Jazz*, ed Krin Gabbard, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 207-28; Jacqui Malone, "Jazz Music in Motion: Dancers and Big Bands," Chapter 18 in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, edited by Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), "Keep to the Rhythm and You'll Keep to Life: Meaning and Style in African American Vernacular Dance," in *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, edited by Alexandra Carter, 230-36 (London: Routledge, 1998), and *Steppin' on The Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996); Danielle Robinson, *Modern Moves: Dancing Race During the Ragtime and Jazz Eras* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015) and "'Oh You Black Bottom!' Appropriation, Authenticity, and Opportunity in the Jazz Dance Teachings of 1920s New York," *Dance Research Journal* 38, no. ½ (Summer-Winter 2006): 19-42; Peggy Roquigny, "Les Plaisirs de la Dance à Montréal: Transformation d'un Divertissement et de ses Pratiques, 1870-1940), PhD thesis (Université du Québec à Montréal, 2012); Howard Spring, "Swing and the Lindy Hop: Dance, Venue, Media, and Tradition," *American Music* 15, No. 2 (Summer 1997): 183-207; Sherrie Tucker, *Dance Floor Democracy: The Social Geography of Memory at the Hollywood Canteen* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); and Christopher J. Wells, "'Bop Fiends: Bebop Dance, Afro-Modernity, and Black Youth at Mid-Century," conference paper presented at "Beyond Genre: Jazz as Popular Music," Case Western Reserve University (Cleveland, OH, April 21, 2018), "Dancing 'Off-Time: Hypermetric Play among Bebop Social Dancers," conference paper presented at the Society for Ethnomusicology meeting (Washington DC, November 10, 2016), and "Go Harlem! Chick Webb and his Dancing Audience during the Great Depression," PhD thesis (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Notable exceptions to this include Lisa Barg's discussion of exotic dance and jungle sounds in her chapter "Between Theater and History: Duke Ellington's *Black and Tan Fantasy*," in "National Voices/Modernist Histories: Race, Performance and Remembrance in American Music, 1927-1943," PhD thesis (State University of New York at Stony Brook, 2001), 118-165; Harker, "Louis Armstrong;" John Howland's study of the "vaudeville aesthetic" in symphonic jazz as it relates to Harlem entertainment in "The Blues Get Glorified": Harlem Entertainment, Negro Nuances, and Black Symphonic Jazz," *The Musical Quarterly* 90, no. 3 and 4 (Fall-Winter, 2007): 319-370; William Howland Kenney's "The Influence of Black Vaudeville on Early Jazz," *The Black Perspective in Music* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1986): 233-248; and Patricia Willard, "The Unsung Element of Ellingtonia," *The Antioch Review* 57, no 3 "Jazz" (Summer 1999): 402-414.

numbers), singers and dancers. Like the social dance with which it often shared the bill, conventions of the black variety stage figured prominently in the development of early jazz.

On the black variety stage, dancing was, as jazz dance scholars Marshall and Jean Stearns argued in 1968 in their pioneering book *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*, “the mainstay of the show.”<sup>6</sup> Despite their importance to the entertainment business, the performative frameworks of theatrical dance have tended to be analyzed apart from the development of early jazz sound and history. In Harker’s words, “historians have tended to regard dance as a dependent accessory to jazz, a mere visual reflection of the hot sounds first laid down by talented players.”<sup>7</sup> His work on the influence of eccentric dancers on Louis Armstrong’s soloing offered strong evidence of the mutual influence between jazz and theatrical dance, one that went far beyond the original assumption that entertainers based their routines on a fixed and independent soundtrack provided by the band. By exposing common tap figures in selected records after Armstrong collaborated with tap and eccentric acts in the summers of 1926 and 1927, Harker demonstrated the fundamental influence that theatrical dance had had on one of the jazz greats.

Yet eccentric acts were only one among several types of theatrical dances that travelled on the black variety stage circuit and which jazz musicians accompanied, including more conventional tap acts, theatrical lindy-hoppers, adagio or ballroom teams, and “exotic” numbers.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Marshall Stearns and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Macmillan, 1968. Reprint, New York: Da Capo, 1994), 80. See also Roger Pryor Dodge, “The Dance-Basis of Jazz,” in *Hot Jazz and Jazz Dance: Roger Pryor Dodge Collected Writings, 1929-1964* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 144.

<sup>7</sup> Harker, “Louis Armstrong,” 98.

<sup>8</sup> Brenda Dixon-Gottschild and Kathy Ogren paint an evocative map of the extensive circuits which black vaudevillians travelled between the late 1920s through the 1940s, with nodal points in urban centers all across the black Atlantic. They also highlight the longstanding relationships that bands like those of Count Basie, Earl Hines, Duke Ellington, and Cab Calloway entertained with theatrical dancers. See Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002) and Kathy



Perhaps a tempting willingness to associate black vaudeville with eccentricities, gimmicks and novelties has hampered consideration of the teasing that women did with jazz bands in variety halls, burlesque houses, black and white vaudeville theaters, nightclubs and cabarets across the North America and Western Europe.<sup>9</sup> In any case, studies of the aesthetic relationship between theatrical dance and music have so far been centered primarily on male or masculine theatrical forms.<sup>10</sup> Yet if a regular black variety stage attendee could say in 1926 that in “six out of the last ten shows . . . I have seen comely women do on the stage everything it is possible for one person to do in bed,” the field would certainly benefit from a detailed analysis of the influence of exotic dance on the development of jazz sound.<sup>11</sup>

This chapter draws on oral histories of Montreal-based exotic dancers and show musicians to document the aesthetic relationship between jazz sound and exotic dance on the black variety stage. First, I reposition Montreal as an important nodal point on the black variety stage circuit. In doing so, I extend Jayna Brown and Brenda Dixon-Gottschild’s appraisal of the transnational reach of black women performers in shaping modern ideas about music and about the body outside of the United States and Western Europe. Second, I follow John Howland’s cue in his study of Ellington’s symphonic jazz and Harlem entertainment that other sources than recordings and mass-mediated advertisements and reportage must be found in order to

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J. Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution: Twenties America and the Meaning of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> Harker himself doesn’t grant the same level of creative artistry to the “seminude high-yaller gals” of the chorus line than to the “acrobatic,” “difficult,” and “fast and furious” routines of the tuxedo-wearing Herbert Brown and the sportswoman-looking Naomi McGraw. Harker, “Louis Armstrong,” 78.

<sup>10</sup> A notable exception here is Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Dixon-Gottschild, *Waltzing in the Dark*, 79. Thomas Riis has similarly argued that “if one is to judge by the frequent condemnation in the press . . . such goings-on permeated the vaudeville scene . . . Active shows with nothing to be ashamed of made a point of their purity.” Thomas L. Riis, “Pink Morton’s Theatre, Black Vaudeville, and the TOBA: Recovering the history, 1910-30,” in *New Perspectives on Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern* (Warren, Mich: Harmonie Park Press, 1992), 242.

understand the creative processes that led to live performances of jazz on the black variety stage. “While Ellington recorded commercial versions of many individual numbers from Cotton Club revues,” he writes, “the great majority of these performances have no pretense of replicating the exact arrangements from their respective live show.” Moreover, “extant manuscripts contain only minimal details of the actual arrangements.”<sup>12</sup> While the tap and trumpet figures of the Armstrong-Herbert-McGraw collaboration share the same analytical toolbox (rhythm and meter), the sensory gap between Baines’ bum work and jazz drumming cannot be bridged by an exclusive reliance on audio recordings. In this sense, oral histories can provide an important alternative record. Against primary sources like musical objects and contemporary mass media that by definition lead to the erasure of the dancers’ bodies and movements and to the masking of their creative agency behind issues of representation, industry ownership, and strategies of mass-marketing, oral histories can uniquely document the creative processes that led to live performance. “Every step they made,” said Armstrong of the Herbert-McGraw eccentric act, “I put the notes to it.”<sup>13</sup> What notes were one to put to Tina Baines’ bum?

### *Jazz on the Black Variety Stage: Situating Montreal*

As urban markets were growing after the First World War, the 1920s was a decade of increasing professionalization of live entertainment. By 1921, the T.O.B.A circuit (short for Theater Owner’s Booking Association, also nicknamed “Tough On Black Artists/Asses”) consisted of a network of three hundred theaters all around the United States that presented black acts accompanied by jazz bands, with many more independent ones—including those in

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<sup>12</sup> Howland, “The Blues get Glorified,” 344-345.

<sup>13</sup> Harker, “Louis Armstrong,” 98.

Montreal— that benefitted from the greater institutionalization of entertainment.<sup>14</sup> Between the late 1920s and well into the 1950s, clubs like Rockhead’s Paradise in downtown Montreal featured acts from New York, Detroit, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland and Washington that were booked for week-long engagements. “There was a lot of that vaudeville-type entertainment among black entertainers,” remembers Kenny Rockhead, the son of Rockhead’s Paradise owner Rufus: “They, as black entertainers in the States, probably would welcome another place to work . . . Just another place to get a payday.”<sup>15</sup> Saxophone player Herb Johnson, who grew up across from Florence Mills in Harlem, compares Montreal’s Café St-Michel to the Cotton Club: “White people would go to see a big show downtown like the Ziegfeld Follies or something like that, but they felt that the night wasn’t complete until they had gone to see a colored show and heard colored musicians perform . . . The same thing would happen in Montreal.”<sup>16</sup> For Montreal-based exotic dancer Bernice Jordan:

The Terminal Club carried on the Cotton Club tradition more than Rockhead’s. The Terminal Club had the beautiful American colored girls come in to work there, from the Standard to the Terminal. It was the Terminal Club, they had the glamour girls. Oh yeah. Rockhead got the *gamma* girls.<sup>17</sup>

“Gamma girls” such as Lena Horne and Billie Holiday came to Rockhead’s Paradise early in their careers. And when they came, they performed with the nightclub’s houseband, a group of

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<sup>14</sup> For excellent discussions of jazz on TOBA, see Tammy L. Kernodle, *Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004); Riis, “Pink Morton’s Theatre;” Ogren, *Jazz Revolution*; and Stearns and Stearns, *Jazz Dance*.

<sup>15</sup> Kenny Rockhead, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0058, May 4, 1983, audio CD. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Kenny Rockhead also come from this source.

<sup>16</sup> Herb Johnson, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0026, February 8, 1981, audio CD. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Herb Johnson also come from this source.

<sup>17</sup> Bernice Jordan (Whims), *Interview with Bernice [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0002 [7109], 1993-1994, VHS. The italics are used here to reflect Jordan’s humorous tone. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Bernice Jordan also come from this source.

local musicians whose specific purpose was to accompany the travelling acts. The Canadian Ambassadors of Rhythm, Canada's first known all-black jazz ensemble, held a number of such long-term engagements through the 1930s, notably at (Montreal's own) Connie's Inn in 1933, at the Terminal Club for almost two years between 1935 and 1937, and at the Montmartre in the late 1930s.<sup>18</sup> Trumpet player Allan Wellman was the bandleader at Rockhead's Paradise in the late 1940s while trumpet player Louis Metcalf, who had been a member of the Duke Ellington orchestra in the late 1920s, led a four year residency at the Café St-Michel with his International Band starting in 1946.<sup>19</sup> When Billie Holiday came at the Standard, pianist Harold "Steep" Wade accompanied her. Herb Johnson also remembers playing behind Josephine Baker, and Montreal-based drummer Wilkie Wilkinson accompanied Hazel Scott when she came in town.<sup>20</sup> In short, Montreal was well connected to the rest of the North American black variety stage circuit, a large network of urban centers where groups of local and travelling musicians and entertainers made their living.

For the majority of entertainers, Montreal was only one stop amongst many, but a number were also to settle there. Bernice Jordan recalls helping numerous American girls who had come to Montreal with "just enough money:"

Sometimes [an] American chorus girl came, learned the routine just like that. Some American girls don't want to go back to the States. She feels as though she's gonna maybe get some work around Montreal. Come in the chorus to learn for a while, and then she'd pull off and go live in Quebec, or somewhere. Oh, they did that often. We used to have many American girls jump right in our chorus line. The boss would hire her to make an extra girl on the line. Extra girl

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<sup>18</sup> John Gilmore, *Who's Who of Jazz in Montreal: Ragtime to 1970* (Montréal, Véhicule Press, 1989), 49-52.

<sup>19</sup> May Oliver, interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0049, February 17, 1982, audio CD. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from May Oliver also come from this source.

<sup>20</sup> Mark "Wilkie" Wilkinson, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0076, February 18-19, 1982-September 7, 1982, audio CD; and Wilkie Wilkinson, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0075, January 26, 1982, audio CD. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Wilkie Wilkinson also come from this source.

always makes it look like you have somebody new, you know? As if we're all new but, we're all the same girls, but when there's a new face in there, they think, oh, it's a new bunch of girls out there now! Oh yeah! Yes. It was real business in those days. To help one another. 'Cause a lot of them never wanted to go back.

“A lot of people, they just liked Montreal and stayed,” explains drummer Dennis Brown: “There was, okay, the social situation, they weren’t beat over the head for their skin color as much, there is some, or was, but not to the extent of the States, it was much freer, just like many people went to France and were treated like human beings. And they stayed!”<sup>21</sup> Other accounts of race relations in histories of Montreal jazz have also emphasized how “wide-open” the city was in comparison to the United States in the age of Jim Crow. “It was like coming into your mother's arms!” said saxophone player Randolph Whinfeld: “The white musicians wouldn't let anyone call us those names. And the women loved us, they spoiled us!”<sup>22</sup> But black historian Dorothy Williams draws a much less enthusiastic portrait of race relations in Montreal during the first half of the twentieth century. “There were no laws restricting blacks from attending schools,” she writes, “but prejudice discouraged them from continuing their education. The teachers, ‘in the best interests of the students,’ made it clear that an academic education was a waste of time for students who would inevitably become porters or domestics.”<sup>23</sup> Williams also points to an endless stream of petitions and discrimination bills that were presented to the Federal Parliament, as well as to other bureaucratic obstacles put in place in order to prevent people of color from bringing their families to Canada. “For the whole of 1911,” she writes, “black immigration was halted for an entire year on the basis of climate unsuitability!”<sup>24</sup> Apparently, black bodies were

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<sup>21</sup> Dennis Brown, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0010, April 15, 1983, audio CD. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Dennis Brown also come from this source.

<sup>22</sup> Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise*, 29.

<sup>23</sup> Dorothy Williams, *The Road to Now: A History of Blacks in Montreal* (Montréal: Véhicule Press), 61.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 42-43.

not fit to handle Canada's winter weather. Clearly, Canada in general and Quebec and Montreal in particular struggled with questions of ethnicity and race in their very own terms.

Tap dancer and singer Ethel Bruneau (born Mae Waterman), a.k.a "Miss Swing," was one of those travelling entertainers who eventually settled in Montreal. Born in the mid-1930s in Kingston, Jamaica and brought to Harlem when she was still a baby, Bruneau always thought (still thinks!) of herself as a Harlemitte.<sup>25</sup> She started studying tap, ballet, and acrobatics at the Mary Bruce Dance Academy in Harlem when she was three or four years old.<sup>26</sup> As a young teen, she performed with her cousin Cornelius "Poppy" Scott as a tap team called the Melody Twins in Atlantic City and in USO-bases, and she appeared on the Paul Whiteman and the Ed Sullivan shows. Bruneau also worked in a number of clubs in New York, including the Audubon and the Savoy ballrooms, where she learned from seasoned entertainers:

I used to sit through all the shows! Bill Bailey! I used to bring a notebook and I used to copy the steps down. Over-the-tops and pull-backs, and wings, and that's how I learned, learned from watching the shows, not being shy, asking the guys backstage to show me the steps again. . . I knew Chinky Grimes ever since I was about ten years old. Because Chinky I knew from New York City, because when we were nine we were professional dancers, and in Harlem, the odd fellows, they used to give big dances at the Audubon ballroom, and the Savoy ballroom, and every time they would have a big dance at the Savoy ballroom, Chinky Grimes would be the shake dancer on the bill. So they would book Chinky Grimes, they would book us, and they would book a singer. And that's how I knew Chinky. 'Cause I was a little kid, 'cause we weren't allowed in the ballroom, 'cause there was liquor being served, so they used, we used to hide under the tables, they used to bring us, and, and let us be, you know . . . So they would have the floor show and they had a big band stand, and they would have . . . the Duke Ellington band playin' and Chinky Grimes would come out and do her shake dance, and I used to love to see her dance. Chinky would come out there, she used to come out and she used to wear these, I'll always remember, she had these high, high heels that went around your ankle. And she had beautiful legs, and she used to wear these white fringe, dear God, she'd go into this shake dance and those people would go crazy. And we used to get under the tables so we could watch her, you know? And they'd let us. Men used to throw money at her on the floor. And they used to throw money at us on the floor. Sometimes we would do a tap dance number, and we'd make twenty-five, forty, fifty dollars, [it] was a lot of money for kids in those days. And they would throw one-hundred-dollar bills at her on the stage, so Chinky was just fabulous.

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<sup>25</sup> Ethel Bruneau, *Interview with Mrs. Swing [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0005 [7112], 1993-1994, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Ethel Bruneau also come from this source.

<sup>26</sup> Lys Stevens, "Ethel Bruneau: Montreal's Rhythm Tap Legend," *Dance Collection Danse* 71 (Fall 2011): 28-33.

Bruneau came to Montreal in her late teens, with Cab Calloway's orchestra and as the end-of-the-line chorus girl in 1953. The engagement was supposed to last four weeks but quickly turned into shows "365 days a year" for Bruneau. "Some people have been long in the chorus," she reports booker Roy Carter telling her upon seeing her for the first time, "but you don't belong in the chorus, you stand out." Bruneau opened her tap dance school in 1964 and as of 2018 was still teaching in Montreal's most famous tap dance school.

Choreographer Chuck Hughes was another American who spent most of his adult professional life in Montreal nightclubs. Born on March 30<sup>th</sup> 1911 in Cincinnati, Ohio, Hughes toured as a child as the Chick and Chuck tap act of the *Shuffle Along* revue with dancer Marianne "Chickie" Harris. "She was a very beautiful girl," remembers Hughes: "She didn't have to put on make-up. She looked natural. The light caught her just right on stage."<sup>27</sup> Based in Detroit, the act was booked in the early 1930s with Gypsy Rose Lee in Chicago and eventually at Lowe's Theatre in Montreal for one week, followed by a similar engagement in Ottawa. Upon returning to Detroit, "I lost Chickie," explains Hughes, "she stopped dancing with me. Nobody in Detroit wanted me without Chickie, so Roy Cooper said he would keep me busy in Montreal." Hughes established himself in Montreal in 1935 and worked as a choreographer, booker, as well as a "bodyguard" to some of the younger trainees: "A lot of the mothers said 'I hold you responsible.'" Hughes worked first at the Chinese Paradise for about six months, then "for years" at the Terminal Club, the Café St-Michel, as well as at Rockhead's Paradise.

Mary Brown also settled in Montreal after a training and early career in Harlem. Born in Baltimore, Maryland, on October 28, 1927, Brown moved to West Harlem and lived in the Sugar

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<sup>27</sup> Chuck Hughes, *Interview with Chuck Hughes [audio]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-11-004, November 20 1993, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Chuck Hughes also come from this source.

Hill neighborhood, where she learned ballet, modern jazz, modern interpretive and “all of the different ethnic dances,” including from Katherine Dunham herself.<sup>28</sup> She too snuck into the Savoy before being of age, where she saw among others Coleman Hawkins. Brown quickly became involved in showbusiness, doing nightclub as well as modelling work. She came to Montreal just after the Second World War after being offered a choice between two jobs:

Cairo, and Montreal. I say if I go to Montreal, I can always come home. So, I came to Montreal. I chose Montreal. I came here with what we call a winter coat in New York, a velvet coat. *Nice* [sarcastically]. And I stepped down in the snow, I thought I was in Alaska [she laughs]. *Wow* [sarcastically] . . . So I came on a Saturday, and [Paul Smith] took me straight to get a pair of boots. The ugliest boots I ever seen . . . Snuggies, they were called. But they kept me warm.

Brown eventually stayed in Montreal, marrying drummer Dennis Brown and singing and dancing in Quebec nightclubs and theatres for the rest of her professional life.

Montreal-born black women performers also travelled to the United States in order to learn and to work. Born in Montreal in 1908 or 1909, Olga Spencer (married name Foderingham) went to New York to learn to dance in the late 1920s and she worked in a nightclub there before she came back to Canada.<sup>29</sup> She started to work in small nightclubs in the mid-1930s, and by 1937 she was hired in an all-American line at the Montmartre:

At the Montmartre, they imported the shows from the States. We had a line-up of ten or twelve girls. I became one of the line members, because one of girls couldn't make the show, and ah, I became the first Canadian girl in a line with the Americans . . . I had worked also in the States in a line, so I knew the type of work that they were dancing.

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<sup>28</sup> Mary Brown, *Interview with Mary [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0004 [7111], 1993-1994, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Mary Brown also come from this source.

<sup>29</sup> Olga Spencer (Foderingham), *Interview with Olga [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0006 [7115], 1993-1994, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Olga Spencer Foderingham also come from this source.



Crucially, all of these women taught and learned from each other when they met in Montreal and on other stages on the black variety stage circuit. As choreographer Chuck Hughes explains:

Mary Bruce's girls from New York City, she had a big dancing school in New York, she booked four of those girls [in Montreal]. . . when they came, they all liked me, one was named Rose Bud, she says, 'I'll go down and help you Chuck!' They would come down and would help the Canadian girls to learn to shake this way. Those girls picked it up really quickly.

Travelling black women performers such as Chinky Grimes, Flash Gordon, and Sonya Millburn came regularly to perform in Montreal. "At the end of her routine," remembers Bernice Jordan,

Flash Gordon had things that twirled on her bottom. It's a terrific number. . . The flash lights were on a belt, hanging down. All around. And then she goes all around, and they're all on. Just the weird way that the music is when they come on, right? . . . Sonya Millburn was the fire act. . . she would work with her stomach. She dances all around doing all kinds of weird shakes and bumps and grinds and beautiful number she does, Sonia Millburn, she was beautiful.<sup>30</sup>

Jordan, who was born in Montreal on March 25, 1918, spent most of her performing career on Montreal variety stages. While she also toured in Ontario and rural Quebec, among others with the Canadian Ambassadors of Rhythm in the mid-1930s, Jordan had to reinvent her solo acts and the routines of the chorus girls on a regular basis in order to adapt to the nightclub's weekly schedule. She insists on the importance of travelling acts in the diversification of her performance offer, and on how fluid the exchanges in performance knowledge were between entertainers. When Pearl Bailey came to Montreal,

She taught us a lot of routines . . . Her brother Bill Bailey taught us a lot of tap dancing. And Pearl taught me to sing all those risqué songs, oh boy . . . She was good at that. She used to

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<sup>30</sup> As Jayna Brown and others have argued, Josephine Baker might have been an immensely captivating entertainer, yet she was all but unique. Flash Gordon's routine recalls, among others, the famous banana dance that Josephine Baker featured on 1926-7 Folies Bergères, with that gilded girdle of bananas rattling and flying "as if they had lives of their own" to use Ramsay Burt's evocative wording. Baker's "danse sauvage" from the 1925 Revue Nègre also combined various moves such as the shake, shimmy, and mess-around, all of which local and other travelling groups of black women performers would have been seen and taught each other to do. See Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: The Hungry Heart* (New York: Random House, 1993), 41; Brown, *Babylon Girls*; and Ramsay Burt, "'Savage' Dancer: Tout Paris Goes to See Josephine Baker," in *Alien Bodies: Representations of Modernity, 'Race' and Nation in Early Modern Dance* (London: Routledge, 1998), 67.

work at Café Society . . . Ora Bailey the big sister, was a singer. They all worked together in the St-Michel.

Jordan also learned to sing “Goody Goody,” a 1936 Matty Malneck-Johnny Mercer popular song, from Bailey, and she learned to sing the blues from American male blues singer and songwriter Leroy Carr. She also learned “a thing or two” from Eddie Perkins, a US-born drummer who spent a few decades in Montreal before returning south, with whom Jordan most likely worked at the Terminal Club in the 1930s:<sup>31</sup>

He was good. And he taught me a lot, because, he was an elderly man and he used to try to get on the floor to show me how the American girls move and shake [She mimics his low voice:] ‘Now you go do it like this Bernice,’ and I said ‘How?’ and he’d walk just as if he was a [she interrupts herself], and he was a little short man like me. And he was elderly, but he could show you so well, and you know, you would copy him and boy, you really got the knack of it. He’s the one who taught me to do my first burlesque walk!

In other words, it is impossible to distinguish a Montreal- and an American-brand of entertainers: They travelled on the same transnational black variety stage circuit. Moreover, black women performers worked and exchanged knowledges with other travelling acts as well as with local groups of black women performers who filled-in as solo acts and as chorus girls. When arriving in a new city, travelling entertainers were hosted by local bands of jazz musicians whose primary function was to accompany the acts. In this sense, entertainers played a crucial role in the transnational reach of jazz knowledges in an era where radio and records were unevenly accessible in the United States and beyond. Particularly during the Depression years, “hot” bands appeared much less often on the radio than sweet bands such as Paul Whitman’s Orchestra. Moreover, the availability of jazz recordings and fully-scored arrangements was scarce in a place like Montreal.<sup>32</sup> As Herb Johnson explains,

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<sup>31</sup> Gilmore, *Who’s Who*, 215.

<sup>32</sup> See Michel Fillion, *Radiodiffusion et société distincte: Des origines de la radio jusqu’à la Révolution tranquille au Québec* (Montréal: Méridien, 1994); Marie-Thérèse Lefebvre, “Analyse de la programmation radiophonique sur les ondes québécoises entre 1922 et 1939: Musique, théâtre, causeries,” *Les Cahiers des dix*, no. 65 (2011): 179-225

There was a certain amount of recordings, was a great deal of recordings being done in the United States, but . . . that didn't mean that jazz records came to your hometown and you had access to them. So you had very little opportunity of developing, as I said, your personal like for one person, one character in [a] band or one instrument.

When Louis Metcalf rehearsed with the International band at the Café St-Michel in the late 1940s, he used to teach the newest tunes by “hum[ming] the lead line, and sometimes he would play the lead line on his trumpet,” explains saxophone player Herb Johnson:

and we would of course have a piece of manuscript paper and a pencil and then jot down the notes that we thought important for us to play . . . we wrote down littl' figures here and there, and then we harmonized the thing, or, unison passages. . . That type of recording just wasn't coming to Montreal so that you could buy a copy and put it on a machine and learn it properly. [...Until then] I [had] paid no attention to [Charlie Parker]. I had read their names, but I attached no importance to the music that they were playing.

As I exposed above, scores and recordings are only of limited use in reconstructing the kinds of sounds produced on the black variety stage, and even radio broadcasts, including for instance the broadcast of Ellington's Cotton Club band, still miss, quite literally, the dance. In other words, musicians in Montreal would have been significantly more out-of-sync with contemporaneous US-based repertoires and performance practices had entertainers not travelled beyond the borders of individual cities and nations with such knowledges. While saxophone player Myron Sutton exceptionally “had all of Louis Armstrong” and based his playing “on that of Johnny Hodges,” the majority of Montreal-based musicians learned the music which travelling entertainers required them to play for their specific numbers.<sup>33</sup>

In this sense, Montreal was not just one nodal point amongst others on the black variety stage circuit: several features also exacerbated certain traits of black transnational performance in

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and “Porosité des pratiques. Étanchéité du discours: Réflexions sur l'analyse de la diffusion musicale radiophonique au Québec entre 1922 et 1939,” *Globe* 151-2 (2012): 65-81.

<sup>33</sup> Myron Sutton, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0064, December 15, 1981, audio CD. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Myron (Mynie) Sutton also come from this source.

comparison to the contemporary New York, Kansas City, and Chicago scenes. Above all, Montreal was a showtown. Drummer Dennis Brown is categorical when he is asked to compare the musicians in Montreal and those in Boston or New York: “Invariably, [the acts]’d get their music played better, in general, in Montreal . . . because that was how everybody made a living! You essentially in this town were a show drummer! Or a show musician.” When pressed by interviewer John Gilmore to acknowledge that perhaps musicians in Boston or New York were doing the very same thing, Brown answers:

No, no, not necessarily. I mean here, it was a showtown . . . All the musicians, some way along the line . . . the ones I knew, you played shows! . . . And as I said, most of the shows were so jazz and Afro-oriented, because even when I played places like Café du Nord, sure enough some of these dancers would come out that had been in Rockhead’s and show up there. So, like, you still got a taste of it, along with playing with . . . Michel Louvain, Fernand Gignac, or whoever! But there would very often be . . . often a singer or a dancer, who was out of the States, who was black, so . . . even in those clubs, you were still swinging.

Herb Johnson concurs: “In those days no matter where you worked in Montreal, you were playin’ shows.” And according to May Oliver, “audiences in Montreal were quite discriminating. Not cruel in any way, but if you could do well in Montreal, you *knew* you were gonna be a smash in New York.”<sup>34</sup>

It is important to note that the music that was played in Montreal’s nightclubs was only rarely advertised using the “jazz” label until the late 1940s. Rather, bands such as Myron Sutton’s and Allan Wellman’s are as described as danceable, syncopated, swing, rhythmic, red hot, colored, or peppy.<sup>35</sup> When interviewed, show musicians seem to become

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<sup>34</sup> May Oliver, quoted in John Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise: The Story of Jazz in Montréal* (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1988), 169. Also discussed in Hughes, interviewed by Meilan Lam.

<sup>35</sup> Myron Sutton Fonds, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, P-019, digitized scrapbook; Meilan Lam Fonds, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, boxes HA1763, HA1767, HA1768, HA3127, HA 3128. Contains pictures, ads, newspaper articles in relation to the production of *Show Girls: Celebrating Montreal's Legendary Black Jazz Scene*, Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1998, VHS.

uncomfortable when asked about the kind of music that they played behind the shows. In other words, the long history of jazz' contested status on the black variety stage becomes suddenly audible as it lurks behind musicians' hesitations, refusals to answer, and attempts to deflect or re-direct the interviewer's questions. When asked by John Gilmore what the Montreal jazz scene was like before Sutton started playing in the early 1930s, Sutton answers:

There wasn't that much jazz . . . I don't think there was that much jazz at all until actually we got in there and we . . . started playing the type of music that we were capable of playin' eh? You know at the Terminal Club they had maybe Smitty [Elmer Smith] and a drummer and saxophone . . . but it wasn't that type of jazz as we . . . worked it up to be eh?

In this part of the interview, Sutton attempts to deflect the interviewer's expectations at the same time as he obviously wants to write himself into the narrative that Gilmore is invested into—that is, the story of *jazz* in Montreal. Later on, Sutton ponders:

Actually, I don't know if they termed us as a jazz band or not but in all the material you read it's a jazz band, eh? So ah, I guess that's what we did! We never made ourselves known as a jazz band, but they just took it for granted that we were a jazz band! So, we were a jazz band [he laughs]!

The complexity of the relationship between jazz critics and music-makers comes to the surface here. In the oral history of none other than the bandleader of the first known all-Canadian black jazz band, the jazz label is contested and adopted retrospectively, as an answer to “all the material you read.” Saxophone player Herb Johnson, a member of the first so-called bebop band in Montreal, Louis Metcalf's International band, similarly avoids answering the same question, making references to “everything that had ‘stomp’ in it,” and the “happy music” that his father used to play when he was young and growing up in Harlem. Johnson later describes his first band as a “strictly commercial band . . . but being a colored band, we got our share of jazz licks in there.” Other

musicians who also played shows in this time period articulate narrower definitions of jazz: violinist Harry Enlow speaks of starting to play jazz “for the first time” in the 1970s, while he regularly performed in nightclubs in the 1930s and 40s.<sup>36</sup> Drummer Wilkie Wilkinson similarly allows for his tenure with the International band in the late 1940s to be called “jazz,” but he asserts that all of the other gigs he took until he could “work his way down to that corner” were “commercial gigs.” Wilkinson despised the black variety stage setting: Upon returning from New York in the mid-to-late 1940s where he had attended jam sessions and learned bebop drumming, he describes the shows he played in Montreal as “like pulling up sidewalks with your hands. Bare hands. I used to detest them.” To the contrary, musicians who enjoyed playing the shows such as Myron Sutton, Herb Johnson, Dennis Brown and Allan Wellman—notably, musicians whose primary income was made on the black variety stage—articulate delineations of jazz that are more inclusive: “To me I think you had more jazz in Montreal than you had in New York!” Wellman goes as far as claiming.<sup>37</sup>

For Montreal-based audiences and musicians, jazz and variety went “hand in hand. You cannot take one of those elements out. They all add. They add to the basic concept of jazz in that period of time,” explains Ralph Whims, Bernice Jordan’s son.<sup>38</sup> Against traditional jazz historiography where bebop musicians “succeeded” between the mid-to-late 1940s in effectively severing the sounds of jazz from the entertainment

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<sup>36</sup> Harry Enlow, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0014, May 3, 1983, audio CD.

<sup>37</sup> Allan Wellman, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0074, April 20, 1982, audio CD.

<sup>38</sup> Ralph Whims, *Interview with Ralph [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0003 [7110], 1993-1994, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Ralph Whims also come from this source.

business, bebop from was played in one club in Montreal, by one band, for four years, and it was played “slower,” so that it could be “danced to.”<sup>39</sup> And according to drummer Wilkie Wilkinson, “after the Café St-Michel was finished as a jazz spot [i.e. when Louis Metcalf left in 1949], you had to get back in the commercial field and keep your nose clean in order to make a living . . . a lot of the guys from Metcalf’s band . . . went back to commercial music.” Even by the mid-fifties at the New Orleans club, “It was one dancer, one band member, one dancer, one band member,” explains drummer Dennis Brown.

So it was shows, but in between we always had a band number . . . the dancers were mostly jazz, Afro-Cuban dancers, so we were still playing jazz, but within their requirements, and the next number, we could play whatever we wanted . . . We tended to play fast tempo numbers in between. Every other number, *bam*.

In other words, against a dominant narrative that would go from ‘hot’ to swing to bebop to cool, according to the oral histories of black women performers and show musicians “jazz” in Montreal never entirely disarticulated from theatrical dance during its so-called “golden age.”

From this perspective, the decline of black vaudeville seems to have been heralded quite too soon in the scholarly literature to date. Thomas Riis points to the advent of talkies in the late twenties and “the capitulation of vaudeville theaters to risqué burlesque” throughout the thirties as signaling the end of black variety entertainment.<sup>40</sup> Robert P. Crease suggests that the closure of the Cotton Club in 1940 should be read as a symptom that the all-black nightclub revue had become anachronistic.<sup>41</sup> Brenda Dixon-Gottschild proposes a decline that came only after the

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<sup>39</sup> Johnson, Interview with John Gilmore.

<sup>40</sup> Riis, “Pink Morton’s Theatre,” 243.

<sup>41</sup> Robert P. Crease, “Divine Frivolity: Hollywood Representations of the Lindy Hop, 1937-1942,” in *Representing Jazz*, edited by Krin Gabbard (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 103.

Second World War, “with the advent of the double feature, film-newsreel-carton format,” when “the white vaudeville outlet had dried up as a source of employment for black entertainers . . . Black artists had [had] their moment—or decade—of opportunity.”<sup>42</sup> But up to the mid-1950s the flow of black acts to a city like Montreal doesn’t show any sign of deceleration, nor of qualitative decline. Up until 1964 when she opened her tap dance school, Ethel Bruneau “got booked in just about every club. I worked 52 weeks a year . . . It was like little Las Vegas. This was the Las Vegas of North America.” Specialty dancers and exotic dancers in particular continued to come to Rockhead’s and other clubs in Montreal well into the fifties and early sixties. Tina Baines and Mary Brown performed almost without interruption until Expo ’67. As Joanna Mansbridge has observed in her study of Montreal burlesque, the thriving nightlife culture that animated Montreal through the first half of the century was not only supported by the Prohibition and by a seven-time mayor who was also a vaudeville comedian, but also thanks to Fiorello LaGuardia’s ban on burlesque in New York City from 1937 to 1956.<sup>43</sup> Is this Montreal-specific, or would a study of intermediary-sized cities and middle-of-the-range theatres across the black Atlantic pose similar ontological and periodical challenges to traditional jazz historiography?

The contested status of the music played on Montreal’s black variety stage between the late 1920s and the mid-1950s does not mean that one has to rule on whether or not it was jazz. On the contrary, the fact that the boundary-work is so contested between jazz and commercial music when framed by strictly aesthetic concerns should attune us to the ways in which jazz narratives highlight certain opinions about musical genre at the expense of

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<sup>42</sup> Dixon-Gottschild, *Waltzing in the Dark*, 27.

<sup>43</sup> Joanna Mansbridge, “In Search of a Different History: The Remains of Burlesque in Montreal,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 158 (Spring 2014), 7.



others. As David Brackett has argued, genre labels are very difficult to delineate as strictly sonic phenomena, yet they must mean something if so many people think they do.<sup>44</sup> The line between commercial music and jazz can be drawn a lot more neatly when one focuses less on aesthetic considerations than on questions of masculinity, class, and race.<sup>45</sup> Simply put, in the words of Dennis Brown:

You might be a jazzman at heart, but if you had to pay the rent . . . you know, you played shows . . . common sense dictates, you know, you're gonna starve as a pure jazz musician. Like Miles Davis has been a millionaire for a very long time [but] he's one of the very few. . . I mean essentially, you know, I had a family so, you know, in order to eat I was a show drummer.

Herb Johnson articulates a similar legitimizing ideology: "I was always interested in trying to make a dollar . . . Here, you're not going to make any money in jazz, but you will make money playing commercial music." Even his account of his bebop gig with Metcalf's band at the St-Michel is framed by class and race concerns rather than by aesthetic ones:

Man, when I stop to think of all the blood I left on that stand for that little bit of money, I says 'Man, don't ever ask me to do this again, 'cause I'm not doing it.' I says 'I'm not lazy. But I was not brought up by Uncle Tom, ah, or some white man with a whip over my head,' you know? . . . You don't see no bandana around my head, I'm not wearing no overalls and jumpers. There's got to be some intelligence somewhere. And dignity too.

A clearer structure emerges then between the "pure jazz" of primarily white male critics and musicians who saw jazz as an art requiring time and intellectual investments that shouldn't be subjected to economic and family concerns, and the "commercial music" of musicians who were concerned with paying the rent and providing for their families. Clearly, the issue of labelling between jazz and commercial music in the first half of the century, while not being disarticulated

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<sup>44</sup> David Brackett, "Questions of Genre in Popular Music," *Black Music Research Journal* 25, no. 1/2 (Spring 2005). See also Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Identity in Popular Music* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015).

<sup>45</sup> For a similar argument, see Scott Deveau, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography," *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 3 (1991): 525-560.

from aesthetics either as I explore at greater length below, rests on class, gender, and race-based notions that also interact with the notion of care. Scott Appelrouth has argued that the boundary-work in musical genre plays a fundamental role in the struggle to create and recreate the cultural distinctions that sustain social hierarchies.<sup>46</sup> Surely, the issue of labelling between jazz and commercial music in a city where jazz musicians were all show musicians problematizes the classist, racialized, and gendered assumptions through which jazz gains cultural legitimacy in dominant discourses. As most musicians made their living playing shows—and since these shows occurred three times a day, seven days a week, and fifty-two weeks a year—Montreal hosted few extended after-hours jam sessions. As Herb Johnson explains:

I didn't take part in [jam sessions] for the simple reason that I was workin' hard enough in the clubs and that was it, and somehow or other I learned then that you're not gonna make any money playin' ["pure"] jazz. But you will make money and perhaps work more frequently and hold on to your job longer if you're playing a variety show in somebody's nightclub.

Kenny Rockhead recalls that the Café St-Michel had jam sessions on Sunday afternoons, but they also had entertainment every single night for the rest of the week. In the late 1940s, “I think once we tried it” at Rockhead’s Paradise, explains bandleader and trumpet player Allan Wellman, “because you know St-Michel was doing so good at it . . . it was too hard on me. Because, [I] had to play for the jam sessions and then get ready for Sunday night to play them three shows, you know?” As late as 1949, newspaper *Le Soleil* boasted that Louis Metcalf “would make known what a veritable jam session was” to audiences of La Tour in Quebec City—the advertisement featured five entertainers on the bill, including pictures of two black women performers listed as “jam session dancers.”<sup>47</sup> Clearly, not

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<sup>46</sup> Scott Appelrouth, “Boundaries and Early Jazz: Defining a New Music,” *Cultural Sociology* 5, no. 2 (2011): 226.

<sup>47</sup> Louis Metcalf ad, *Le soleil*, May 14, 1949, 14.

only were jam sessions still new to Quebec City audiences in 1949, but a “veritable jam session” could be a public event that involved entertainers and theatrical dancers.

In short, Montreal jazz in the first half the twentieth century was not something that audiences went out just to listen to. There was the music that audiences danced to, and there were the shows that the audiences watched. Musicians make anecdotal references to band feature numbers, but these performances also functioned more or less as novelty acts, in other words, as one among a series of other acts that made up an evening of entertainment. Herb Johnson has fond memories of a saxophone player Gerry Tremblay:

He couldn't read a note which was as big as a spoon, but he could play his alto . . . his famous trick was to play “St. Louis Blues” dismantling each part of the clarinet. Start at the bell, then second joint, then first joint [he laughs], then the tuning barrel, then finally wound up with just the mouth piece!

Johnson also recalls playing arrangements of “The Flight of the Bumble Bee” and “The Sabre Dance” with jazz pianist Oliver Jones, as well as several solo feature numbers like “Body and Soul” or “O-Bop-She-Bam” in the late 1940s with the Metcalf band, all of which appeared as one amongst a number of other variety numbers. In the late 1940s, the band at Rockhead's Paradise got into the habit of having one band feature every show: “The band didn't get no kind of publicity,” explains bandleader Allan Wellman, “[so I thought] let's do a band number every show. The band's playin' the show so good, so now let me see what the band can do.” But all of these musicians agree that it was the theatrical dancers, and particularly the women, who contributed the most to the development of a Montreal-based audience for jazz.

Language issues discriminated positively for dancers and against talking acts in travelling shows. As the two black dancers Dave and Tressie suggest in a letter to the *Chicago Defender* after visiting Montreal in 1921:

At last we are out of New York, the farthest since April was Philadelphia until this date, and, believe me, this part of Canada is great... 10% beer 30 cents a quart. Best brandy 1\$ a pint. Seems like living up here, with the exception of meeting so many French people who do not speak English. But they are great people to be around . . . The act is going great. You know they don't care much for talking acts, so we have no talking and very little singing but a world of dancing, we are all to the mustard.<sup>48</sup>

When asked why he thought the nightclubs and theatres were full every night when his mother worked there in the 1930s and 1940s, Ralph Whims answers:

Well, I think it's because of the dancers . . . They were so instrumental in balancing the show. [The chorus line would] get people into the mood of it, before the comedians or the musicians or the other dancers, the single dancers would come on, and they, they would do a routine somewhere in the middle, also part of the finale. They were really the hype form of the performance, to get people into it . . . They were able to pick up a show if maybe the entertainment [or] the musical portion was not really that good . . . Women have always been a kind of highlight. The audience was basically very strongly male. It worked. My mother worked all the time!

Mary Brown concurs: "They brought the money! If there was no dancers, there was no money.

The men really came to see the dancers back then." Similarly, when asked about the importance of dancers in nightclubs in the 1950s, tap dancer Ethel Bruneau is categorical:

They needed the dancers. If the dancers weren't there, there wouldn't be a show, you know what I'm saying? They'd have the singer, you have a comedian, you gotta have the dancer. This was what the nightclub of that era was! The dancers, whether you had a chorus line, whether it was a single dance, a strip, or jazz, or whatever, you had to have a dancer! . . . That's what made up the clubs, the chorus girls, the shake dancers, the tap dancers, the novelty dancer, you know . . . These girls put these shows on and . . . people came to see them!

The centrality of black women performers to Montreal's jazz scene can also be observed in the press between the mid-twenties up to at the very earliest the late forties, when individual musicians like Oscar Peterson and Louis Metcalf were starting to grow individual reputations as jazz musicians. Newspapers of the interwar era are unambiguous about the centrality of the black female teasing body in jazz advertisement: ads of the downtown clubs capitalized above all on

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<sup>48</sup> Mark Miller, *Such Melodious Racket: The Lost History of Jazz in Canada 1914-1949* (Toronto: Mercury Press, 1997), 52.

black women entertainers.<sup>49</sup> They were often accompanied by drawings of semi-nude dark women (very common on ads of Rockhead's Paradise and the Café St-Michel), and few make anything beyond generic mention of the kind of music that was going to be played besides “rhythms that you'll find very danceable indeed.” Ads from the Connie's Inn, the Terminal Club, the Val d'Or, and the Montmartre most typically advertise each entertainer individually—Evelyn Campbell, the “stunning creole soubrette;” Bee McConnie the “teasing high-brown dancer”—before adding, almost as an aside, “Enjoy the enchanting music of Andy Shorter and his Orchestra from Harlem.” The first thing that catches the eye on ads of Le Montmartre is a scantily-clad nonwhite woman in typical chorus-girl apparel—the smallest available font is reserved for “with Mynie Sutton's Swing Orchestra” (see below Figure 1.1). An ad from the

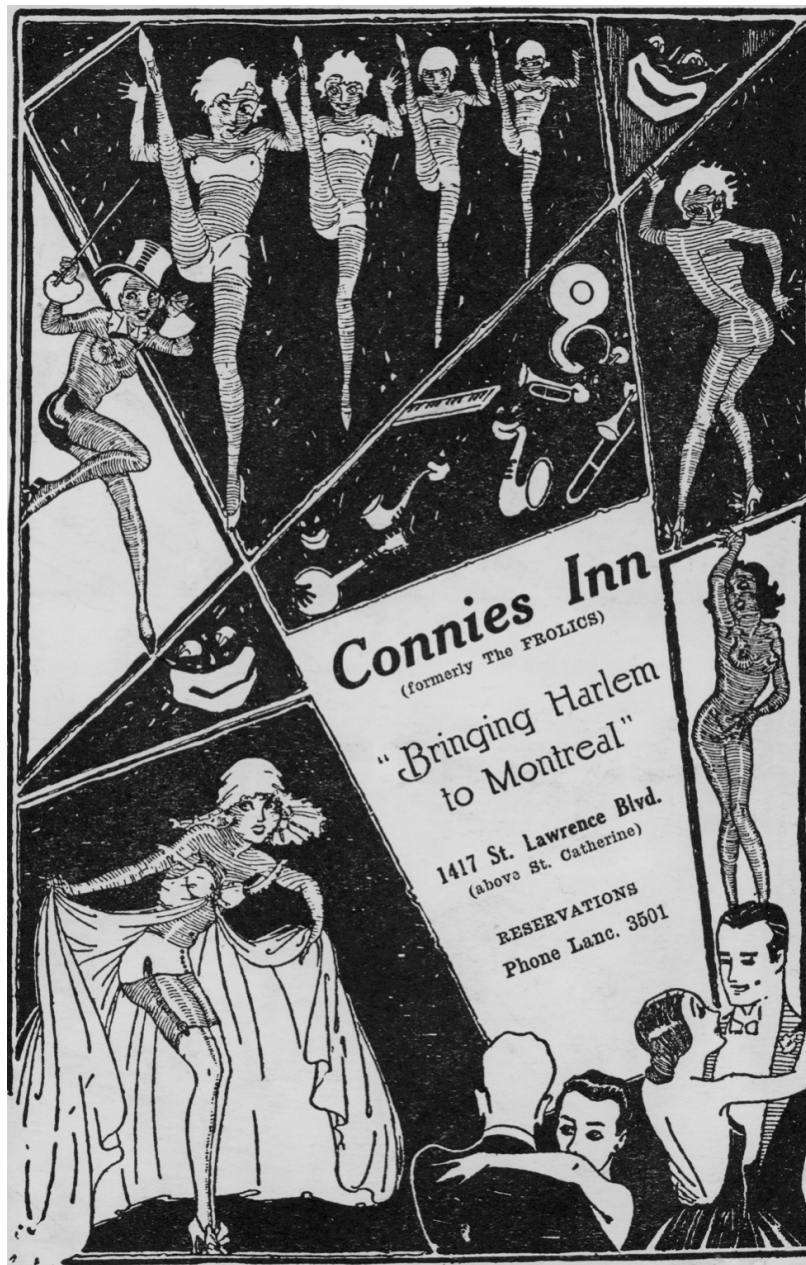


*Figure 1.1: Newspaper clipping with advertisement for The Montmartre, September 10, 1937*

<sup>49</sup> Myron Sutton Fonds, digitized scrapbook; Meilan Lam Fonds, boxes HA1763, HA1767, HA1768, HA3127, HA3128.

Chinese Paradise similarly advertises each of the entertainers individually, and adds towards the end, almost as an aside, that “the music is provided by Myni [sic] Sutton and his Famous Canadian Ambassadors.” Much of the focus is indeed on the “hand-picked beauties” that made up the floorshow. “Gorgeous Girlies in Glittering Gyrations!” reads an ad from the Chez Maurice in 1933 or 1934; “Ten Tall Tan Terrific Girls,” reads one from the Montmartre; “Watch them darkies strutt their stuff” reads another from the Standard in 1932: “It’s a real treat. Sid Flood and his Clef Club Orchestra will play music that you’ll take home in your feet.” At Connie’s Inn, drawings of teasing female dancing bodies, either almost or completely naked, take up most of the advertising space along with the names of the evening’s top billings (see below figure 1.2). In almost all cases, any mention of the band appears anecdotal, always secondary to

the other glitter and grind. Through this entire era, jazz was advertised as dance music, and advertisement in the black clubs capitalized first and foremost on black female teasing bodies.



*Figure 1.2: Advertising brochure for Connie's Inn, 1933*

The clubs themselves also capitalized on erotic stagings of black women's bodies. At the Val d'Or, the walls were decorated with murals whose motifs were "semi-naked women of

heroic height in small jackets and shortened *pantelettes*.”<sup>50</sup> At the Hawaiian Lounge, there were “glass paintings of naked and semi-naked women, with only their sex being hidden, a play of lights placed inside the wall bringing out ‘more’ through the glass of these paintings.” The Café St-Michel had “half-naked colored women painted on the walls.”<sup>51</sup> Similarly, the only musician that Herb Johnson has ever heard of, “wherein the proprietor had a full-length picture made [of] glass, and placed at the head of the stairs [of the club],” was drummer Willie Wade at Rockhead’s Paradise. Wade had the reputation of being “greatest drummer in the world behind dancing girls.” “He could drum us into the grave,” explains black woman performer Bernice Johnson, “he had the fastest foot in town. [Rufus] Rockhead just thought that there was no one in the world like Willie Wade.” Again, even in a case where the consecrating was done around a musician rather than on the dancing bodies of black women, Willie Wade’s musicianship was valued precisely in relation to black women’s dance.

### *Jazz and Exotic Dance: Drums, Bums, and Drum-Playing Bums*

Montreal’s particular status as a showtown and its position on the black variety stage circuit allows us to make an important critical intervention into dominant discourses of jazz history. As I stated above, the main obstacle to a better understanding of how exotic dance has influenced the development of jazz has been the difficulty of tracing in the music precise traces of black women’s bodies. But references to direct interaction and mutual influence emerge with a striking consistency in the oral histories of Montreal-based exotic dancers and show musicians. It may be hard—although as I show below, not impossible—to show it in the notes themselves, but of course not any harder than in any other forms of improvised practices. Often, the

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<sup>50</sup> Danielle Lacasse, *La Prostitution Féminine à Montréal, 1945-1970* (Montréal: Boréal, 1994), 70. My translation.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.



entertainers who arrived in town from the United States did so without any music to provide to the local bands. It was expected that the band would know the standards. In this sense, entertainers played a decisive role in the repertoire that the band was to play and that the audiences were to hear. Bernice Jordan sang things like “One Hundred Years from Today,” “Exactly like You,” and “Goody and Goody.” She used to do her showgirl walk on Duke Ellington’s “Satin Doll” or “Things Ain’t What They Used to Be” and she had a routine on “A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody.” Tina Baines sang risqué numbers, love ballads, “Consider Yourself,” and she sang “the blues.” Mary Brown sang “Shadow of your Smile,” “Summertime,” and “Sunny Side of the Street.” Ethel Bruneau sang “Sweet Georgia Brown” and “Down by the Riverside.” Olga Spencer and Bernice Jordan also sometimes sung in French. The band at Rockhead’s Paradise played “Honeysuckle rose” and “the show-type music that colored people would dance to . . . ‘Dinah,’ ‘Sweet Georgia Brown,’ ‘Sweet Sue’ or something like that . . . or the blues, most likely the blues, you know.”<sup>52</sup> A dancer might come in and say “Play a Jitterbug,” and drummer Boggie Gaudet would play “A Night in Tunisia.” For a cha-cha or a merengue, “we’d pick jazz tunes, ‘Bernie’s Tune’ or ‘Manteca.’”<sup>53</sup> For a blues dance, “Honky Tonk,” or “Night Train.” For a slow dance, “‘Lover Man’, ‘Funny Valentine’, the putty ballads.”<sup>54</sup> Myron Sutton played “Tea for Two.” Above all, “lots of Duke Ellington.”<sup>55</sup> Altogether, what might appear to us like an eclectic collection of Fats Waller numbers, bebop

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<sup>52</sup> Johnson, Interview with John Gilmore.

<sup>53</sup> Boogie Gaudet, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0015, February 15, 1983, audio CD. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Boogie Gaudet also come from this source.

<sup>54</sup> Brown, Interview with John Gilmore.

<sup>55</sup> Jordan, *Interview with Bernice [moving images]*.

tunes, Broadway ballads, Ellington memorabilia and other popular syncopated and dance music consolidated into a distinct and meaningful core repertoire for variety stage artists and publics.

Not only did entertainers have a big say in the repertoire that was played, but they also had much to do with the overall form that these pieces took in live performance. Occasionally, fully-scored arrangements were ordered in advance and written prior to rehearsals, though always with a specific number and dancer in mind. Mary Brown and Ethel Bruneau both had fully-scored arrangements made for performances in 1950s and 1960s, and drummer Dennis Brown speaks of hours-long rehearsals where such arrangements could be polished. But particularly in the city's black clubs or before the early fifties, as saxophone player Herb Johnson explains, "A great many colored musicians did not learn to play their instrument [in an institution]:"

They could play them by ear, in any key, but they didn't learn to read for the simple reason: 'Who am I gonna work with, who's gonna hire me?' They certainly wouldn't work in the symphony . . . Playing these little rinky-dink clubs that we had and the variety shows here, most of the time we played without music. So, what are you gonna learn?

As Allan Wellman recalls:

You couldn't buy arrangements in those days for six-piece band worthwhile . . . John Kirby, that's the only thing they had out . . . Some old pieces, if [the dancers] wanted an arrangement on that . . . "Honeysuckle rose," you know, or "Sunny Side of the Street," things like that in those days, you know? John Kirby he didn't have no music for that, so I used to write those tunes you see? And I'd write for all the . . . show people. So I'd write for the band for them, and I'd make my money off of the people in the show, you see? . . . A lot of them didn't bring [charts. . .]. A lot of them . . . you sat down and they says 'Give me a couple of chords of this' you see? . . . I wouldn't have time to write the music for the . . . first couple of days, I didn't know who was coming in . . . And the first night, if the music didn't go down the way the girl explained it to me . . . she'd say the band was no good . . . I had to fix [it] up.

In general, arrangements were worked out during rehearsal time, usually blending a mix of stock arrangements, well-known standards, and improvised segues in-between. By the time that the band stepped onstage for the first show of the week, "Each musician would have a cue sheet,"

sax player Leroy Mason remembers: “It would say things like: 16 bars of ‘I Got Rhythm,’ segue into ‘How High the Moon’ segue into ‘Black and Tan Fantasy.’ We wouldn’t write out the changes, we got to know them.”<sup>56</sup> Dennis Brown goes into great length about the cue sheets he used:

I had my little system for tempos . . . For a dancer’s routine, for example, there may be many changes in tempos, especially some of the Afro-Cuban dances, where they would go into a fast thing and then they would go into a stop and slow, you know, like various things, you had no music you just had to go blind. I would ask for cue points, and I drew a little picture of a pose, I had like little pen and ink things on there, on my cue sheets, of poses like when they’d hit a certain position, like an abrupt change of tempo, and mood, possibly. And this is what I liked! I got to the point of playing so many dancers that I could pick up, okay, what their roots, like say they came from New York, like after the first few steps I could pick up whether their roots were West-Indian or Cuban or straight-American . . . and vary the rhythm and feeling accordingly . . . so sometimes I’d get into a calypso-ish type of thing, an other time into a much more Cuban thing, another say more like a shake-dancer-straight-American-New-York-Harlem type of thing you know.

Several things are worth pointing out in this excerpt. First, Brown’s mention of the various changes in tempo in dance routines is revealing. Dancers Mary Brown and Ethel Bruneau claim that their routines could go on for up to about 45 minutes—a time length that is impossible to reconcile with the assumption that they danced to a single tune or even tempo. Dennis Brown gives an even more precise example of an individual number later in the interview: “A lot of [exotic dancers] had things like ‘Night in Tunisia’ to start up with or ‘Manteca’ or things like that as the music part, then it was a drum solo thing, and so it was continually something that you were working out.” In other words, not only did the dancers have a big say in the repertoire that was played on the variety stage, but they also had much to do with the overall form that these tunes took in live performance. Multi-tempo, multi-mood pieces –what John Howland has called the “vaudeville aesthetic”– were perhaps less-suited to the dance floor, with the expectations for

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<sup>56</sup> Leroy Mason, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0041, November 16, 1982, audio CD.

a sustained rhythmic drive that came along with a stomping or a lindy-hopping audience, yet they were ideal vehicles to showcase the talents of solo theatrical dancers.<sup>57</sup> In her documentary on black social dance filmed at the Savoy Ballroom in the 1950s, Mura Dehn's decision to accompany Sandra Gibson's shake-blues dance and her gutbucket-blues dance with two of Ellington's rhapsodic pieces, "Creole Rhapsody" and "Black and Tan Fantasy," can hardly be seen as an arbitrary choice.<sup>58</sup>

Other aspects of swing era sound flourished in the context of the black variety stage performance: soloing, and riffs-based accompaniments. Saxophone player Myron Sutton speaks in unequivocal terms of how the particular context in which he developed his soloing skills:

Say I was playing Connie's Inn [in 1933-4]. . . You had to put a girl up once in a while to go around and sing at the tables, eh? This is how I learned to ad lib quite a bit, because we had a small band, small group, ah say five-piece group, eh? So you'd have to put a girl up . . . and when those girls went up, they sang [or danced] at every table. So, let's say you had ah your alto, your tenor, your trumpet, eh? And then . . . drums and piano. Well, we used to each take . . . a chorus in rotation. Like I'd finish a chorus, and the trumpet player would take a chorus and the tenor man would take a chorus and back to me. This is how we learned. This is actually how I learned to ad lib quite a bit . . . While she's singing [or dancing]. You'd take an ad lib on, say you're playin' ah "Tea for Two" or anything like that, you'd ad lib and break it up and play it the way that you thought you wanted to play it eh? . . . You'd experiment, if you made a mistake this time, next time you play it, well, nobody's listening to you anyway it's listening to the girl singing, eh? So, a lot of experiment and you learn to ad lib, that's all.

Herb Johnson speaks of a similar practice in the late 1940s:

With Metcalfe [the bandleader of the houseband at the Café St-Michel], I might play anywhere from 10 to 20 choruses. With Russ Meredith [the leader of a Montreal dance band] it took all night for me to get to one chorus. In the dance music of course, he would say, Herb take the first eight [bars], and Gerry . . . would take the second eight, the piano player would take the third eight, and Russ would come in with the full-band to end the chorus. And it went on like this for about nine months. I really got lazy on this job . . . It was very rare that I got one whole thirty-two bars by myself! Very rare!

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<sup>57</sup> Howland, "The Blues Get Glorified."

<sup>58</sup> Mura Dehn, *The Spirit Moves: A History of Black Social Dance on Film, 1900-1986* (Flemington, N.J.: Dancetime Publications, 2008), DVD.

And still in the 1950s, “of course,” explains drummer Boogie Gaudet, “between the theme and the last chorus, we’d blow to our heart’s content.” In this context, it is obvious to see how riffs-based accompaniments, one of the most characteristic aspects of the swing sound according to Howard Spring, also flourished in the context of the black variety stage. As drummer Dennis Brown remembers it:

[The band] would automatically, like, create arrangements on the spot and riff and do, like, the ol’ jazz accompaniment is called a riff, behind singers especially, singers were coming in with no music and [we] had three-part harmony riffs going. And we’d remember them, and it was sort of the standard thing to do, in this environment. This didn’t happen in the white scene. This happened in this scene. Allan Wellman, the Sealy brothers, Rockhead’s, they did the same thing. They would just, right away, look at each other and *bam*. It was there. It was just beautiful! . . . And the next show they did the same riff, you know? It was just unbelievable that they would do this.

Clearly, the variety stage provided much better opportunities for extended soloing than the dancehall gigs, and the particular context of the black variety stage, where musicians worked primarily without fully-developed arrangements in opposition to white dance bands such as Johnny Holmes’ Orchestra, contributed significantly to the development of improvised riffs.

Finally, accounts of direct interaction between show drummers and exotic dancers during live performances also abound in these oral histories, thus making Josephine Baker’s “call-and-response” with the unidentified drummer in the 1926-7 *Folies Bergères* appear all but unique.<sup>59</sup>

As Dennis Brown explains, it was expected that drummers would have to “catch” the dancers:

Every move they made . . . You caught everything that moved . . . A dancer coming in, you know, you might have [He sings a drum beat, on toms] and she does a kick! And I’d crash, you know? You accented everything, pointed everything up. This was expected. Now this had to

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<sup>59</sup> Burt, in “‘Savage’ Dancer,” 67, argues that: “Although this dance has gone down in history as a solo, one part of the film shows a volatile interaction between Baker and an unidentified drummer . . . He carries his drum under one arm and lightly shifts around, intently following her every move while Baker, for her part, seems driven by his drumming. [. . . At some point], she slowly turns round on the spot shaking her bottom—the bananas rattling and flying as if they had lives of their own—while in response the drummer circles round the outside so that they remain facing one another and in eye contact, his fingers beating away at the drum head. [. . . Later] she smilingly faces the camera then quickly turns her head and shouts to someone off screen to her right—presumably the drummer—then quickly smiles forwards again, the rhythmic repetition of this suggesting call and response.” See also Baker and Chase, *Josephine*, 41.

happen . . . in the context of the music, and you still like were expected to be grooving you know? As opposed to a drummer who just had to play the music and play very straight and go [He sings a drum beat], now you had to also swing, or if it was Latin or Afro, you still had to maintain that feeling *and* catch. But I mean, it was a beautiful challenge.

Boogie Gaudet agrees: “The drummer would have to follow her, like if she did bumps-and-grind, you know, like he would, catch her.” This was a skill that the press was definitely attuned to and that critics were quick to identify: “We used to get these write-ups in the [*Montréal Matin*] paper,” recalls Brown, “and invariably when it came to a mention of the band, when it came to me it was always about how I followed the dancers, *la manière qu’il suit les danseuses*.” The same story emerges from the oral histories of exotic dancers themselves. In the words of Bernice Jordan:

They’d see you do it and they’re good drummers? They get right into it and they know what you’re gonna do to ‘til you finish you know? Each one has to do whatever they’re gonna do, and the drummer has to be on his toes to know. Some of the girls do as I say, ‘Round the World’ with the back of your foot, some of them would do half-breaks, some would just time-step, you know? [She dances as she recalls] Some would do soft-shoe cross like eh Bing Crosby and that all soft-shoe step, gliding, soothing with his drumbeat to the soft shoe. Wilkie was a very good drummer for that . . . I liked Willie Wade though, he could beat a drum. He could make you feel good when you got up there to dance. He caught every hit, every kick, every bump, every grind.

It should come as no surprise then that musicians who worked in a place that had an international reputation as a showtown were hired above all for the skills outlined above. The pianists had to know all the standards by heart, even the less well-known ones, in order to be able to accompany the travelling acts. Brown and Johnson remember jazz pianist Ilene Bourne fondly for this very reason: “She must have known every standard tune that was ever written,” claims Brown: “If you could call a tune that she couldn’t play, she was ready to pay off.” As I explore in Chapter 5, Ilene Bourne was “not the solo type”—in fact, “she was better comping. Since we had no bass, she was a good compensating . . . straight-ahead . . . ten-fingers piano. Which is what we needed,” explains Brown. The importance of hiring good show drummers was unparalleled,

“especially in African numbers,” says Tina Baines. Drummer Wilkie Wilkinson agrees, and his phrasing is unequivocal: “Drummers were very essential then, *due to shake dancers*.”<sup>60</sup> Finally, Herb Johnson suggests that it was his skills at improvising riffs and at harmonizing that made him a particularly sought after instrumentalist: “I had a good ear for third-alto harmony. Even if you didn’t have the music, I had a fairly good harmonic ear. I was hired more for that than anything else.”

To summarize, the variety stage offered more opportunities to develop improvisation skills—soloing and riffing—than the dancehall, and certainly more than the odd jam session in Montreal would have allowed. Moreover, several aspects of form, timbre, instrumentation, rhythm, and repertoire that we value in musicological studies of interwar jazz can be explicitly linked to collaborations with exotic dancers, either because the acts were extensively rehearsed beforehand, or because it was expected that a good showband would be able to “catch” the dancer. Clearly, the nightclub scene in Montreal was economically, discursively, and aesthetically driven by the shows, and several defining aspects of jazz aesthetics blossomed through the conventions of the black variety stage. This puts in an interesting light Mary Brown’s assertion that:

When I did Afro-Cuban alone, I say it’d be a 45-minute act. I would do Afro-Cuban, Latin-American, and blues, and everything, you know, like that. The music, there, *I taught a bunch of musicians to play their instrument*. Believe me when I tell you [she laughs]. Now they’re big jazz musicians [dismissive].

While Brown later asserts that she sometimes danced with a tambourine, maracas, conga, bongos, or finger cymbals depending on the number, she didn’t play a more traditional jazz band instrument that could account for the above-quoted role that she claims to have played in

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<sup>60</sup> Italics mine.

teaching the big jazz musicians. “I know music,” she says, “but I can’t really play. I can play a few songs, and that’s about it . . . I cannot play piano.” Dennis Brown explains the relationship between his professional development and theatrical dancers in similar terms:

I gained a lot of my experience because we had good shows coming in there, lot of gals, lot of dances, Afro-Cuban groups, single acts, you know, doing a lot of jazz and blues singers, it was very, like, blues, jazz, and the Latin thing when the Latin craze came in. So, very good experience for me.

Here, the hierarchy that we most commonly assume between dancers and musicians—and arguably, between husband and wife in the above case—is entirely reversed. Entertainers did not base their routines on a soundtrack provided independently by a band. Rather, the setting in which black women’s performances took place is precisely what allowed jazz musicians to refine their skills.

As Scott DeVeaux and others have famously argued, much is lost in recordings- and scores-based jazz histories.<sup>61</sup> The oral histories of show musicians and exotic dancers provide an important alternative record, one that allows us to reconsider the contribution of black women performers to the development of the jazz sound. If, as Tina Baines and Mary Brown suggest, it was the bums that did the drumming, and if “coming-of-age” as a jazz musician required integrating a woman’s dancing body within one’s sound, assumptions about the power dynamics between the band and the dancer need to be revisited—and not just in Montreal, but also in other centers where jazz musicians performed on the black variety stage. Conventions of the black variety stage travelled in the limbs—bums, and others—and minds of black women performers, in this guise and in others, all the way up to French Canada.

### *Coda*

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<sup>61</sup> DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition.”



During his interview with John Gilmore, Dennis Brown transcribed two rhythmic patterns that he used to play behind dancers, one for a “slow or medium Afro dancer” and another for a shake dancer (see below Figures 1.3 and 1.4, note the indication for “fringles and tassles,” most likely “fringes and tassels” in Figure 1.4).<sup>62</sup> Clearly, what connected the sound of a piece like Duke Ellington’s “Caravan” to the “mysterious veiled world” that Mark Tucker said the piece conjured was not just the sound itself, but actually a very conspicuous practice in which black female bodies *unveiled* to the world to the particular drum pattern that introduces the piece.<sup>63</sup> Those were the kinds of notes that one was expected to put to Tina Baines’ bums:



**Figure 2.3:** "Slow or Medium Afro-Dancer," transcription, Dennis Brown.

<sup>62</sup> Dennis Brown, “Drum Rhythms for Montreal Black Show Dancers, ca. 1950s eg Rockhead’s,” Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, April 16 1983.

<sup>63</sup> Mark Tucker and Duke Ellington. *The Duke Ellington Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. For a discussion of Ellington’s various arrangements of “Caravan” as well as Billy Strayhorn’s arrangement and its relationship to exotica, see Lisa Barg, “Queer Encounters in the Music of Billy Strayhorn,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66, no. 3 (December, 2013): 771-824.

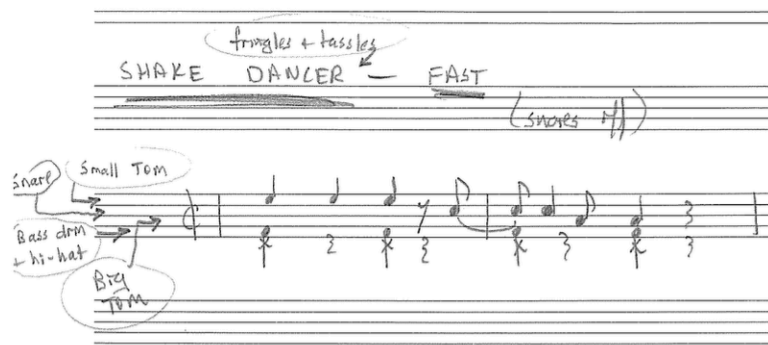


Figure 1.4: "Shake Dancer," transcription, Dennis Brown.

No archival records or videos survive to allow for a musichoreographical analysis between sound and body in Montreal theatres and nightclubs of this era. Still, the oral histories of show musicians and black women performers, combined with Dennis Brown's transcriptions, allows for some of the silences to be heard in an LP recorded in 1964 called *Ebony in Rythem* [sic], a show that opened on August 11, 1964 at Rockhead's Paradise and which, according to the cover, "visit[ed] scores of countries in the months following their premiere in Montreal."<sup>64</sup> The LP begins with the following narrative told by emcee Walter "Sandman" Howard:

In the beginning, rhythm was established by the native drums of Africa. This rhythm was carried to North America by the slaves of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. From then until present day, ebony man has developed a selection of distinctive rhythm, rhythms applied to music loved by all. Spirituals, blues, ragtime and jazz; Fisk, Handy, Armstrong, Ellington, and so many more, are names immortal to the heritage of ebony rhythm.

In the background, drummer Norman Villeneuve performs a variation on Dennis Brown's shake dance drum pattern: He alternates between the snare and the "big tom" and plays a moderately fast tempo that similarly emphasizes the anticipated (first and) third beats of the bar. As black woman performer Olga Spencer describes in her oral history, this is the moment in a variety show where:

<sup>64</sup> *Ebony in Rythem* [sic] (Mississauga, Ontario: Capitol Records, 1964), LP.

Usually you had a fast dancing number with the line-up of girls that started it. The emcee actually opens the show, and we had a line-up of girls you would come in with, probably an exciting number, fast dancing, probably tap.

In this case, the Frank Hatchett dancers advertised on the cover of the LP would have most likely entered the stage, performing in a style that signified on Howard's exoticizing and primitivizing narrative, the kinds of shake and tap dance routines that Bernice Jordan and Ethel Bruneau were famous for. The cast intones the first piece, an AA' chorus called "Ebony Rythem," which is sung once along with pianist Linton Garner improvising in-between the melody, Nick Aldrich's busy walking bass, and Villeneuve swinging the drum sets. While the rhythm section included relatively new additions to Montreal's jazz scene (Garner had just arrived in Montreal after a series of arranging and performing gigs with, among others, Dizzy Gillespie and Billy Eckstine), the two horns that take on the melody in the following A section are played by musicians that had long been core figures of Montreal's jazz scene: trumpet player Allan Wellman and saxophone player Vernon Isaac had both been playing in Montreal show bands since the 1940s. The cast reprises the last iteration of A,' which is extended by two one-bar breaks on the toms.

These sorts of breaks, as Bernice Jordan explained above, were common spaces where dancers and drummers engaged in call-and-response. While we cannot hear the sounds of a tap dancer on this recording, one can easily imagine Frank Hatchett's dancers trading rhythms with Villeneuve here. The LP continues with popular dance music of the day—by 1964, that included both a rock-n'-roll version on Berry Gordy's early Motown song "Make Everything All Right" as well as an instrumental version of a 1938 ballad by Duke Ellington, "Prelude to a Kiss." Was this piece intended as a solo feature for Vernon Isaac, as it appears to be from the recording format alone? Or was the slow tempo in this arrangement, sticky and grinding saxophone timbre, lush harmonies and gliding figures played by the trumpet meant to accompany Bridgitt, also

advertised on the cover of the LP, on a dance that would have been an appropriate prelude to a kiss—the kinds of dances for which exotic dancers Mary Brown and Tina Baines were known for? Lorenzo “C” continues, his “sweet sounds of song developed while one of the Ink Spots” intoning “White Cliffs of Dover,” a popular Second World War song popularized by the Glenn Miller orchestra in 1941, followed by the Foster Twins, a “calypso from the Islands, who also are Frank Hatchett’s dancers,” singing “What a Difference a Day Makes.” Their voice is amateurish enough in comparison to that of Lorenzo “C” to make us wonder whether the recording format isn’t somehow missing the point of their act. The first side of the LP ends with Tany Roman, the “vocal international with seven languages” singing “Angelitos Negros” accompanied by Villeneuve who plays a variation of Brown’s “slow or medium Afro dance” exclusively on the toms. “Then,” Olga Spencer continues:

Midway the show, the showgirls would come out with those beautiful costumes and bright colors, lots of stones, diamonds . . . ruby colors, and all kinds of beautiful costumes and they would walk around, you know? And they used their body beautifully, they used beautiful arm movements, and they had a lovely music to dance to, you know? . . . This was usually partway through the show.

Duke Ellington and Juan Tizol’s “Caravan” could not fit Spencer’s description better, a sure staple of jazz exotica with its semi-tone-based oscillatory theme and the opening figure on the toms that I already discussed in relation to Browns’ transcription. In this case, the band takes it at a much faster tempo than Ellington’s 1936 recording, one that seems counter-intuitive to the kinds of “beautiful arm movements” that Spencer describes. The piece features a lot of instrumental solos, including by Wellman, Isaac, and Villeneuve. Was this a faster-moving dance, then, or perhaps one of those band feature numbers that Wellman said happened occasionally at Rockhead’s Paradise? The second side includes another piece by star singer Lorenzo “C,” a piece by Joe Sealy that features “sounds of the age” (some kind of organ or

synthesizer), the exotic number “Island in the Sun” by the Foster Twins, as well as another kind of exotic number, a French song called “J’attendrai (ton retour)” that Tany Roman sings with a conspicuously non-native accent, featuring Isaac on the vibraphone. “Then,” continues Spencer in her oral history,

For the finale of the show, it would also start with a line and the acts that came in between, and end up with the showgirls coming in at the very end there, and making a big flash at the very end of the program.

The last piece on the B side of the album, “Fast Blues,” fits that description perfectly, with its fast and flashy rock-n’-roll feel. In short, *Ebony in Rythem* features all that could be expected from a show on the black variety stage: popular songs of the day, exotica, novelty numbers, a star singer, an emcee, top jazzmen in the city. Yet the LP lasts altogether only thirty minutes while shows at Rockhead’s, as black women performers and show musicians explained above, averaged seventy-five. The technology of the LP might have allowed consumers to take home a significantly larger portion of an evening at the nightclub than the recording format that was available during Ellington’s tenure at the Cotton Club. Still, at what was by then the end of the golden age of jazz in Montreal, the format still lacked, quite literally, more than half of the story: the dance.

Perhaps a collection of oral histories can’t prove exactly where and when the bums played drums early-twentieth-century jazz. But it certainly makes it easier on the imagination.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *What Would You Tell Your Mother? Jazz, Vice, and the “Golden Age” of Jazz in Montreal*

The story goes that jazz was birthed in the brothels of Storyville, and that the closing of New Orleans’ Red Light district in 1917 marked the decisive moment when jazz could break free from the confines of vice, its sounds thereupon radiating through the urban centers of North America.<sup>1</sup> In her article on myths of origins in jazz, Lara Pellegrinelli observed that women tend to take on the role of “shady birthmothers” in jazz history: “Although the specifics of jazz’s conception tend to remain as cloaked in mystery as the deliveries of the elusive stork,” she writes, once jazz is “born” women are not allowed to move forward the way ragtime piano progresses into stride, to then be absorbed into early jazz ensembles.<sup>2</sup> Once vice has fulfilled its symbolic role as the fertile and exotic terrain where African American forms of vernacular expression sprouted, jazz cuts the cord, leaving the bodies that birthed it behind.

The story of Montreal jazz also begins with vice. Systematically, the city’s open-city imaginary is cast and its tolerant attitudes towards sex work and the underworld take the center stage. Jazz, the story goes, was first heard in the railroad clubs, where the paths of black train

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<sup>1</sup> The links between women’s sexual labor and the emergence of jazz have been stressed not only in New Orleans but also in places like Chicago, Kansas City, Los Angeles and New York. See in particular Court Carney, “New Orleans and the Creation of Early Jazz,” *Popular Music and Society* (July, 2006): 299-315; Charles Hersch, *Subversive Sounds: Race and the Birth of Jazz in New Orleans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Alicia P. Long, *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004); Stephen Longstreet, *Sportin’ House: A History of the New Orleans Sinners and the Birth of Jazz* (Los Angeles: Sherbourne Press, 1965); Kathy J. Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution: Twenties America and the Meaning of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Lara Pellegrinelli, “Separated at ‘Birth’: Singing and the History of Jazz,” in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, edited. Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker, 31-47 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); and Jeffrey Taylor, “Earl Hines’s Piano Style in the 1920s: A Historical and Analytical Perspective,” *Black Music Research Journal* 12, No. 1 (Spring, 1992), 57-77. For work that aims to critique the narrative function of brothel as a humble starting place out of which jazz grew into a high art form, see Sherrie Tucker, *A Feminist Perspective on New Orleans Jazzwomen* (Lawrence, KS: Center for Research University of Kansas, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Pellegrinelli, “Separated at ‘Birth,’” 34.

porters, show people, and bootleggers crossed those of the “ladies” who lived on the top floors.<sup>3</sup> As in other urban centers across North America, it was at the sites of women’s sexual labor that jazz emerged in Montreal. And as soon as the curtain is raised, women also disappear from the historical narrative. Montreal’s jazz scene appears on paper as a largely homosocial male space in which only the bandleaders and the jazz soloists—positions which, in Montreal as elsewhere, were chiefly occupied by men—are endowed with creative agency. In other words, Montreal’s vice district also functions as a sort of shady incubator, where “exotic” and sex-driven women foster the music until a truly Canadian-grown kind of jazz can reach maturity, wail, and break free.

In comparison to historical narratives about jazz in the United States, however, the case of Montreal presents an interesting twist: Women do recur in the narrative, yet only for causing its demise. “My sense is,” ventured John Gilmore, who authored the central monograph to document Montreal jazz history, “that jazz declined to strippers, then strippers declined, and then everything declined.”<sup>4</sup> Of the confluence of elements that precipitated the radical changes that the nightclub industry went through at the time—the advent of television, of rock n’ roll, and the development of suburbs outside the island of Montreal among others—one above all others stuck in the collective memory of Quebecers: that the jazz scene in Montreal was the unlucky

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<sup>3</sup> This is all covered, among others, in Donald Cuccioletta, “The Américanité of Quebec Urban Popular Culture as Seen Through Burlesque Theater in Montreal, 1919-1939,” Doctoral thesis, Faculty of History, Université du Québec à Montréal, 1997; John Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise: The Story of Jazz in Montreal* (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1988); Adam Kuplowsky, *A Captivating “Open City:” The Production of Montreal as a “wide-open town” and “ville ouverte” in the 1940s and ‘50s*, MA thesis, Department of History and Classical Studies, McGill University, 2015; Meilan Lam, *Show Girls: Celebrating Montreal’s Legendary Black Jazz Scene*, Montreal, National Film Board of Canada, 1998, VHS; Nancy Marrelli, *Burgundy Jazz: Little Burgundy and the Story of Montreal Jazz*, e-book (Véhicule Press and CatBird Productions, 2013); Al Palmer, *Montreal Confidential: The Low Down on the Big Town!*, 1950 (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 2009); Will Straw, “Montreal Confidential: Notes on an Imagined City,” *Cine-Action* 28, (Spring, 1992): 58-64 and William Weintraub, *City Unique: Montreal Days and Nights in the 1940s and 50s* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> John Gilmore, in Dennis Brown, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0010, April 15, 1983 audio CD.

bystander of vice, an unfortunate and undeserving casualty of mayor Jean Drapeau's promise when he took office in 1954 to rid the city of vice and corruption "once, and for all."<sup>5</sup>

This poses an interesting historiographical conundrum. Vice and jazz are intricately woven together at the point of emergence as well as at the point of dissolution of Montreal's jazz scene, yet women completely disappear in between. How could Drapeau's morality squad, a state apparatus that functions above all as an apparatus to discipline women's bodies, sexuality, and marriageability possibly bring to an end a scene described as having been animated almost exclusively by men? The narrative that goes from brothels to a musician-centric golden age to a strippers-induced demise is implicitly gendered for the ways in which it obscures the importance of exotic dancers, strip-teasers, sex workers, and other unruly women in sustaining Montreal's jazz scene, both economically and discursively, through this entire era. In this sense, this chapter breaks away from the trope of the fallen woman as a catalyst for birth and downfall to map the specific challenge that jazz posed to Quebec's social order through this entire era. I draw on a collection of interviews with black women performers and show musicians to document jazz' continued dependency on women's sexual labor, real or imagined. I also draw on French-Canadian criticism to map the specific parameters that articulated the discursive relationship between jazz and vice in this period.

This chapter also seeks to establish the ways in which jazz became an important site where the boundary-work between moral and viceful bodies was articulated in Quebec. As abbot Victorin Germain commented in his 1930 pamphlet on jazz dance: "How much we would yell, if we saw our daughters held in the arms of young men like this without the music. But is evil

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance Weintraub, *City Unique*, 84-85: "Within days of his election, the *Herald* reported [that] fourteen 'shady ladies' were seen departing for New York, presumably to ply their trade in a more tolerant atmosphere." See also Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise*, 185.



made good by the mere fact of a musical accompaniment?”<sup>6</sup> Twenty years later, Montreal journalist Al Palmer chronicled the city’s nightlife through the experiences of chorus girl Gisele Lepine in his 1949 novel *Sugar-Puss on Dorchester Street*, where a character suggests: “You can get arrested for doing a rumba without music.”<sup>7</sup> Clearly, the presence of a soundtrack was a decisive element in discriminating between the morality and the vicefulness of a woman’s body in movement. In her research on theatrical dancers Irene and Vernon Castle, Susan Cook argued that “music sets up an acoustical space that surrounds the public dance ritual . . . Thus the dance music would seem to allow the dancing to take place, *acting as a license* for bodily response.”<sup>8</sup> The specific terms of the moral panic that jazz triggered in French-Canadian media suggests that not all musics granted all license—or at least, not to all bodies in the very same way. What sorts of evil could jazz turn into good, and what sorts of good did it make evil? While this chapter documents jazz’ continued dependency on unruly women’s bodies, I also draw on Kevin J. Mumford’s theorization of city “interzones” to show that jazz was not considered altogether viceful as much as it provided French-Canadian critics with a liminal zone where theories about morality and vice, and more broadly about gender and racial difference, could be articulated in the public sphere.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Victorin Germain, *Dansera-t-on chez moi ? Consultation théologique rédigée à l’intention d’un père de famille* (Québec: l’Action Sociale, 1930), 76. All excerpts below are translated (my translation).

<sup>7</sup> Al Palmer, *Sugar-Puss on Dorchester Street*, orig. 1949 (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 2013), 45.

<sup>8</sup> Susan C. Cook, “Passionless Dancing and Passionate Reform: Respectability, Modernism, and the Social Dancing of Irene and Vernon Castle,” in *The Passion of Music and Dance: Body, Gender, and Sexuality*, edited by William Washbaugh (New York: Berg, 1998), 200. Italics mine.

<sup>9</sup> Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black and White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

As Andrée Lévesque, Karen Herland, and Danielle Lacasse have shown in their research on Montreal's Red-Light district, little changed in the way civic authorities understood and regulated vice between the Coderre Inquiry into Police Corruption and Vice of 1924-5, and the Caron Inquiry that got young lawyer Jean Drapeau elected as mayor of Montreal in 1954.<sup>10</sup> As other vice districts across North America were closed down or experimented with various levels of regulation in the interwar period, tolerating the Red-Light district continued to be part of Montreal's commercial strategy at home and abroad. Between the ends of the two World Wars, a general climate of tolerance for vice in Montreal was only punctuated by "occasional arrests to mollify public opinion," explains Andrée Lévesque: "The medical profession, the daily press, and the police were in favor of this hybrid system of control that allowed the brothel-keepers, their inmates, and their clients a degree of freedom in exchange for payoffs to the police."<sup>11</sup> In other words, vice was seen, and sustained, as necessary evil.

The history of vice in Montreal intersects with jazz first and foremost in the spaces that they shared. Downtown nightclubs like Rockhead's Paradise, the Terminal Club, and the Café St-Michel; uptown clubs like the El Morocco, the Tic Toc, and the Esquire; and the cabarets and theatres around boulevard Saint-Laurent ("The Main"), including the Val d'Or and the Montmartre, all appear in the vice reports collected by Herland and Lacasse as famous *nids de racoleuses* ("streetwalkers' nests"). Lacasse explains that sex workers timed their comings and

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<sup>10</sup> Karen Herland, "Organized Righteousness Against Organized Viciousness: Constructing Prostitution in Post World War I Montreal," PhD Thesis, Department of Art History and Communication Studies, McGill University, 2005; Danielle Lacasse, *La Prostitution Féminine à Montréal, 1945-1970* (Montréal: Boréal, 1994); and Andrée Lévesque, "Éteindre le Red Light: Les Réformateurs et la Prostitution à Montréal entre 1865 et 1925," *Revue d'Histoire Urbaine* 17, no. 3 (February 1989): 191-201.

<sup>11</sup> Andrée Lévesque, *Making and Breaking the Rules: Women in Quebec, 1919-1939* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1994), 69.

goings with the shows. They came in around 9:45 PM, they were generally out of the club during the intermission, and they were usually back by 11:05 PM, “in time for the end of the second show.” According to an investigative report on sex work from 1946, the waiters at the Café St-Michel acted as procurers: “[They] solicit for these girls, asking ‘*Do you want a girlfriend*’ and if the answer is yes, they head to the left of the room . . . where there are three or four tables where sex workers are seated on their own; the boy then comes back with one of them and seats her at the customer’s table. At the Montmartre, “waiters demanded five dollars for the girl and three dollars for their procuring services.”<sup>12</sup>

The intricacy between the sex trade and the show business industry is also confirmed by the testimonies of musicians and black women performers who animated Montreal’s jazz scene. One of the earliest claims to jazz musicianship in Montreal emerges in fact from the Coderre Inquiry: Sixty-year-old pianist John Swail testified that he had been playing for at least fourteen years in Montreal’s Red-Light district as well as in some of the *salons particuliers* of the vaudeville houses on Saint-Laurent. Sometime around the turn of the century, Swail had left behind a similar performance practice in Kansas City. “That dope business was wonderful,” he recalls of 333 Cadieux Street (now De Bullion):

Men would come in and sell the dope to the girls . . . the girls would jump to the ceiling sometimes and shout and dance. That is where I made my money—‘Don’t forget the professor’ [the girls would say:] when they were under the influence of that dope, singing and dancing—it gave a good entertainment.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lacasse, *La Prostitution Féminine à Montréal*, 69-72. My translation.

<sup>13</sup> John Swail, *Enquête Judiciaire sur la Police de Montréal: Témoignages, 1924*, Archives de la Ville de Montréal, 1924, digitized copy, 2318.

We learn from the same report that 92 Cadieux, the most popular brothel of the post-war years, also had a parlor room with a piano and three dancehalls.<sup>14</sup> In the early years of the Depression, saxophone player Myron Sutton tells of the continued practice of hiring jazz pianists in brothels:

[Jazz pianist Elmer Smith] played a lot in sporting houses . . . you know, where the guys used to go and the girls used to be . . . They paid these sporting houses x number of dollars to play in them . . . because they made their money, maybe, [in the] first hour in tips . . . they made lots of money in tips [playing] background music.<sup>15</sup>

Asked whether there was “much vice” happening inside the Terminal club in the 1930s, Myron Sutton answers: “Not too much. Maybe a girl would take a trick out or something like this, you know, that was her business, you know, but nothing happened in the club at all . . . Nothing like Rockhead’s.” Kenny Rockhead, the son of Rockhead’s Paradise’s owner Rufus, remembers that his father “kept the third floor as rooms.”<sup>16</sup> “I have prostitutes in here ‘cause there’s a need for them,” tap dancer Ethel Bruneau reports him saying: “People come and they want to go out with one.”<sup>17</sup> Harold “Steep” Wade, one of Montreal’s most monumental jazz legends, also played “for strippers and tips” through the 1940s and early 1950s.<sup>18</sup> For Maury Kaye, the bandleader at the uptown club El Morocco, “The Downbeat was . . . *the* best place in town for hookers. And that

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<sup>14</sup> Also quoted in Lévesque, “Éteindre le Red Light,” 145 and in Peggy Roquigny, “Les plaisirs de la danse à Montréal: Transformation d’un Divertissement et de ses pratiques, 1870-1940,” PhD thesis, Department of History, Université du Québec à Montréal, April 2012, 310.

<sup>15</sup> Myron Sutton, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0064, December 15, 1981, audio CD. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Myron Sutton also come from this source.

<sup>16</sup> Kenny Rockhead, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0058, May 4, 1983, audio CD. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Kenny Rockhead also come from this source.

<sup>17</sup> Ethel Bruneau, *Interview with Mrs. Swing [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0005 [7112], 1993-1994, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Ethel Bruneau also come from this source.

<sup>18</sup> Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise*, 153; John Gilmore, *Who’s Who of Jazz in Montreal: Ragtime to 1970* (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1989), 298.

was it! There was no undercover shit happening, I mean, *they were there!*”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, as jazz aficionado and manager of Louis Metcalf’s International band May Oliver recalls of The Snake Pit, a jam sessions’ spot in the late 1940s that was located just under Rockhead’s Paradise:

The Snake Pit, I mean it *was* a snake pit . . . They used to get the worst. You got there the same as Rockhead’s . . . Girls, weird lookin’, weird lookin’ chicks. Upstairs, you would get ah, the odd girl that would be absolutely stunning and she’d turn out to be a high, very high-priced call girl that was just out enjoying herself and not looking for any kind of business. And then of course down the snake pit you got the depths, I mean, you’d wonder how anybody would ever want a woman like that, you know, some of them were really strange.<sup>20</sup>

Clearly, the spaces that jazz musicians played across town, regardless of whether they were located uptown, downtown, or around the Main, were indeed an important step in the “usual route” that, according to a 1923 article in the *Montreal Daily Star*, took young girls from “the most respectable house[s]” through “stealing, Chinese cafés, cabarets, Negro and Chinese opium joints and last but surest, the disorderly house.”<sup>21</sup>

At least one black woman performer is known to have also worked in the sex trade. “[She was] more famous than all the strip dancers in Montreal,” recalls tap dancer Ethel Bruneau:

She didn’t really strip, she was a shake dancer. Tricksie was tall, she looked like an African Princess . . . She used to wear black stockings, with a black garter belt . . . with the red rose, and then, she had no bust so she used to take newspapers and stick it into the black bra, and with a big red rose in the hair, and she’d come out and dance . . . She also used to make the rounds at the tables . . . every boss wanted Tricksie because she was the best money-maker for the club, because she used to go out and ask the men ‘How was their bananas’ but I didn’t know what she used to talk about when she used to talk about bananas . . . One night . . . I was on stage and I saw her kind of doing whatever she was doing to the guys’ banana. And she used to go ‘round the club and she used to take Vaseline and put it on her hands to take care of

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<sup>19</sup> Maury Kaye, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0029, September 2, 1982 audio CD. Italics mine, to account for Kaye’s own emphasis. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Maury Kaye also come from this source.

<sup>20</sup> May Oliver, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0049, February 17, 1982, audio CD. Also quoted in Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise*, 158. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from May Oliver also come from this source.

<sup>21</sup> “City is Accused of Tolerating, if not Abetting Vice,” *The Montreal Daily Star*, January 8, 1923, 3. Quoted in Herland, “Organized Righteousness Against Organized Viciousness,” 63.

the bananas! And then . . . I realized why she had all these Vaseline jars in the dress room and wouldn't let anybody use them!<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, at the Chez Paree in the 1950s, Bruneau remembers several entertainers who

would go up to the tables and dance, I guess a shake dance, and try to get the money with their knees or their thighs and stuff like that. And then some of them would go to the tables, and the guys would just feel them up! I mean, I've seen girls sitting at a table having sex with a guy!

Mary Brown explains that such practices were also common at Rockhead's Paradise in the 1920s and 1930s, where: "Dancers would go from table to table, [they] would pick up bills with their thighs off the table. Rolled up bills . . . they would put their leg up and catch it in their wassood [sic?]."<sup>23</sup> More commonly, much in the manner of burlesque dancers, strip-teasers, and sex workers, black women performers used stage names such as Rose Bud, Venus, or Exotic Ti-Ti in order to emphasize their erotic appeal as well as to veil their private identities from their public ones.<sup>24</sup> Shake dancer Tina Baines advertised her shows in the paper but constantly changed her name so that her brother wouldn't follow her around to "bug" her.<sup>25</sup> Bernice Jordan used "Bunny" and "Brazilian Bombshell" as stage names, and Mary Brown went by Maria Estabañez, Princess Elveena, or Mary Wah depending on the evening's number. They wore costumes and

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<sup>22</sup> According to Ralph Whims, Tricksie (or Trixie) was the stage name of Lucille Wade, who was the sister of Harold Steep Wade. Personal communication with author, March 30, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Mary Brown, *Interview with Mary [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0004 [7111], 1993-1994, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Mary Brown also come from this source. Kathy Ogren speaks of a similar practice in American cabarets in the 1920s, a practice that she suggests had been standard among black blues and jazz singers. "Placing tables alongside the cabaret floor made it possible not only for the audience to see and feel a part of the performance, but performers could also move through the tables to the audience . . . Alberta Hunter remembered how this worked at the Dreamland in Chicago: 'Singers then would go around from table to table singin' to each table, hustlin' dollars in tips. But nobody at the other tables would get mad when they couldn't hear you. I made a lot of money that way.'" Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution*, 68.

<sup>24</sup> Meilan Lam, *Show Girls: Celebrating Montreal's Legendary Black Jazz Scene*, Montreal, National Film Board of Canada, 1998, VHS.

<sup>25</sup> Tina Baines Brereton, *Interview with Tina [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0001 [7108], December 2, 1993, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Tina Baines also come from this source.

props meant to emphasize the most eroticized parts of their bodies: False eyelashes, lipsticks and rouges; brassieres and falsies, tassels or pasties, feathers, veils, skirts, or fringe bathing suits—always with high heels, unless they performed “African numbers,” which they often performed barefoot.<sup>26</sup> For Baines, there was “no need for a skirt, shorts and a top would get them excited just the same [she laughs].” According to Brown, there were still some limitations on what parts of the body they were allowed to show: “You didn’t have hair under your arm. You can have hair where the sun don’t shine, and you had to have two pairs of panties to hide it, and you had to shave it off where it could be seen. It was considered indecent. No kinda hairs at all.” But as Jordan’s son Ralph Whims explains, most parts of black women’s bodies were not bound to such strict regulations: “If the tassel falls off, the hat falls off, they have to dance without it, have to keep doing it.”<sup>27</sup> Jordan’s brassiere strap “always broke:”

I had a really heavy bust [she laughs] and eh [she laughs], I was very unlucky like that [she makes a coy face]. I’d be jumping and dancing and dancing [she mimes it] and one strap would come down. Good thing they were firm then. The men would love, they’d love that, and the women would be so shy they’d be turning their head, and I always wondered why they turned their head. They had a bust too!<sup>28</sup>

Clearly, practices of strategic undressing on the black variety stage (or whatever unlucky situation it was that made Jordan’s brassiere strap slide so regularly) were not seen as altogether viceful as much as they were contested sites where displays of appreciation and distaste could be expressed safely in the public sphere. Some loved it, some turned their heads—Jordan laughed. When black women performers toured outside of Montreal, for instance in Shawinigan, “Three-

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<sup>26</sup> Discussed among others in Tina Baines Brereton, *Interview with Tina [moving images]*.

<sup>27</sup> Ralph Whims, *Interview with Ralph [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0003 [7110], 1993-1994, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Ralph Whims also come from this source.

<sup>28</sup> Bernice Jordan (Whims), *Interview with Bernice [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0002 [7109], 1993-1994, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Bernice Jordan also come from this source.

Rivers,” “Two-Mountains” and Quebec City, they had to negotiate somewhat more conservative audiences and as such, slight increases in levels of regulation on the display of their bodies: “In some little towns you’d go to,” recalls Tina Baines, “no belly button.” When Bernice Jordan performed in Trois-Rivières, she tells how “the Maurice Duplessis department” said:

‘Gotta sent her back to Montreal, her brassiere strap breaks all the time.’ But the gentlemen in those clubs, they laughed, they said [she mimics a French-Canadian accent by rolling the ‘r’ with her tongue]: ‘Bunny Jordan is in town, go see her, I’m sure her brrrrrassiere’s gonna brrrreak!’ . . . One time, Duplessis said ‘She has to go back, the men aren’t going to go to church on Sunday, they’re going to see the show on Saturday and they’re just going to wait there until her brassiere strap breaks’ [she laughs].”

It’s unclear whether Jordan was actually sent back to Montreal after this performance in Trois-Rivières, or whether she was just warned to “watch it pretties don’t *boom* too much, Maurice Duplessis is gonna assault to Three-Rivers.” In any case, her story testifies once again to the ways in which conventions of the black variety stage were understood as liminal zones where the articulation between the viceful and the moral could be safely rehearsed in the public sphere. Some found it funny, some found it exciting, those in power found it improper, and all of these attitudes could coexist somewhat peacefully in the public sphere. Strategic undressing was marked and remarked upon, but regulatory attempts were not meant to effectively challenge the performance conventions of the black variety stage.

Jordan, Brown and Baines describe some of their routines in ways that can hardly be distinguished from strip-and-tease acts. Brenda Foley makes this point in *Undressed for Success: Beauty Contestants and Exotic Dancers as Merchants of Morality*, where she compares the “routine of choreographed abandon” of exotic dancers to that of striptease artists. Among others,



Foley's description of the stripper's parade is very similar to Jordan's demonstration of a showgirl walk upon entering the stage:<sup>29</sup>

You ah... you hold your hands out [she demonstrates] and you start and the drummer starts bombobobo-bombobobo... [she sings the beginning of Duke Ellington's "Things Ain't What They Used To Be," on the tonic] and you walk! [she sings the same motive on the tonic again] and you walk! And you got to stick your chest, [she sings the motive third time, in subdominant harmony] and you get more stiff [fourth iteration of the motive, tonic harmony, with closing motive]. There's all kinds of different steps you have to do to different beats of the drum.

Jordan also tells of a number she did on the theme song of the Ziegfeld Follies, "A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody," a common fixture of strip-and-tease and beauty contest musical repertoire, where she wore a fringe bathing suit and danced with one of her "three lovely fans, black and white, mauve and white, and, pink and white." May Oliver, the band manager of Louis Metcalf's International band, recalls that variety shows at Rockhead's Paradise featured many tease acts: "Believe me, the tassels were strategically placed, and a girl could spin those tassels in one way or the other, I mean, believe me, that is an art! If you've never seen a tassel dance, you've never lived." And when a group of priests walked in at Café du Nord while Brown was singing:

They [had] heard that I danced with the less clothes [she makes big, falsely offended eyes], so they wanted me to dance with the less clothes . . . [So] I just went out, very bashful, you know, and I wore a long gown, and I sort of took it off, and, with good taste, and, showed them my legs, ankle here, ankle there, you know . . . They were gawking more than anybody else! You know! . . . They almost made me lose my religion.

Jordan also describes one of her acts in a way that makes it difficult to articulate exactly where the difference lies between an exotic dance and a strip act:

You have a nice bust that stands up and your tassels were moving, you shake, twirl, do a bump or a grind . . . You have these nice little skirts, and then you bend over, you, you look cute, you

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<sup>29</sup> See Brenda Foley, *Undressed for Success: Beauty Contestants and Exotic Dancers as Merchants of Morality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). See also Lucinda Jarrett, *Stripping in Time: A History of Erotic Dancing* (London; San Francisco, Calif.: Pandora, 1997); Becki Ross, *Burlesque West: Showgirls, Sex and Sin in Postwar Vancouver* (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2009); Dahlia Schweitzer, "Striptease: The Art of Spectacle and Transgression," *Journal of Popular Culture* 34, no. 1 (Summer 2000): 65-75; and Rachel Shteir, *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

got high heel shoes on, it makes your legs all look nice and straight—well my legs were straight then—and you, you, you got a nice bust, and that's what the men liked to look at, you know?

Similarly, Tina Baines specifically enjoyed working at the Starland Theatre on Saint-Laurent boulevard specifically because it had “a gangplank, a runway:”

And you'd see always the little lone men, bald-headed men all around there. And they used to pack that place up! [she laughs] I was only a kid, and I used to laugh, to do all those numbers, but they were nice. It was fun. It was fun. The music, etcetera . . . It's a thrill for you to be close to the customers, and the customers feel good when you're right close to them.

Further in Baines' oral history, interviewer Meilan Lam asks the cameraman if the camera has been turned off. “Well, don't turn it off!” answers Baines, amused, before she continues: “In certain places yes, we danced around the tables, which was fun. As long as they don't touch you, you know? But ah, that wasn't bad.” “Did you do tassel dancing?” asks Lam. Baines smiles, hesitates, her eyes expressively wondering whether, or how to answer Lam's question. She shakes her head, a twinkle in the eye.

More than just sharing comparable routines, black and white tease acts often shared the same stages and were even put on the same bill. Around the Main, where the least segregated stages were located (the downtown clubs had all-black shows for mixed audiences, and the uptown clubs had only the “top-notch blacks” for an exclusively-white audience), erotic routines by black and white female dancers appeared one after the other. At places like the Midway, the Starland, the Crystal, and the Roxy Theatre, black women performed in-between movies and French-Canadian burlesque skits. Black women performers were also hired for stag parties where they performed risqué songs and danced between white strip-and-tease acts and female impersonating acts. “The men are all sittin' around and you're singing,” recalls Bernice Jordan:

*So you met someone who set you back on your knees. Goody Goody! And you [she keeps singing the notes but she forgets the words] Please. Goody Goody! [now talking:] Oh I can't remember words. And I used to do that, 'Goody Goody.' And you touch them on their chin*

and on their bald head, and you sit on their knee and you get cute, and sometimes they put ten of five dollars in your pock [she interrupts herself], in your chest, and that's good money in those days. That's a little tip 'cause you look good [she laughs]. You know. Everything is a terrible hustle [she laughs].

Tina Baines also describes the kind of dancing that she was hired to do for stag parties:

We all do the occasional stag party, which was fun. And sometimes [she laughs], it's okay when I was hired as a singer at a stag party because you sing risqué numbers which is, two way, which is great. But sometime when they hire you as a, a strip-teaser, and I says 'Get outta here,' I sing party tunes but not stripping. I said 'Tina,' I said 'strip-teasing' I said 'Ok.' So strip-teasing was, you go you tease, I have five costumes on and I take off four and I got one on, and that's it! . . . Some of us, some of us did strip-teasing, some didn't. If you know how to do your business, you know? And still be respected.

To summarize, black women performers wore revealing costumes, performed erotic dances, worked on runways, fan-danced, sang double-entendre songs at stag parties, sometimes doubled as sex workers and danced at the tables, and onstage they pranced around, they arched their backs, they teased, and they stripped. Yet despite an abundance of evidence that linked the genre to public displays of female erotic bodies, the acoustical space that jazz set up did not work the same to legitimize the erotic dancing of female bodies black and white. When Bernice Jordan is asked by Meilan Lam "Did you do the strip-teasing?" she answers:

Oh God no. I'm too short! . . . They had the colored girls doing the show, and they had the beautiful white girl doing her strip. Really beautiful girls too, mostly tall, gracious girls. They'd do the strip. 'Cause anytime we had a beautiful white girl doing her strip, they always got raided! So who'd want to be a strip-teaser? . . . Good thing we were the song-and-dance girls 'cause we were able to go home! That's an awful feeling and experience, nobody would want that . . . You get scared to death, and you'd say [she interrupts herself]. What would you tell your mother !?

As I documented above, the commonalities in costumes, routines, and movements far outweigh the differences between black and white tease acts. Exotic dance, strip-and-tease acts, and strips were to a certain extent interchangeable in the kinds of variety shows that animated Montreal's jazz scene through the first half of the century. "If the dancers weren't there, there wouldn't be a

show, you know what I'm saying?" begins Ethel Bruneau: "Whether you had a chorus line, whether it was a solo dance, a strip, or jazz, or whatever, you had to have a dancer!" Still, what Jordan suggests here is that black showgirls were not arrested by Montreal's police for performing erotic routines provided there was a soundtrack to legitimize it as a song-and-dance number. Why were the "song-and-dance girls" and the "beautiful/tall/gracious white girls" seen differently enough in the eye of civic authorities for one to be granted impunity and not the other? How could a jazz soundtrack give license to black woman's erotic body-in-motion, while eroticizing white women's bodies to the point of offense?

### *Jazz and Modernity in Quebec*

In the years that followed the First World War, the rapid urbanization and industrialization of Montreal contributed to the reification of particular anxieties regarding the preservation of culture as Quebec society adopted new modes of living and thinking about itself and about the world.<sup>30</sup> For the majority of French-Canadians, urbanization involved more than just exchanging a rural life for an urban one: It implied leaving behind a rather homogenous French-Canadian agrarian and Catholic culture in the countryside for the cosmopolitanism of one of the continent's most thriving urban centers.<sup>31</sup> Besides its well-researched French-speaking majority, the city also hosted a powerful Anglophone minority (including Scots, English, Irish,

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<sup>30</sup> On Quebec and modernity, see among others Serge Gagnon, *Religion, Moralité, Modernité* (Sainte-Foy: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1999); Yvan Lamonde and Esther Trépanier, dir., *L'avènement de la modernité culturelle au Québec* (Québec: Éditions de l'IQRC, 2007); Kenneth McRoberts and Donald Postgate, *Développement et Modernisation au Québec* (Montréal: Boréal Express, 1983); Collett Tracey, "Montreal: Its Role in the Beginnings of Modernism in Canada," In *Culture + State: Nationalisms*, edited by Gabrielle Zezulka-Mailloux and James Gifford, 77-83 (Edmonton, Alberta: CRC Humanities Studio, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> McRoberts, *Développement et Modernisation au Québec*, 70.

Americans, and Jews), as well as increasingly visible minority communities, including those of the African diaspora.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, for French-Canadian cultural elites, modernity was not only synonymous with urbanity and cosmopolitanism, but also with Americanization of culture.<sup>33</sup> Hector de St-Denys Garneau, who was one of the most important figures in French-Canadian poetry of the 1930s (and anecdotally, the brother-in-law of Ethel Bruneau) positioned French-Canadian culture in the following terms:

It has only had three centuries to form its originality in contact with a marvelous nature, a new life; it has only had three centuries of original tradition. And now it falls into a time of intense speed, leveling, and uniformity. It hardly had any time to become itself completely. The ease with which those who are in contact with *américanité* sacrifice to it all originality only serves to prove my point.<sup>34</sup>

Because French-Canadian culture was understood as frail and therefore vulnerable, *américanité* triggered particular anxieties relating to the imagined French-Canadian nation. The interwar years and the reign of the Maurice Duplessis government, which ended as late as 1959, is an era in Quebec history that is commonly referred to as *La Grande Noirceur*, an expression somewhat akin to “the dark ages.” These decades were marked by the proliferation of nationalist groups for whom protecting the idealized racial, religious, linguistic, and cultural homogeneity of Quebec society was to be accomplished primarily by increasing the demographics.<sup>35</sup> Clerical and state

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<sup>32</sup> Bettina Bradbury and Tamara Myers, *Negotiating Identities in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Montreal* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 3-8.

<sup>33</sup> On Quebec and *Américanité*, see Sandria P. Bouliane, “‘Good-bye Broadway, Hello Montréal:’ Traduction, appropriation et création de chansons populaires canadiennes-françaises dans les années 1920,” PhD thesis, Department of Music, Université Laval, 2013; Cuccioletta, “The *Américanité* of Quebec Urban Popular Culture;” Magda Fahrni and Yves Frénette, “‘Don’t I long for Montreal,’ L’identité hybride d’une jeune migrante franco-américaine pendant la Première Guerre mondiale,” *Social History* 41, no. 81 (May 2008); and Denis Saint-Jacques and Marie-José des Rivières, “Notre *Américanisation*,” in *1937: Un tournant culturel*, edited by Yvan Lamonde and Denis Saint-Jacques (Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 2009), 151-159.

<sup>34</sup> Lamonde, *L’avènement de la modernité culturelle au Québec*, 217. My translation.

<sup>35</sup> Lévesque, *Making and Breaking the Rules*, 29.

authorities worked together on a pronatalist strategy called *la revanche des berceaux* (“the revenge of the cradles”) which identified the body of French-Canadian women as the main arena where Quebec’s ongoing struggle to define and maintain itself as a distinct cultural entity in North America was to be played. As feminist historian Diane Lamoureux explains, “Nationalism . . . does not always act in the direction of modernization. In some cases, it can even decry modernity on behalf of the threat it poses to the nation, as evidenced by the *nationalisme de survivance* of the first half of the twentieth century in Quebec.”<sup>36</sup> French-Canadian nationalists insisted that it was a national duty for the *québécoise de souche* to marry French-Canadian men and bear high numbers of French-speaking children—a strategy that was essentially successful, since until the late fifties Quebec’s fertility rate was amongst the highest in the Western world.<sup>37</sup> As Andrée Lévesque has shown in her analysis of discourses on womanhood in the interwar year period, despite increasing groups of women who challenged Quebec’s long-established gender and sexual roles, until the beginning of the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s the ideal French-Canadian woman continued to be a home-based mother of many. The *québécoise*’s role as bearer of the nation’s religious, linguistic, and cultural values was defended vehemently by those closest to the centers of power.<sup>38</sup>

The rapid urbanization and thriving cosmopolitanism of Montreal, the notion that French-Canadian culture was vulnerable to *américanité*, and nationalist reclaimings of the body of the *québécoise* as an apparatus of cultural preservation constituted a host of related concerns and anxieties surrounding Quebec modernity that the advent of jazz in Montreal contributed to reify.

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<sup>36</sup> Diane Lamoureux, *L’Amère Patrie: Entre Féminisme et Nationalisme* (Montréal: Éditions du Remue-Ménage, 2001), 91.

<sup>37</sup> Catherine Krull, “Where Have All the Children Gone? Quebec’s Fertility Decline: 1941-1991,” *Canadian Studies in Population* 30, no. 1 (2003).

<sup>38</sup> Lévesque, *Making and Breaking the Rules*, 15.

*Les jeunes filles modernes*, these young working-class urban girls who willfully spent their earnings on modern forms of leisure such as the movie theatre and the dancehall rather than on the Church or their families, were not only decried for rejecting the paradigm of caring femininity that they were expected to embody, but above all for jeopardizing the “survival of the French-Canadian race.” As Tamara Myers’s research demonstrates, *les jeunes filles modernes*

embodied delinquency in a way boys could not. Adolescent girls’ bodies were barometers of the future and made them, in the words of one probation officer, ‘ripe for trouble.’ Their maturing sexuality and promise of maternity were read as harbingers of society’s destiny . . . Young modern girls were cast as harbingers of the decline of the family, the cornerstone of French Canada.<sup>39</sup>

Above all, *le problème des jeunes filles modernes* was understood as a leisure time problem.<sup>40</sup>

Peggy Roquigny’s research on social dance in Quebec between 1870 and 1940 shows that between the end of the First World War and the beginning of the depression decade, the commercial dance industry in Montreal experienced a remarkable growth. From a minimum of four locations which featured commercialized social dance in 1913 to a maximum of forty-seven in 1932, the trend would continue well into the Second World War.<sup>41</sup> And because these social spaces were seen as less homogenous than the parish, it was feared that *les jeunes filles modernes* were opening themselves up to the threat posed by the “new” and “foreign” populations who frequented these spaces and who, in the words of Father Archambault, would

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<sup>39</sup> Tamara Myers, *Caught: Montréal’s Modern Girls and the Law, 1869-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 7, 15. See also Nancy Janoviček and Catherine Carstairs, *Feminist History in Canada: New Essays on Women, Gender, Work, and Nation* (Vancouver; Toronto: UBC Press, 2013); Suzanne Marchand, *Rouge à lèvres et pantalon: Des pratiques esthétiques féminines controversées au Québec 1920-1939* (Montréal: Hurtubise HMH, 1997); Isabelle Perreault, “Morale catholique et genre féminin: La sexualité dissertée dans les manuels de sexualité maritale au Québec, 1930-1960,” *Revue d’Histoire de l’Amérique Française* 57, no. 4 (Spring 2004): 567-591.

<sup>40</sup> Myers, *Caught*, 159.

<sup>41</sup> Roquigny, “Les plaisirs de la danse à Montréal,” 270. See also Cynthia Comacchio, “Dancing to Perdition: Adolescence and Leisure in Interwar English Canada.” *Journal of Canadian Studies* (Autumn, 1997).

always “threaten families” and “introduce their shameless morals.”<sup>42</sup> Nowhere else was Montreal’s black community more visible than on jazz stages. In this sense, jazz provided a crucial site where the articulation of racial difference could be attempted. To summarize, if, as many have argued, adolescence was one of the most radical inventions of the twentieth century, youth culture in interwar years Quebec expressed itself through its engagement with racialized and Americanized forms of leisure—jazz—which in turn threatened the idea of the French-Canadian nation through constructions of the body of the *Québécoise* as bearer of French-Canadian linguistic, cultural, and religious values.

### *French-Canadian Jazz Criticism*

The jazz criticism that emerged from the centers of French-Canadian religious, academic, political, and cultural authority was much less concerned with questions of aesthetic value than with jazz as a sound-body complex. Abbot Victorin Germain’s 1930 pamphlet *Dansera-t-on chez moi? Consultation théologique rédigée à l’intention d’un père de famille* vilifies modern dance precisely in such terms.<sup>43</sup> The book, dedicated “to the catholic heads of families, in the hopes that it awakens their convictions and stimulates their energies to support the church fully,” collects together the testimonies of various “experts” in gynecology, physiology, “fitness” and “hygiene” to stage a debate on modern dance and morality.<sup>44</sup> The first strategy that Germain uses to delegitimize modern dance is to demonstrate the threat that it poses to the sexual integrity of French-Canadian girls. For this purpose, Germain calls on various experts in gynecology, physiology, “fitness” and “hygiene” to testify to the fact that modern dance is “the ultimate

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<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Myers, *Caught*, 4; and Lévesque, *Making and Breaking the Rules*, 17.

<sup>43</sup> “Will We Dance Under my Roof? Theological Consultation for the Benefit of Fathers of Families.” All translations from this source are mine.

<sup>44</sup> Germain, *Dansera-t-on chez moi?*, 26.



sensual evil;” that it “encourage[s] the things of the flesh, at the same time as it turns away from marriage, sterilizes the homes, and ruins the health.”<sup>45</sup> Doctor Pagès “deplore[s] a way of dancing that adds excitement to those we must already suffer from due to our Latin origins, our overall well-being, and the growing presence of women in everyday life.”<sup>46</sup> An anonymous young officer is also quoted saying: “I would never marry a young girl who dances the tango or the fox-trot. Why? Because I dance them.”<sup>47</sup> Clearly, women’s bodies were at the center of the anxiety triggered by jazz. The “clothes worn by female dancers,” the frequency and the regularity of the dances, and the fact that they are organized in public spaces are all elements that Germain draws upon to delineate what he finds truly viceful about modern dance: that it “*leads to inappropriate gestures, to indiscreet touches, to rapprochements between adults of the two sexes that are too intimate, to indecent postures, and to embraces that excite the carnal passions.*”<sup>48</sup> Above all, modern dances are decried as “*opportunities for intimacy and meetings between people of different sexes.*”<sup>49</sup> And while Germain ultimately blames the musicians, the fathers and mothers, as well as all people involved in the gramophone, automatic piano, and radio industry for good measure, it is above all for failing to intervene in an activity that puts the sexual integrity of French-Canadian girls at risk that he condemns them. Regardless of whether its participants eventually engage in so-called promiscuous practices, modern dance is viceful because “it’s in itself a grave sin not to want to fend off the possibility of grave sin.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Germain, *Dansera-t-on chez moi?*, 31, 105.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 53-55. He also blames modern dance for “awakening the temptation of solitary sin.” Ibid, 82.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 51. Italics mine.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 50, 59.

The second strategy that Germain uses to discredit modern dance builds on a racialized and positivist understanding of the history of social dance. Here, Germain draws primarily on the testimonies of dance historians and teachers associated with the *Académie des Maîtres de Danse de Paris* in order to testify to the “vulgarity, the savagery, and the complete lack of aesthetic of these alleged dances.”<sup>51</sup> He argues that modern dance has more in common with the “voluptuous and lewd dances performed by the dregs of certain negro or savage populations in the midst of their worst moments of moronification” than with dance forms “consistent with the state of grace.”<sup>52</sup>

In the early years of mankind, dance must have been spontaneous, since neither ordinary language nor chant have ever sufficed to express the great transports of joy. The entire body must take part in the expression of feeling. Look at children when they are happy: They can't stay still; they talk; they sing; they jump . . . Just like the observation of primitive music and song has led us to deduce the rules of harmony, choreography was borne out of the observation of steps and figures that were inspired to mankind in its early stages, upon experiencing feelings that were both simple and intense . . . Musical technique opened the door to geniuses and masterpieces; choreography itself spread the grace of gesture, the elegance of attitude, the charm of a beautiful gait through the world . . . The human body subtracted itself, in a way, from animality as it served the high poetry of the inebriated soul. Such were the first idealistic tributes from mankind to its Creator.

“But evolution did not end there,” Germain continues: “decadence found its way.” Over the next few pages of the pamphlet, Germain traces the portrait of how what he calls the “noble dances” (or the “serious dances,” where the execution is “downright honest: we don’t leave the ground; the art or the entertainment consists in calm sliding or walking steps, in beautiful poses, in beautiful attitudes; it’s the minuet, it’s the pavane”) declined to “light dances” (or “high dances . . . the ones where we leap and spin, like the gavotte and the contre-danse”), which in turn declined to what he calls the “turning dances” (the waltz, the polka, the mazurka). “The only

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<sup>51</sup> Including “Tancrède Martel, titulaire du fameux prix Lasserre.” Germain, *Dansera-t-on chez moi?*, 27.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 24.

thing left,” he concludes, “was to get the world to accept as a fashion an entertainment without art and absolutely immoral, the dances that I would call *sticky*.”<sup>53</sup>

Germain produces here a racialized narrative that relies on a primitivist understanding of African-diasporic forms of vernacular expression. It is also telling that Germain sets himself to compare *la vraie danse traditionnelle* to *les danses exotiques modernes*: all modern dances are understood as exotic here.<sup>54</sup> Germain quotes a definition of social dance from a contemporary edition of the Larousse dictionary that draws on the same assumption: “The twentieth century saw the Boston dethroned by exotic dances: The cake-walk, the Matchitche, the One Step, the Fox-Trot and the Tango.”<sup>55</sup> Similarly his blurring together of such diverse dance forms as “the fox-trot, one-step, shimmy and other habaneras” is indicative of a much greater interest in asserting the inherent foreignness of modern dances rather than to demonstrate genuine concern with African-diasporic dance forms. Finally, not only does Germain describe modern dances as being “as ugly and foolish as they are bestial,” but he argues that “some races might stand next to the precipice with less risk of experiencing vertigo than the Latins [that is, speakers of Romance languages].”<sup>56</sup> Modern dance is therefore not only constructed as a form of cultural expression which French-Canadians family heads should be encouraged to look down upon because it is sexually threatening, racialized, foreign and more primitive: it is constructed as essentially ‘other’ to an imagined nation whose boundaries are above all language-based. Ultimately, Germain’s concern is exclusively with those who danced modern dances *and* whom French-Canadian nationalists claimed as their own.

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<sup>53</sup> Germain, *Dansera-t-on chez moi?*, 13-23. Italics mine.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, appendice I.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 26.

The anxieties reflected in Germain's depiction of modern dance are consistent with the jazz criticism that appears in the French-Canadian press of the interwar period. Sandria P. Bouliane has pondered on the relative dearth of results following a words-based search of the term "jazz" in Quebec's francophone press between 1919 and 1929. As she demonstrates, most of the francophone criticism from the 1920s came from opinion-makers based in France. Bouliane argues that by endorsing France's position against jazz, the French-Canadian press strengthened its cultural ties with *La Vieille Europe* as a way to resist the Americanization of its culture.<sup>57</sup> Yet words-based searches of terms like turkey-trot, ragtime, fox-trot, shimmy, black-bottom, one-step, Charleston, tango, rumba, swing, shag, and cheek-to-cheek reveal a solid core of criticism coming from French-Canadian political, academic, and cultural elites that sustained well into the Second World War. It is important to point out here that the word jazz appears only rarely in the criticism despite the fact that the sounds that the jazz band made and the space of the modern dancehall or cabaret are implied. As late as 1942 words like "tango," "fox-trot," "shimmy" and "cheek-to-cheek" are used to refer to jazz in the French-Canadian press.

In this sense, it is less with jazz sound that critics took offense than with jazz as a sound-body complex. In a 1923 article "on the degeneracy of modern times" for *La Revue Moderne*, Arsène Laplume argues that

There's a hundred times more spirit in a quadrille than in a tango, and a thousand times more in [the song] '*N'te promène pas toute nue*' [*Don't walk around naked*] than in a band from Douglas. The word, however trivial or even when inept, is more 'intelligent' than movement.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Sandria P. Bouliane, "'Le Jazz devant ses Juges:' Critique, presse et jazz à Montréal, 1919-1929," in *La critique musicale au XXe siècle, Tome 4, Jazz, Rock et Musiques actuelles*, edited by Timothée Picard (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2018). Paper originally presented at the 2014 McGill Graduate Student Symposium.

<sup>58</sup> Arsène Laplume, "Notre Époque," *La Revue Moderne*, Mai 1923, 14. Translation mine.

The reference here to a song about women and modesty is telling: Words casting a naked woman's body-in-motion are still a thousand times better than an actual naked woman's moving body. A 1931 entry in *Le Passe-Temps*, a French-Canadian magazine that frequently published music sheets and criticism, also demonstrates how cultural elites in French-Canadian society were worried about the effects of jazz on French-Canadian patriotism. "Now," wrote Nicolas Tillemont, "we are starting to 'blacken up' [i.e. *négrifier*] our old Canadian airs while our ancient quadrilles, jigs and reels are a hundred times more harmonious."<sup>59</sup> Jean Saucier similarly asks in 1921 in *La Canadienne*:

What are we going to do against this invasion? Experience teaches us that it is the simple melodies, the themes that are easy to capture and to memorize that have always made the greatest impression on nations, and our Canadian songs are filled with these musical phrases that are so striking we can't forget them. Why not revive them? Why not bring them up to date? Their sweet melodies and their caressing nuances will no doubt instill in us, perhaps without us even noticing, a more ardent heritage and a more profound attachment to our native soil . . . Two birds will be hit with one stone: The idea of nation will appear under a new and brighter day, coated with a new shine (for many, it may even appear for the first time!), and as we get accustomed again to the singing of the melodies of the *terroir*, jazz will see its followers dwindle, then disappear, and thus abandoned by everyone, it will go back to where it came from, not taking with it anyone's regrets.<sup>60</sup>

Peggy Roquigny has observed that the amateur music sheets that appear in French-Canadian magazines like *Le Passe-Temps* and *Canada qui Chante* between 1919 and 1935 draw overwhelmingly on traditional dance forms—statistics that in theory should have appeased Tillemont and Saucier (as well as, arguably, Victorin Germain). The editor-in-chief of *Le Passe-Temps* was arguably the most conservative of the two. Out of 190 music sheets, 126 are waltzes and the vast majority of others are polkas, mazurkas and gavottes. Only one one-step appears

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<sup>59</sup> Nicolas Tillemont, "Alouette, Fox-Trot," *Le Passe-Temps* 37, no. 834, February 1931, 18. Translation mine. Nicolas Tillemont was the pseudonym for Lionel Groulx. I would like to thank Marie-Thérèse Lefebvre for sharing this information with me.

<sup>60</sup> Jean Saucier, "Musique et Jazz," *La Canadienne* 4, no. 2, Novembre 1921, 8. Translation mine. Jean Saucier was the son of musician Joseph Saucier.

between 1919 and 1926, and only two cake-walks, one ragtime, and not a single fox-trot throughout the interwar years.<sup>61</sup> By comparison, nearly half of the thirty music sheets that appear in *Canada qui Chante* draw on modern dance forms. Aimed at a more popular readership, thirteen fox-trots, one one-step, two javas, two habaneras, and one Charleston were published between 1927 and 1930. Still, the majority of songs that make topical references to jazz dance do so in lyric form only, with only the mention of a popular, often French-Canadian air that the lyrics are meant to be sung to. In other words, the Canadian air itself was not really “négrifié.” “*En dansant la Mazurka*,” composed by Jean Nel and sung to “*Dans ce beau pays d’Espagne*,” mentions the black-bottom, the Charleston, and the tango to argue that the Mazurka is a much better couples dance, an argument that aligns well with Germain’s claims about the threatened marriageability of the jazz-dancing *québécoise*.<sup>62</sup> “*L’appendicite*,” by Oscar Valade, sung to “*La marche du commis voyageur*,” cites the Charleston along with “shortened dresses” and “boy-like haircuts” as combined forces of evil that eventually lead the “daughters of good families” to end up at the doctors’ office, “crying their dishonor” and asking for their “appendicitis” to be removed.<sup>63</sup> In “*Les Sept Merveilles du Monde*” by Armand Leclair, sung to “*La Musique qui Passe*,” the Charleston is associated with women who put on make-up, who use pills to get thinner or to make their breasts larger, who get short haircuts and who flirt, smile, and *se*

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<sup>61</sup> Roquigny, “Les plaisirs de la danse à Montréal,” 425-537. As Roquigny demonstrates, this stands as powerful historical evidence to the continuity, and in fact to the interdependency of traditional and modern dance forms in Quebec society, and by extension to the ways in which ideas relating to tradition and modernity should be understood in a more synchronic than diachronic way. Clearly, an important gap existed, as Roquigny argues, between Montreal’s commercial dance practices—all of whom centered on modern dance—and those associated with private spaces like amateur music-making, where prewar and modern dance forms appeared side by side.

<sup>62</sup> Jean Nel, “En dansant la Mazurka,” air: “In A Little Spanish Town,” *Canada Qui Chante* 1, no. 5, May 1927, 54. Translation mine. Jean Nel was a pseudonym for Jean-André Jeannel, French author and comedian who emigrated to the United States and Canada. I would like to thank Marie-Thérèse Lefebvre for sharing this information with me.

<sup>63</sup> Oscar Valade, “L’appendicite,” chanson d’actualité par Almer, air: *La Marche du Commis Voyageur*, *Canada Qui Chante* 1, no. 1, January, 1927, 8. Translation mine.

*dévergondent* [i.e. “debauch themselves”].<sup>64</sup> “La Jazzbinette,” by J.R. Blay (“Air: Annabelle”) serves once again as a pretext to reflect on foreign modern forms of heteronormative sociality (“*on la danse comme aux États*,” “We dance it like they do in the States”).<sup>65</sup> In short, parlor songs that make topical references to jazz dance are well-aligned with contemporaneous criticism: They produce difference between self and other where jazz signifies the foreign, the exotic, the sexually-threatening, and where it is symptomatic of a modernity that is perceived above all as coming from the outside.

Beyond lyric songs that make explicit references to modern dance forms, songs composed by French-Canadian composers and marked fox-trot were also important sites for articulations between self and other through musical representation of colonial fantasies. The song “Miss Canada: Souvenir du Carnaval de 1923,” marked “fox-trot” by J.H. Metcalf, is particularly interesting for the ways in which it similarly sets a dichotomy between a masculine national self and a feminine other (see appendix I for score).<sup>66</sup> The song begins with a hurdy-gurdy-like piano introduction with repeated open fifths in the left hand, semi-tone appoggiaturas in the right, and sudden dynamic changes at the beginning each bar for the first four bars that generate a rustic affect. The first part of the song is an instrumental section based on the form AA’. It is in A minor and it combines a stride-piano left hand with a melodic syncopated figure, with a marked accent on the upbeat of the downbeat, that is followed by an ornament evoking the tango. A quick pivot between i-III in A minor and vi-I in C major suffices to modulate to C for the second part of the piece, where a male chorus intones an ABA’C air (repeated twice) with the words:

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<sup>64</sup> Armand Leclaire, “Les Sept Merveilles du Monde,” air: “J’en suis capable,” excerpt from *La Mascotte, Canada Qui Chante* 4, no. 3, March 1930, 129. Translation mine.

<sup>65</sup> J.R. Blay, “La Jazzbinette,” air: “Annabelle,” *Canada qui Chante* 1, no. 6, June, 1927, 64. Translation mine.

<sup>66</sup> J. H. Metcalf, “Miss Canada: Fox trot Souvenir du Carnaval de 1923,” *Le Passe-Temps* 726, February 7, 1923, 56-7. Translation mine.

“Welcome Miss Canada/To our Carnival/You are the sweetest girl/in all Montreal/Welcome Miss Canada/To our winter sports.” The first twelve bars of the second part of the song have everything to evoke patriotic sentiment: major chords, the particular brightness of C major, a quarter note pace, a melody in parallel sixths and thirds, a chordal texture, etc. Tellingly, a syncopated figure on a minor ii<sub>6</sub> chord—the only functional minor chord of the chorus—recurs on the first two bars of the C phrase with the words “Ever so jolly/Ever so pretty.” A dichotomy is effectively created here between an attractive feminine other in the first part (one can imagine that she might have been entering the stage then) and a patriotic masculine self. The “fox-trot” marking appears to be a generic device that allows for the disarticulation between the national/exotic, the masculine/feminine, and self/other to take place.

Similarly, Canadian art-music composer Henri Miro’s “Au Pays d’Allah” (marked “Oriental fox-trot”) and French composer Charllys’ “Salamambo: La légende du voile sacré” (marked “tempo di Fox-trot”) both set narratives of about desiring to possess “exotic” and languorous women in a musical language that is filled with musical markers of exoticism. “Salamambo,” a piano reduction of an orchestral piece, opens with a horns chorale in d minor and showcases melodic augmented seconds, extended, parallel and dominant minor chords, oscillatory motion between neighboring chords, cymbals and triangles, and a declamatory refrain (“Sa-lamm-bo!”) that is built on the pentatonic scale (see appendix II for score).<sup>67</sup> In “Au Pays d’Allah,” Miro sets a much similar narrative to parallel and extended chords, oscillatory motion between neighboring chords and tones, chromaticism, and pentatonicism (see appendix III for score).<sup>68</sup> In this context, the “fox-trot” marking also seems to work as an exoticizing device, one

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<sup>67</sup> Charllys, “Salamambo: La légende du voile sacré,” fox-trot, *Canada qui Chante* 2, no. 10, October 1928, 145-146. Translation mine.

<sup>68</sup> Henri Miro, “Au Pays d’Allah,” fox-trot oriental, french lyrics by Leon Chevalier, english lyrics by Geo. Dunbar, *La Lyre* 1, no. 4, 1923, 14-16. Translation mine.



which functions in semantically coherent ways with a narrative about women whose attributes are archetypically associated with representations of the nonwhite female body. In other words, in songs composed by art-music composers and published in French-Canadian magazines, jazz dance is presented a site of imperial conquest and colonial fantasy, a “device” or liminal zone that serves to disarticulate between self and other.

In the French-Canadian press, jazz is similarly framed as a primitive, foreign, racialized and sexually-enticing form of cultural expression by drawing on dichotomies like license/restraint, emotion/rationality, past/present, or movement/speech that reproduce racist and sexist tropes about gender and racial difference. But it is criticized above all because of its potential effects on the body: as music aimed for dancing, it can uniquely penetrate and animate bodies in comparison to other forms of art and entertainment. As early as 1919, jazz is likened to illness: “the grotesque dances with which we have become too easily infatuated” make people look like they “suffer from *la Danse de St-Guy* [i.e. French-Canadian name for the dancing plague] or other momentary forms of insanity.”<sup>69</sup> Here, primitivist images of erratic, manic dancing are combined with the idea that “simpler,” more primitive forms of cultural expression have a way of drawing people in against their better judgment. Similarly, in the same 1923 article from *La Revue Moderne* that I quoted above, Arsène Laplume compares “the agitation of the dancers . . . their hysterical wriggling” to “the *danse macabre* of the painters of the Middle Ages.” Again, a positivist narrative emerges where modern dance, through its association with

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<sup>69</sup> “Mesdames, voici la danse à la mode: La Valse Hésitation,” *Le Panorama* 1, no. 1, October 1919, 57. Translation mine.

African American vernacular forms of expression, brings French-Canadian culture backwards on the evolutionary scale.<sup>70</sup>

Such portraits of orgiastic dancing scenes brought about “when the jazz band tears the air with its wild noises” participated in the construction of jazz not only as a device to disarticulate between self and other but also as a sound-body complex that could pose a significant challenge to the social order. “Jazz,” reads Jean Saucier’s critique of modern dance from 1921:

is an illegitimate offspring that has no other relationship to music than the only element of noise—quite a meager form of kinship, needless to say. To the contrary, it stimulates in us only a purely physical sensation. It governs the phantasmagoria of circuses, the burlesque dances of cabaret, and the entertainment of fairs. It serves at best to move, reflexively, the plump shoulder muscles or the atrophied calves of an entire category of people for whom this unsightly shaking called “shimmy” continues to bring delight, and whose hearing faculty, impoverished and excited by the syncopated refrains, remains satisfied with the highly unpleasant noise produced by instruments as blissfully pathetic as the banjo and the rattle coupled with the ukulele, the triangle, and the pots and pans... yes, the pots and pans! Do not be surprised, because for those who didn’t know, the pots and pans play one of the most prominent roles in the percussion of any respectable jazz band. . . . By creating jazz, humanity moved back five centuries in time . . . really, our modern jazz lovers are comparable in all respects to cavemen. Their taste is just as barbaric, even more I would say, because they live in a century that we agree to call civilized, rather musical in fact, and where such sonic aberrations should by no means be allowed.<sup>71</sup>

In this excerpt, jazz is not just a matter of individual taste (i.e. “unsightly,” “unpleasant”): It is a “primitive” and “illegitimate” sound-body complex that stimulates “only purely physical sensations” and “reflexive moves,” in “atrophied” and “impoverished” bodies. Jazz is inherently antithetical to a positivist, ethnocentrist, racialized and ableist social order. Similarly, what was most reprehensible to Louis Vuillemin in newspaper *La Lyre* in 1923 was not so much “the

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<sup>70</sup> Laplume, “Notre Époque,” 14. Translation mine. A critique of a 1941 performance by American dancers Margot Webb and Al Vidal at the Tic Toc confirms that the Anglophone press also assessed jazz primarily within a primitivist, racialized, ethnicized, and sexualized framework: “[Al Vidal’s] thudding death-dance contrasts with Margo’s Southern grace and wriggling flashing vitality, and is suitably backgrounded by the showgirls gone native and grouped around an erupting volcano.” *Montreal Daily Herald*, April 1, 1941, quoted in Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era* (New York; St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 119.

<sup>71</sup> Saucier, “Musique et Jazz,” 8. Tillemont similarly describes jazz as “a negro music with a tam-tam accompaniment that perverts taste” in “Alouette, fox-trot,” 18. Translations mine.

hammered tapping of the piano, the hoarse counterpoint of the saxophone, or all the other pieces of hardware that black men who were not tempted by boxing might have decided to rough-handle!” In other words, Vuillemin takes little offense with jazz aesthetics besides the fact that “it makes noise! It’s obvious!” Rather, Vuillemin decries when jazz musicians

depart for a moment from their special North or South American repertoire, their tango, their one-step, their ‘blues,’ [to] take on actual music to parody it stupidly! The Overture of ‘Tannhäuser’, the finale of the ‘Ninth’ . . . In public, this kind of desecration is simply evil. Their effect is to mix together cocktails and whiskey-soda with Wagner and Beethoven—who without a doubt did not consume any of this . . . Back home, the girls then only sit at the piano to telescope the rhythm of the themes and of the harmonies . . . Enough! We should prohibit confusion between the dancing and the Temple! We must not tolerate for the disrespect of the unbelievers to drag the Gospels to the fair!<sup>72</sup>

In other words, as long as jazz remains safely outside of the body politic, critics take only minor offense with jazz. It is only when jazz begins to “smear the music” that the triggers of the moral panic are activated. Jazz threatens to pollute the body politic through its ability to penetrate the bodies of girls even in their own homes when they are sitting at the piano, arguably the archetype of Victorian domesticity. Another article from Professeur Pinard in *La Lyre* from 1921 critiques jazz with a similar discursive apparatus while making the gendered, ethno-centrist and ableist argument emerge even more clearly:

I consider unfortunate the import of these so-called modern dances. In many girls, they produce a deplorable excitement. As much as the ancient and graceful French dances were beneficial, in particular in preparing and facilitating marriages, these new dances are harmful. By their very excess, they cause the deterioration of the health of the individual. Thus, you are warned, ladies! If you want to marry, leave alone the ‘shimmy’ and return to the minuet and gavotte of your ancestors.<sup>73</sup>

Here again, modernity and the United States are contrasted to Quebec's French and catholic cultural heritage and to the musical and dance traditions of Western Europe in an attempt to

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<sup>72</sup> Louis Vuillemin, “Le Jazz-Band,” *La Lyre* 1, no. 4, February 1923, 5, 31. Translation mine. Vuillemin was a French musician. I would like to thank Marie-Thérèse Lefebvre for sharing this information with me.

<sup>73</sup> Professeur Pinard, “Les Danses Modernes,” *La Lyre* 1, no. 4, February, 1923, 31. Translation mine.

articulate a national identity in line with *La Vieille Europe* and against Americanization.

Crucially, the marriageability of the *Québécoise* is at stake if she is to perform black dances. As late as 1944, a scene in a dancehall is described as such in *La Revue Moderne*:

The jazz-band . . . violently chanted the convulsions of a shimmy. Historians of the future are the only ones who are going to be able to measure the scale in all its consequences of this moral revolution: The muddling of the classes accomplished in less than twenty years, waves coming from the bottom of the sea, blurring the calm, traditional surfaces; foaming and silt appearing, disappearing, mingling with the clear waters, quickly troubled and rendered worrisome by these incorporations . . . In this international setting . . . How many transparent vulgarities are welcomed, adopted, cherished! And the visible vices [i.e. *tares*]! This dark figure looking at the clear face of a teenage girl must have his anthropometric card . . . Only the music of savages could bring to life the macabre dance of all this decrepitude and debauchery . . . A great convulsive motion animated the dance floor. Jazz became demonic. Women's faces instinctively turned towards the good-looking male dancer.<sup>74</sup>

As the above excerpt makes clear, jazz intersected with all that was dear to French-Canadian nationalists. Calm, traditional surfaces were blurred by waves that had come from the very bottom of the sea; clear waters were muddled by silt and foam; and last but surely not least, the clear face of a teenage girl was turning, *instinctively*, towards the convulsive motions of a demonic, primitive, dark, international figure. Jazz is a classed, ethnicized, and racialized sound-body complex, one that threatens the social order specifically through of its unique ability to penetrate the idealized body of the *Québécoise*, and by extension that of the French-Canadian nation.

### *Jazz as Interzone*

To be clear, religious groups and critics in France, Germany, and in the United States also drew on similar tropes to reject jazz dance. The intersections between Quebec's nation-building project and the anxiety that was generated by the powerful alignment between jazz and women's unruly bodies could also be compared to other emergent postcolonial, national cultures such as

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<sup>74</sup> Albéric Cahuet, "Régine Romani," *La Revue Moderne*, April 1944, 36-7. Translation mine.

contemporary Ireland, where fixing national identity similarly involved a form of spatialization of culture that capitalized on rural values.<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, the hold of conservative catholic authorities on Quebec government and society until the end of *La Grande Noirceur* was in some ways singular. Despite Canadian politician Henri Bourrassa's assertion in 1929 that “we French-Canadians do not look at race problems from any other point of view than that of the French in France,” French-Canadian criticism on jazz had little to do with contemporary French negrophilia.<sup>76</sup> Jayna Brown has described the ways in which the artistically expressive black body of Josephine Baker was aligned in the interwar years with French nationalist discourse: Baker's narrative of “emancipation” worked to reassure all of France of the moral and ethical value of colonialism.<sup>77</sup> On the contrary, French-Canadian cultural elites rejected what they perceived as a further colonization by English-speaking North Americans. French-Canadian culture was understood as frail and therefore vulnerable to foreign influences. As such, the jazz-infatuated *Québécoise* convinced French-Canadian elites of the importance to resist colonialist forces through the consolidation of the nation-building project. For French-Canadian religious,

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<sup>75</sup> Eileen Hogan, “‘Earthly, Sensual, Devilish’: Sex, Race, and Jazz in Post-Independence Ireland,” *JRJ* 4, no. 1 (2010): 63. See also Suzanna Chan, “Some Notes on Deconstructing Ireland’s Whiteness: Immigrants, Emigrants and the Perils of Jazz,” *Variant* 2, no. 22 (2005): 20–21; Johannah Duffy, “Jazz, Identity and Sexuality in Ireland during the Interwar Years,” *Irish Journal of American Studies Online* 1 (2009); Barbara O’Connor, “Sexing the Nation: Discourses of the Dancing Body in Ireland in the 1930s,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 14/2 (July, 2005): 89–105; and Jim Smyth, “Dancing, Depravity and All That Jazz: The Public Dance Halls of 1935,” *History Ireland* 1/2 (Summer, 1993): 51–54.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Dorothy Williams, *The Road to Now: A History of Blacks in Montreal* (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1997), 80. On jazz and identity in France, see in particular Rashida Braggs, *Jazz Diasporas: Race, Music, and Migration in Post-World-War II Paris* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016); Jayna Brown, “Translocations: Florence Mills, Josephine Baker, and Valaida Snow,” in *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*, 238–279 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Matthew F. Jordan, *Le Jazz: Jazz and French Cultural Identity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Andy Fry, *Paris Blues: African American Music and French Popular Culture, 1920–1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); William A. Shack, *Harlem in Montmartre: A Paris Jazz Story Between the Great Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); and Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).

<sup>77</sup> Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 251–261. For counterargument to this, see Fry, “Du Jazz Hot À La Créole: Josephine Baker Sings Offenbach,” in *Paris Blues*, 123–171.

political, and cultural elites, jazz was at the crux of insecurities that pitted American culture against that a French-speaking “colony,” and of anxieties surrounding the sexuality and marriageability of the *Québécoise*.

Such fears, articulated through racialized, ethnicized, and sexualized constructions of jazz music and dance, were central to the political and legislative responses that aimed to hamper the threat that jazz was believed to pose to the French-Canadian body politic. As Andrée Lévesque reports, “Dancing was prohibited altogether in certain dioceses; in Montreal, warnings were issued against certain dances. These prohibitions, far from losing their force over time, were repeated by the bishops and reiterated from the pulpit throughout the entire period.”<sup>78</sup> A 1920 article in *La Canadienne* begins as such: “One could also make a polka improper if it was danced with clothes that were shortened at the top and at the bottom in true red-skin fashion,” yet “prohibiting the tango, the fox-trot, and all their cousins” must be encouraged if “the languid nonchalance, the swaying of the hips, the fluttering of the steps” are to be prevented.<sup>79</sup> A contemporary entry in *L’Écho du Saint-Maurice* reads similarly:

More and more clergy people feel the need to react against the plague of certain dances. The tango, the foxtrot and similar dances are immoral entertainment by their very nature. They are forbidden by conscience itself, everywhere and always, prior to and independently of episcopal condemnations. These dances, being immoral by their very nature, are also prohibited when, by a subterfuge unworthy of French loyalty, we keep the figures while changing only the name. Trying to make a selection to amend them and trying to make them acceptable is only to dilute the poison in water: It is still poison.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Lévesque, *Making and Breaking the Rules*, 58.

<sup>79</sup> Mamy, “Causerie sur la Danse,” *La Canadienne* 2, no. 3, November 1920, 13. Translation mine. This excerpt highlights an important connection between representations of indigenous and African American dance in French Canadian criticism from this time period that would be worth exploring further.

<sup>80</sup> “Les Danses,” *L’Écho du St-Maurice* 5, no. 47, May 6, 1920, 2. Translation mine.

In 1936, Canon Cyrille Labrecque issued a warning: “The lascivious dances are prohibited . . . the tango, the turkey-trot, the fox-trot, and the cheek-to-cheek.”<sup>81</sup> Still, as the testimonies of black women performers presented above make clear, these legislative and regulatory attempts were overall ineffectual in expelling jazz practices and conventions of the black variety stage altogether. “A raid was always a prearranged affair,” saloon pianist John Swail had even testified to the court during the Coderre Inquiry, “we always received notice . . . every time.” In other words, the legislative and regulatory attempts were never meant to disrupt Montreal’s jazz scene altogether. Rather, they seem to have worked to consolidate the body politic and reinforce the boundary-work between moral/viceful and national/foreign bodies at a time when French-Canadian culture was rapidly urbanizing, modernizing, and globalizing. The temporal, spatial, and discursive segregation of jazz that was accomplished through the critical work of French-Canadian political, religious, and cultural elites in *La Belle Province* worked primarily to consolidate heteropatriarchy at a time of cultural upheaval amongst the French-Canadian youth. Montreal’s jazz scene, as it intersected with what was considered viceful by French-Canadian elites, posed significant challenges to nationalist articulations of French-Canadian womanhood. But as long as it could be constructed as foreign/other, jazz could wail free.

These constructions were of course not entirely uprooted from the material conditions in which jazz appeared in Montreal. Shows were advertised primarily as coming “direct from the Cotton Club”—even when local bands and entertainers were featured. The Terminal Club claimed to be “Montreal’s Original Harlem Spot” and to “bring[. . .] Harlem to Montreal,” and Connie’s Inn advertised the “pleasure-loving spirit of Harlem, carefree, happy.”<sup>82</sup> The same

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<sup>81</sup> Weintraub, *City Unique*, 121.

<sup>82</sup> Roquigny, “Les plaisirs de la danse à Montréal,” 303-304.

strategy was used by clubs like Rockhead's Paradise, the Monte Carlo, the Café St-Michel, the Cozy Grill, the Chinese Paradise, the Standard, the Val d'Or, the Kit Kat, as well as in other clubs of the Saint-Antoine South district and around the Main that staged black acts with jazz musicians.<sup>83</sup> Top billings in these clubs included Bertie Warfield, the "Gardenia Girl from Tahiti," "the exotic Lucille O'Daniel, rendering her conception of an Oriental fantasy," Dot Dash, the "Sepia Sheba," Creme the "exotic danseuse," La Lolita, a "veritable bronze heat wave," Myrtie Wilson, the "beautiful Javanese Dancing Girl," and Gladys Ridley, the "Sepian Sophisticate . . . [who] pleas[ed] us with an exotic dance." The clubs in which black acts appeared often had exotic names and decors: The Hawaiian Lounge was decorated with plastic palm trees, and the Sheik (most likely an exotic pun on "*chic*") had a "black orchestra that play[ed] jazz tunes, and the couples, encouraged by the gin and the whiskey, d[id] the 'shimmy' and kiss[ed] each other."<sup>84</sup> More often than not, black women performers staged exotic numbers: "Hawaiian" numbers, "African" numbers, "West Indian" numbers, "Jamaican Carnivals;" snake dances, fire dances and other numbers performed with feathers, flowers, plants or fruit baskets on their heads, diamonds, ruby-coloured jewels, as well as other exoticizing props on their bodies. Bernice Jordan "was doing the West Indian calypso numbers, and the rumba beats and the congo beats." Mary Brown performed "oriental dances" under the stage name of Mary Wah, where she played castanets and finger cymbals and wore (and also took off) veils, as well as a

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<sup>83</sup> Meilan Lam (Fonds), Concordia University Library, Special Collections, boxes HA1763, HA1767, HA1768, HA3127, HA 3128, contains pictures, ads, newspaper articles in relation to the production of *Show Girls: Celebrating Montreal's Legendary Black Jazz Scene*, Montreal, National Film Board of Canada, 1998, VHS.

<sup>84</sup> Lacasse, *La Prostitution Féminine à Montréal*, 70. Also quoted in Roquigny, "Les plaisirs de la danse à Montréal," 339.



“Hawaiian” dance, with tambourines and maracas “which my mother didn’t think was appropriate.”<sup>85</sup>

As should be obvious by now, exoticization was not entirely externally-imposed: black women performers often chose their own stage names, made their own costumes, created their own routines, and they organized their own advertisement in ways that they thought was most likely to increase their appeal.<sup>86</sup> In this sense, they also claimed for themselves the particular performance aesthetic that Anthea Kraut has called “unencumbered exoticism:” one that collapsed the distance between individual cultures and conflated them within the concept of the exotic.<sup>87</sup> To frame it differently, the kind of exoticism that black women performers embraced on stage had less to do with a genuine interest in displaying diasporic connections between dances that shared African roots than with whether or not their outfit could claim to have survived a winter in Canada. Roquigny has argued that such stagings aimed to foreground the distinct African Americanness of the district.<sup>88</sup> I would argue that it worked to emphasize the exotic-erotic appeal of black bodies and sounds altogether and to reassure audiences that they had come “from the outside.” African American theatrical dancer Margot Webb recalls the following telling anecdote of her passage at the Tic Toc in 1941:

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<sup>85</sup> Lisa Barg has similarly argued that the Cotton Club’s jungle productions were similarly “especially effective vehicles for displaying socially transgressive themes.” Lisa Barg, “National Voices/Modernist Histories: Race, Performance and Remembrance in American Music, 1927-1943,” PhD thesis, Faculty of Music, State University of New York at Stony Brook, August 2001.

<sup>86</sup> Mary Brown and Marie-Claire Germain both made their her own costumes, and Tina Baines Brereton and Ethel Bruneau organized their own advertisement.

<sup>87</sup> See in particular Anthea Kraut, “Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham,” *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 3 (October 2003): 433-450 and Rebecca A. Bryant, “Shaking Things Up: Popularizing the Shimmy in America,” *American Music* 20, No. 2 (Summer, 2002): 168-187.

<sup>88</sup> Roquigny, “Les plaisirs de la danse à Montréal,” 304-306.

The agent who hired us told us they weren't going to hire blacks, so we'd better be something else. 'It says here,' he observed, pointing to a clip from the Montreal paper, 'Featuring a real South Sea Island dance team.'<sup>89</sup>

Clearly, women had to pass as whichever 'other' best accommodated a particular stage policy or weekly program.

As Jayna Brown has outlined, processes of self-exoticization on the black variety stage owe as much to the creative agency of performers of *The Creole Show* and other *fin-de-siècle* black burlesques as to a long history of transnational circulation of harmful images of hypersexualized and exoticized Creole women.<sup>90</sup> Arguably, emphasizing the exoticism of their acts reinforced racist constructions of blackness as "other"/transient in the province of Quebec. Wilfred Emmerson Israel's 1928 Master's thesis *The Montreal Negro Community* produces difference between the black from the white community precisely in such terms: The black community his typified by its "extreme level of mobility . . . In the St. Antoine district . . . it is so extensive and characteristic of the district . . . It is safe to assume that the Negro family in this city moves at least once a year."<sup>91</sup> The "looser family ties," the "looseness of [their] marriage relations," "the desertion of husbands" and the "sullen and non-cooperative" behaviors of children that he documents are all framed as consequences of black mobility as a distinctive and essential trait of African American identity.<sup>92</sup> Yet we should note the ways in which black workers in Montreal were engineered as mobile by capitalist economies themselves, not the reverse. The black community in Montreal grew specifically out of and around the province's

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<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Dixon-Gottschild, *Waltzing in the Dark*, 119.

<sup>90</sup> Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 95, 102, 203.

<sup>91</sup> Wilfred Emmerson Israel, "The Montreal Negro Community," Master of Arts thesis, Faculty of Sociology, McGill University, 1928, 44-46.

<sup>92</sup> He writes: The boy had "a mental age of 8.2 years against a chronol[og]ical age of 12 years . . . Psychiometrically he was described as sullen and non-cooperative, and developing a grudge against society." Israel, "The Montreal Negro Community," 125-126.

need for black porters to travel across the US border.<sup>93</sup> According to Israel, more than 90% of the black male population in Montreal was so engaged. In this sense, it was railroad work that predicated that train porters had to travel “on average 16 days each month.” At its core, it was a racist economy that engineered the high level of mobility that typified Montreal’s black male community, and which in turn reinforced the idea that blackness was transient in Quebec.<sup>94</sup>

The racist and sexist histories and structures that channeled black women’s lives towards exoticizing and primitivizing spectacles of their sexuality similarly reinforced the idea that blackness was foreign/other in Quebec and in Canada. Such a view contributed to maintain the racist status quo in a province that kept non-white women excluded from social reforms like the 1937 *programme d’aide pour les mères nécessiteuses*.<sup>95</sup> The institutionalization of jazz spaces and bodies as exotic and foreign within Quebec’s geographical borders was engineered primarily to allow members of white middle-class to slum down the hill and rub elbows with the underworld for a night, a practice that was predicated on the very idea that one could play at vice while escaping the very material consequences of leading an unruly life.<sup>96</sup> As Israel describes:

The lady patrons of these cabarets are largely whites. These girls of the teen age and early twenties, some of whom are never seen in this district, except at night, come from all sections of the St. Antoine district. Above the hill has its representatives also . . . Coming from different

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<sup>93</sup> Williams, *The Road to Now*, 39.

<sup>94</sup> Israel, “The Montreal Negro Community,” 44.

<sup>95</sup> Quebec’s provincial government did not provide financial help to single, unmarried women, and even Duplessis’ 1937 provincial program for single mothers (“les mères nécessiteuses”) had several provisions that made access almost impossible to black women. In order “not to encourage desertion,” only the wives of deceased or extremely ill husbands were admitted until 1959. The desertion of husbands (often called “*le divorce des pauvres*”) was not considered grounds for providing governmental help to mothers unless husbands had been gone more than five years (by which time they were considered deceased). Moreover, mothers who hoped to benefit from governmental help had to have been British subjects for more than fifteen years (by birth, or wedlock), or to have been living in Quebec for more than seven years *and* “be of good moral character” and able to raise her children “in good moral conditions.” This last provision was policed: male inspectors tracked women down in their private lives to adjudicate on their set of attitudes and sexual behaviors with men. A history of exotic dancing would likely preclude these women from getting access to governmental help. See Yves Vaillancourt, *L’évolution des Politiques Sociales au Québec, 1940-1960* (Montréal: Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 1988), 274.

<sup>96</sup> On slumming, see Mumford, *Interzones*. See also Paul S. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).

sections of the city, they enjoy the freedom and abandonment of their new contacts. There is an emotional excitement to these girls from the fact of being in strange surroundings; the musical rhythm is most penetrating; the eating and drinking with the dark, soft-skinned male, supply that thrill and emotional release of unsatisfied wishes which she has sought for so long. Live eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow I may die has become her philosophy for this brief but fascinating period.<sup>97</sup>

The more consolidated the spatial, temporal, and discursive segregation of jazz, the easier it was for members of the middle class—young white lady patrons in particular—to enter and exit othered spaces, “drink and be merry” while escaping the othering themselves.

At the same time, self-exoticization seems as much to have been an aesthetic as a political stance for black women performers. Provided there was a soundtrack, as Bernice Jordan explained above, the “song-and-dance girls” were not arrested for performing erotic dances despite overwhelming commonalities in costumes, routines, and movements between black and white tease acts. In this sense, the perceived vicefulness of a woman’s body had much to do with how it signified on the fields of gender, race, and nation.<sup>98</sup> Carefully segregated outside national discourse, the loss of bodily inhibition that was believed to be associated with jazz dance was not perceived as a threat to the imagined boundaries of the nation when it was located onstage, accompanied by jazz music, and performed by a nonwhite woman. The articulation of a discursive apparatus meant to produce and sustain jazz as an exotic and foreign form of cultural expression practically assured the neutralization of the erotically-moving black female body. Jazz in the interwar years served as a discursive terrain where the production of difference

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<sup>97</sup> Israel, “The Montreal Negro Community,” 190.

<sup>98</sup> As Danielle Lacasse exposes in her study of sex work in Montreal after the Second World War, “Despite Montreal’s growing cosmopolitanism after the [Second] World War, only 4% of sex workers [taken to court] belong to ethnic minorities . . . of the 462 women who appeared in front of the court between 1945 and 1970, the ethnic background is indicated in 433 cases. Amongst those, we note the high prevalence of French-Canadian women, who make up 76% of the workforce. . . During Expo 1967, several African American sex workers came to try their luck in Montreal. Their presence thus slightly increased the proportion of black women brought before the courts during 1967 . . . around 6% on a total of 88 sex workers.” Lacasse, *La Prostitution Féminine à Montréal*, 45-47. These numbers allow to see that black sex workers were indeed brought before the courts, but not the proportion of black sex workers who were not taken before the courts.

between two increasingly visible and threatening groups of unruly women could be accomplished: One which jazz othered as evil, and the other which jazz othered as foreign.

*The end of an era?*

Through its entire golden age, there was virtually no jazz in Montreal that entirely defused the “possibility of grave sin;” no jazz without the shadow of vice, so to speak. Building on the oral histories of black women performers and show musicians, as well as on French-Canadian criticism from this era, the strength of the enabling relationship between Montreal jazz and its unruly women can hardly be discarded. As much as the eulogy of the golden age of Montreal jazz typically includes musings as to whether jazz (that unlucky bystander) could have been spared had Drapeau only extricated the vice from jazz and left its sounds alone, the spaces, bodies, and discourses of vice enabled a scene for Montreal jazz throughout its entire “golden age.” Jazz continued to be where women’s sexual labor, real or imagined, was tolerated, and it provided a space where the boundary-work between morality and vice could be articulated in the public sphere. In this sense, the “radical change” that is said to have occurred mid-century, when in the words of Bourassa and Larrue “jazz concerts disappeared *to the benefit of* strip-teaseuses,” or according to Gilmore when jazz “suffocate[d] under the onslaught of television, rock music, strip shows, and a new mayor’s vision of a city without vice,” was not so radical for the musicians who, since the beginning of the jazz age, had played behind tease acts, as well as for the black women performers who danced well into the late 1960s with small jazz ensembles.<sup>99</sup> For drummer Dennis Brown, the continuity is clear between the Harlem revues he played for, the acts he accompanied in Montreal nightclubs, and the gigs that he took behind strippers and exotic

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<sup>99</sup> André G. Bourassa and Jean-Marc Larrue, *Les nuits de la ‘Main:’ Cent ans de spectacles sur le boulevard Saint-Laurent* (Montréal, Québec: VLB, 1983), 150 ; Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise*, 160. Italics mine.

dancers at the Chez Paree in the mid-to-late 1950s: “It was essentially also a jazz gig as far as I’m concerned.”<sup>100</sup> Asked specifically whether the music was different in a nightclub and in a strippers’ club, whether the band “would have the same liberties in each situation,” he answered: “A lot of times, yes, a lot of times, you would, have that. Especially the [acts] that didn’t have music [sheets]. You’d have a lot of liberty . . . They wanted something to swing.” Drummer Boogie Gaudet concurs: Asked whether he “had a chance to blow” when he played drums behind strippers at the Vic Café, the French Casino, or at the Chez Paree through the 1950s, Gaudet answers:

Oh yeah. Over fifty percent of the tunes we did were all jazz-type tunes. Once in a while [...we played] a tango [...or a] rumba. The strippers . . . used to ask us . . . to do say a blues, maybe we’d do ‘Honky Tonk,’ ‘Night Train,’ something like that, which was sort of jazz, rhythm-and-blues-type tune, and then if they wanted to swing, they’d always leave it up to us. ‘As long as we know when you start and we know when you stop.’ I would tell the girls that, ‘Well, the boss told me that you had to do four minutes, [or] you have to do eight minutes,’ because each girl didn’t get paid the same salary. The girls that closed the show earned more money, they did more time than the girls that opened the show. We used to play accordingly. If one girl wanted a cha-cha, well, we’d do a tune, ah, in a cha-cha beat, but we’d blow, between the theme, and the last chorus. We’d blow to our heart’s content.<sup>101</sup>

Just like drummers were expected to follow the acts on the black variety stage, Gaudet explains that the drummer would similarly have to follow the stripper: “If she did bumps-and-grind, you know, like he would, catch her. Sometimes, some of them would want a drum solo.”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Dennis Brown, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0010, April 15, 1983, audio CD. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Dennis Brown also come from this source.

<sup>101</sup> Boogie Gaudet, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0015, February 15, 1983, audio CD. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Boogie Gaudet also come from this source.

<sup>102</sup> This excerpt is also quoted on page 64.

Saxophone player Herb Johnson states it bluntly: he worked “steady” accompanying shows between 1939 and 1969.<sup>103</sup>

In contrast, for musicians like Maury Kaye and Johnny Holmes who directed large big bands in dancehalls and uptown clubs and hotels in the 1940s, the hiring well did in fact run dry around the mid-1950s. Kaye, who worked as bandleader at one of Montreal’s most prestigious uptown cabarets, the El Morocco, moved to Toronto to a burgeoning recording and television industry, while Holmes, the bandleader of Montreal’s most famous dancehall big band, found himself literally out of work as a bandleader between 1950 and the beginning of the 1960s. Many would have to wait well into the sixties to be able to make a living playing music again. But to those who had worked on the black variety stage since the late 1920s, playing for the “girlie shows” in the 1950s and 1960s was seen more as continuity than as change. Jazz continued to be where women’s sexual labor, real or imaged, continued to be. The current historical record is therefore not only gendered through its strong emphasis on instrumental soloists and bandleaders, but it is also racialized for the ways in which it prioritizes the viewpoints of those among Montreal jazz musicians whose work suddenly stopped being economically sustainable in the 1950s: those who worked in the uptown big-bands and clubs, all of which were almost exclusively white and whose activities more closely approximated contemporary ideas about what jazz is.<sup>104</sup>

Rather than blaming the girls for the decline of jazz in Montreal, those who worked in the black nightclubs and in the theatres of the Main between the late 1920s and the late 1960s point

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<sup>103</sup> Herb Johnson, Interview with John Gilmore. Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0026, February 8, 1981, audio CD. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Herb Johnson also come from this source.

<sup>104</sup> Johnny Holmes’ band, which featured Oscar Peterson, was a notable exception to the big bands playing in the uptown hotels.

to changes in entertainment habits and factors relating to economics in order to explain the closing down of nightclubs in Montreal from the mid-fifties onwards: the advent of television and the development of suburbia, the younger generation's enthusiasm for rock n' roll and the twist in opposition to jazz dances, and the fact that clubs could not afford to hire large big bands and full chorus lines after Drapeau imposed early curfews on Montreal nightlife, which severely impacted profits made from the sales of alcohol. Show musicians and black women performers virtually never refer to the trope of the fallen woman for causing the demise of the nightclub era. Rather, they speak of a 1967 city by-law chaperoned by Drapeau himself that explicitly prohibited the people who worked in places where alcohol was sold to interact with audience members.<sup>105</sup> "No mixing between the performers and the guests," summarized Herb Johnson:

A girl sometimes didn't know all the policemen . . . we sometimes had eight girls, they'd haul three, four or five of them down at the police station, it cost fifty dollars apiece to get them out, and this would go on all night long.

As Allan Wellman explains it, the new by-law was the very reason why he decided to quit show business:

If a musician or artist sat with one of the public, they were arrested for soliciting. I says 'This ain't no place for me, I gotta leave! Because I know too many people in Montreal. I'll be in jail every day!' They put that law just for Expo ['67], but they was smart, they never took that law off.<sup>106</sup>

"There was no work anymore left in Montreal," explains Dennis Brown: "After Expo, all the clubs started to close down. Suddenly, nobody could mix, people would get arrested, it was a harassment thing, they'd lose their liquor licenses, and closed, closed, closed, until there was nothing left."

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<sup>105</sup> Ville de Montréal, "No. 3416—La conduite de certains employés dans les établissements où l'on sert des boissons alcooliques," règlements municipaux, archives de la ville de Montréal, 1967. Translation mine.

<sup>106</sup> Allan Wellman, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0074, April 20, 1982, audio CD.



Strikingly, what the oral histories of Johnson, Brown and Wellman suggest is an almost complete reversal of the causal relationship presented above. Jazz didn't "decline to strippers," or "disappear to [their] benefit," nor did it "suffocate under the onslaught" of the girlie show. Rather, it was the forced severance between jazz and vice that seems to have signaled the end of an era. Jazz, it seems, could just not survive without its unruly women.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Whose Jazz? Cultural Legitimization From the Margins*

To show you how prejudice works, Madame Sorbin [of the Montreal *Ballet Russe*] did not want me in her buildin'. And you saw the size of my [teaching] studio compared to what they have! [My husband] went upstairs and asked her about how you go to put [my] name [in the paper]. *Ethel Bruneau —Tap Tap Tap — Afro-Cu-Jazz — Afro-Jazz*. And you know what she told him? 'She can't put jazz in the paper. She cannot use the word jazz.' And he came and told me, and I says: 'Why can't I use the word jazz?' 'Oh, because you'll be takin' students from them.' 'I am gonna take students from *them* !?'

—Ethel Bruneau<sup>1</sup>

As Scott Appelrouth has argued, the constructedness of jazz discourses becomes most apparent when its symbolic boundaries are erected (as they were in the jazz criticism I discussed in the previous chapter), maintained (through various regulative and legislative apparatuses), as well as when they are challenged.<sup>2</sup> This becomes particularly evident when those who are marginalized from the discursive field claim space for themselves within. Towards the end of his pamphlet on modern dance, abbot Victorin Germain writes: "There are only the mothers and the young women that we have not interviewed. It's because their testimony would have seemed tainted, in the first case of blindness, and in the second of partiality."<sup>3</sup> Yet the testimonies of women—their selective blindness, their willful partialities—and in particular the ways in which they legitimized jazz dance against mainstream discourses were an important part of the boundary-work that typified Montreal's jazz scene. To speak to what Derrida has famously called "the essential shadow of the undeclared," none of the jazz dancers articulate their

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<sup>1</sup> Ethel Bruneau, *Interview with Mrs. Swing [moving images]*, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0005 [7112], interviewed by Meilan Lam, 1993-1994, VHS. Italics mine to account for her emphasis. Unless otherwise indicated the quotes below from Ethel Bruneau also come from this source.

<sup>2</sup> Scott Appelrouth, "Boundaries and Early Jazz: Defining a New Music," *Cultural Sociology* 5, no. 2 (2011): 225-242.

<sup>3</sup> Victorin Germain (Abbot), *Dansera-t-on chez moi? Consultation théologique rédigée à l'intention d'un père de famille* (Québec: L'Action Sociale, 1930), 88. Translation mine.

unruliness as vice.<sup>4</sup> In order to resist the narrative where jazz dance is framed entirely by the disapproval of French-Canadian state, clerical, and cultural authorities, this chapter maps the particular processes of cultural legitimization developed by those marginalized from hegemonic discourses. In this, I follow Sherrie Tucker's cues in *Dance Floor Democracy: The Social Geography of Memory at the Hollywood Canteen* to consider what it meant for dancers to engage with jazz both as social practice and as discourse.<sup>5</sup> What kind of critical apparatus do jazz dancers deploy to assess jazz dance? And how are these strategies shaped by, and in dialogue with, narratives about jazz dance articulated in mainstream discourses? As mainstream discourses did not work the same to vilify the unruly bodies of women black and white, how did cultural legitimization differ depending on which side of the color line a jazz dancer claimed as hers?

### *Labor of Love/Love of Labor: Legitimizing Black Dance*

The introductory chapters of virtually all major women-in-jazz biographies begin on the “small time” black vaudeville circuits in the United States.<sup>6</sup> In the early stages of their careers, blues singers such as Bessie Smith, Clara Smith, and Ma Rainey all travelled with acts that included animals, acrobats, and other circus performers. Pianists Lovie Austin, Lilian Hardin,

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Appelrouth, “Boundaries and Early Jazz,” 226.

<sup>5</sup> Sherrie Tucker, *Dance Floor Democracy: The Social Geography of Memory at the Hollywood Canteen* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> See for instance Donald Bogle, *Heat Wave: The Life and Career of Ethel Waters* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011); Hazel Carby, “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues,” *Radical America* 20 (June/July 1986): 9-22; Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: The Hungry Heart* (New York: Random House, 1993); James Dickerson, *Just for a Thrill: Lil Hardin Armstrong, First Lady of Jazz* (New York: Cooper Square Press; [Lanham, MD.]: Distributed by National Book Network, 2002); Bill Egan, *Florence Mills: Harlem Jazz Queen* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2004); Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If you Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York: Free Press, 2001); Tammy Kernodle, *Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004); and Jeffery Taylor, “With Lovie and Lil: Rediscovering Two Chicago Pianists of the 1920s,” in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, edited by Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 48-63.

and Mary Lou Williams also toured as novelty acts and as accompanists on the TOBA circuit and other non-affiliated though similar theatres. As Tammy Kernodle explained in her biography of Williams, the flexibility allowed by the variety format, where acts could be added, modified, or removed from the show in an instant depending on what a particular city had to offer, provided a rare opportunity for Black women to choose a life that allowed a certain degree of social and geographical mobility, one that provided a way out of the heteronormative contingencies of having to “marry up.”<sup>7</sup> In the early decades of the twentieth century, the variety stage must have been the single most important point of entry into jazz scenes for black women.

I discussed in the previous chapter how black women’s presence onstage in Quebec was framed by white male expectations of exoticizing and primitivizing spectacles of their sexuality—and not just in Montreal of course. Jazz singers such as Lena Horne, Ethel Waters and Florence Mills toured extensively as theatrical dance acts throughout the twenties and thirties, where they danced at least as much as they sang. Horne helped to popularize the shimmy on the black vaudeville stage and was well-known for “showing her laundry”—lifting her skirt and flashing her underwear to the audience.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the late twenties and the early thirties, she was featured as much as a dancer than as a singer. As late as the fall of 1933, she still performed exotic dances with a chorus line: “We weren’t quite as naked as Miss Rand,” Horne recalls, “but we were pretty close—my costume consisted of approximately three feathers.”<sup>9</sup> Ethel Waters started shake-dancing and shimmying on the black vaudeville circuit in 1917, and a decade later she “gave the theater-going ofays of Broadway their first long look at me . . . I sure

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<sup>7</sup> Kernodle, *Soul on Soul*, 32.

<sup>8</sup> Shane Vogel, “Performing ‘Stormy Weather:’ Ethel Waters, Lena Horne, and Katherine Dunham,” *South Central Review* 25.1 (Spring 2008), 102.

<sup>9</sup> Jacqui Malone, *Steppin’ on The Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 88.

knew how to roll and quiver, and my hips would become whirling dervishes.”<sup>10</sup> Florence Mills had been dancing suggestively, singing, and impersonating men, for about a decade on the black vaudeville stage before she was featured in the *Blackbirds* revue of 1926, the revue that made her famous.<sup>11</sup> Trumpet player Valaida Snow also started her career by touring with her mother on the variety circuit. As Jayna Brown has argued, rather than compete with men for orchestra jobs (“instrumentalism was male territory”), Snow combined her musicianship onstage with dancing and singing.<sup>12</sup> In short, black women who wished to play jazz in the early decades of the twentieth century had to do so within the frameworks commended by the entertainment industry, and which often predicated that the boundaries between their musicianship and the eroticism of their bodies be blurred.

Numerous jazzwomen have spoken of their unease with such performative frameworks. “They used to boo if you did anything aesthetic,” theatrical dancer Ida Forsythe remembers specifically of the black variety stage, “I didn’t know how to shake and I never did anything vulgar,” but Forsythe’s refusal to sexualize her stage appearances made it so difficult for her to find work that she eventually quit show business and returned to domestic work.<sup>13</sup> The careers the other above-mentioned jazzwomen went from the black variety stage to the recording studio—a trajectory that testifies to some extent to a widespread discomfort amongst African American women with the performative frameworks commended by the entertainment industry.

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<sup>10</sup> Marshall Stearns and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Macmillan, 1968. Reprint, New York: Da Capo, 1994) 150-1.

<sup>11</sup> Egan, *Florence Mills*, 25. Stearns and Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, 150.

<sup>12</sup> Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 265.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 90. See also Ramsay Burt, “‘Savage’ Dancer: Tout Paris Goes to See Josephine Baker,” in *Alien Bodies: Representations of Modernity, ‘Race’ and Nation in Early Modern Dance* (London: Routledge, 1998), 59.

The gap is indeed wide between the so-called “first” and “second” Josephine Bakers, the bare-breasted and banana-wearing performer and the Baker who emerged in early 1930s Paris sporting a blonde wig, dancing ‘en pointe,’ performing a George Balanchine choreography, and singing “Si j’étais blanche.”<sup>14</sup> Brenda Dixon-Gottschild argued that this “toning-down” was “a requirement for the well-being and success of the African American expatriate performers, females in particular.”<sup>15</sup> At home, such refusals to abide by the requirements of the entertainment industry also drew on an emergent discourse in black respectability associated with the Harlem Renaissance that sought to instill dignity and self-respect at the same time as it aimed to challenge stereotypical images of African Americans in popular culture.

In the pages of *The New Negro*, which set the tone and outlined the scope of the Harlem Renaissance, intellectuals of the period like Alain Locke and W.E.B. Dubois

were anxious to leave minstrelsy, and anything remotely resembling it, behind. [They] felt that the physicality of dance, connected as it was to minstrelsy and sexuality, undermined black achievements in literature and the arts . . . Dance was part of a cluster of activities that embarrassed them, including gambling and drinking.<sup>16</sup>

*New Negro* intellectuals wrote eagerly about moving away from images of white consumerism which black entertainment had come to be associated with and to place art in the service of the

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<sup>14</sup> See Josephine Baker and Jo Bouillon, *Josephine*, (New York: Marlowe, 1988), 55; Burt, “‘Savage’ Dancer,” 57; and Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 179.

<sup>15</sup> Dixon-Gottschild, *Waltzing in the Dark*, 179.

<sup>16</sup> Wendy Perron, “Dance in the Harlem Renaissance: Sowing Seeds,” in *EmBODYing Liberation*, edited by Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Alison D. Goeller (Hamburg: Lit; Piscataway, NJ: Distributed in North America by Transaction Publishers, 2001), 37. Jayna Brown presents a similar argument in *Babylon Girls*: “Black cultural arbiters Alain Locke and other repeatedly cautioned against the deleterious effects of comedy, popular music, and dance. For the producers of the Negro Renaissance, variety hall specialty acts, blues, and jazz were forms governed by base sentiment and filled with vulgar expression, and they obstructed the world’s view of the Negro’s true abilities . . . A self-consciously black elite had long been urging the race to bring forth its best and finest, warning against the corrupting vulgarities promoted in burlesque halls, jook joints, and cabarets.” Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 75. See also Farah Jasmine Griffin in her biographical monograph on Billie Holiday, where she explains how politics of respectability first emerged as an attempt to address the harsh conditions of living for African American people both internally and externally. Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If you Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 72

advancement of the black community. The figure of the black exotic dancer figured prominently in *New Negro* criticism and fiction works. Jayna Brown lists some of the ways in which exotic dancers were described: “clusters of female bodies vamping to derivative Negro rhythms across the popular stage,” representations of “acquisitive cosmopolitanism,” “symbols of decadent cultural dissipation,” “sign[s of] cultural corruption,” “symbol[s of] assimilation, threatening the recovery of racial authenticity,” “represent[ations] of the deleterious effects of the city on forms of black cultural communality and resilience,” “the very embodiments of the corrupting seduction and betrayal of capitalism,” “colluding with the very system that oppressed black people, the “pathological symptoms of the fall of civilization itself,” the “quintessential symptoms of modernity’s failings.”<sup>17</sup> Symptoms, signs, symbols, representations. Even representatives of the younger generation like Langston Hughes expressed ambivalent feelings towards exotic dancers. In his autobiography, Hughes criticizes the “absurd things” that dancers did “for the entertainment of the whites, that probably would never have entered their heads to attempt merely for their own effortless amusement.”<sup>18</sup> The rhetoric of racial uplift and the discourse of black respectability worked together to encourage greater distancing between black entertainment and art, and more specifically between music and the erotic in black artistry.

For numerous women-in-jazz, distancing the musicianship from the erotic was an important black feminist strategy, one that intersected with the rhetoric of racial uplift and the discourse of black respectability to legitimize black female artistry on, and off stage. In this

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<sup>17</sup> Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 163, 168, 191, 194-6. As Jayna Brown explains, “fear and blame were mapped onto the bodies of black women dancers: fear of what was being left behind as black people diffused into urban industrial environments, and blame for the perceived loss of community structures and stable cultural traditions.” Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 194.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Howard Spring, “Swing and the Lindy Hop: Dance, Venue, Media, and Tradition,” *American Music* 15, No. 2 (Summer 1997): 201-2.

sense, identifying the processes through which black women performers distanced themselves from stereotypes they enacted onstage has been crucial to scholars and students of African American dance.<sup>19</sup> Josephine Baker's clowning antics and her notorious eye-crossing as the comic "end-of-the-line chorus girl" have assumed fundamental importance to the reclaiming of jazz dance as modernist art. As Dixon-Gottschild argued:

The image of Josephine Baker –dancing in her fast, eclectic, rubber-legged fashion, naked except for a belt of bananas around her waist, exuding a strong sexuality all the while she is mugging and playing the clown– *is the quintessential signifier of the jazz aesthetic* . . . At this time in her career, Baker was a sublime example of the trickster, that staple icon in African aesthetics who take on comically ironic, mocking, and self-mocking roles and discards them just as easily. *It is at this site –tricksterism—that the swing aesthetic and modernism met and challenged the establishment canon.*<sup>20</sup>

Scholars such as Dixon-Gottschild, Jayna Brown and Anthea Kraut have made the important connection between Bakers' parodic performance style and the process of 'signifying' on minstrel formulas in the sense that Henry Louis Gates Jr. outlines in *The Signifying Monkey*: "Through a process of repetition and revision *with a critical difference*."<sup>21</sup> Baker embodied the

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<sup>19</sup> Lawrence Levine discusses how music and dance were an important medium through which African American slaves in the 19<sup>th</sup> century parodied the behavior of their white masters in ways that were often lost on white spectators. William Pearson also sees the African American version of the cakewalk as a parody of the high manners of white folk, just like Karen Blackstein has described the charleston as a parody of white masters dancing the European quadrille. Discussed in Michael Borshuk, "An Intelligence of the Body: Disruptive Parody Through Dance in the Early Performances of Josephine Baker," in *EmBODYing Liberation: The Black Body in American Dance*, eds Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Alison D. Goeller (Hamburg: Lit; Piscataway, NJ: Distributed in North America by Transaction Publishers, 2001), 47-48.

<sup>20</sup> Dixon-Gottschild, *Waltzing in the Dark*, 210. Italics mine. Borshuk makes a similar point: "The more outlandishly distorted the performer's stage persona was . . . the more the entertainer might challenge the received stereotype." See Borshuk "An Intelligence of the Body," 51.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Samuel Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). For scholarship on Baker and parody, see in particular Borshuk, "An Intelligence of the Body;" Burt, "'Savage' Dancer;" Dixon-Gottschild, *Waltzing in the Dark*; Andy Fry, *Paris Blues: African American Music and French Popular Culture 1920-1960* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014); Anthea Kraut, "Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham," *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 3 (October 2003): 433-450; Wendy Martin, "'Remembering the Jungle': Josephine Baker and Modernist Parody," in *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995); Nancy Nenno, "Femininity, the Primitive, and Modern Urban Space: Josephine Baker and Modernist Parody," in *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).



stereotype of the primitive-exotic at the same time as she transcended the mask. In short, Baker's dance could be reclaimed as modern art because it can be aligned with what Houston Baker identified in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* as the two guiding tropes of black modernist art and literature: the mastery of form, and the deformation of mastery.<sup>22</sup>

Montreal had its fair share of parodic and end-of-the-line acts. According to May Oliver:

Some exotic dancers . . . played it for laughs. They would eh, play it, eh, for instance, eh there's one famous one where she used to come out in a raggedy costume, a real, horrible-looking thing . . . the stockings, there was hardly any part of them that was in one piece . . . it was funny . . . She would, eventually strip off all of this horrible stuff.<sup>23</sup>

Ethel Bruneau also recalls a comedy strip performed by a theatrical dancer named Caledonia:

She worked Rockhead's, seventy-five, seventy-six, she was in her eighties, but she was still good . . . Caledonia would come out there, she could still do a perfect split, and she used to do a strip, a comedy strip. She used to wear the long garter pants down to here [she shows]. And then she had her little dress and her bow. And she'd come out with her gloves, and she'd take that off [she shows how] and then she'd come out and then she'd have funny clothes underneath. And she could kick that leg straight up in the air, and she'd do the slowest split you ever saw. That was Caledonia.

Montreal-based chorus lines also had their very own end-of-the-line chorus girls. Ethel Bruneau's sister "of course never be a good chorus girl, she would go that way when we would go this way." And as Natalie Ramirez recalls of a performance in USO-camps overseas:

I was always the clown of the group. So . . . it was cold, and eh, the army had given us these green long johns, and we had these gorgeous white peau-de-soie evening gowns on with just little straps, tight-fitting, and at the end of the finale and everything, we were doing all these turns and everything, then I picked up my dress and I [she laughs], I had on these green long johns [she laughs]! When [. . . Olga and Thelma Spencer] turned around and looked at me, I

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<sup>22</sup> Houston Jr. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>23</sup> May Oliver, Interview with John Gilmore. Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0049, February 17, 1982, audio CD. Unless otherwise indicated the quotes below from May Oliver also come from this source.

don't know whether they were mad or whether they were laughing, but they couldn't sing [she laughs].<sup>24</sup>

Caledonia, Bruneau's sister, and Ramirez could easily be reclaimed as black modernist artists in the tradition I have outlined above, with a long list of well-documented foremothers to look up to thanks to the work of Brown and Dixon-Gottschild among others. What is less clear is how we are to account for the other girls that made up the rest of the chorus line, those who played up the stereotype of the primitive-exotic on stage. Shane Vogel has called "literalism" the "long-established principle" of enforcing a direct correspondence "between the idea expressed and its representation" in Cotton club revues, an aesthetic process that "functioned as a popular technology of US racism to withhold black subjectivity from the popular stage."<sup>25</sup> In the argument where Baker's resistance to the uniformity of the chorus line rests on a convention-abiding rest-of-the-line, the other chorus girls and the non-parodic exotic numbers are hitherto reduced, to use Vogel's words, as "representatives of the idea expressed." In other words, Baker's ability to challenge the eroticizing, primitivizing, and exoticizing settings which framed black woman performance onstage rests on politics of the comedic that are only made possible through the reduction of the rest of the chorus line to the stereotype of the primitive-exotic itself. Only the end-of-the-line chorus girls and those whose performance style can be read as parodic have been reclaimed as modernist artists, while those who grant Baker's performance style its very readability continue to carry the heavy historiographical burden of having "failed" to distance themselves from white expectations of primitivizing and exoticizing spectacles of their sexuality. Jayna Brown has argued that performers like Baker could harness satire and laughter

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<sup>24</sup> Natalie Ramirez, *Interview with Natalie [moving images]*, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0007 [7116], interviewed by Meilan Lam, 1993-1994, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Natalie Ramirez also come from this source.

<sup>25</sup> Vogel, "Performing 'Stormy Weather,'" 99.

into a powerful critique of racist stereotyping: “laughter slides under and around regimes of power,” she writes.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, the production of difference—and the articulation of a hierarchy of value—between those who overtly distanced themselves from the stereotype in live performance and those who didn’t is being made at the expense of a lot of jazzwomen who engaged in self-exoticization and embraced the erotic potential of their bodies onstage without irony. In respectability narratives, it is the detachment from the erotic that seems to mark the passage of black women performers to modernist jazz artistry. Legitimate jazz subjecthood can be granted to women if it can be shown to have resisted or signified on exoticizing, eroticizing, and primitivizing stage conventions. In other words, it is the distancing from the stereotype that seems to make black female artistry imaginable.

To be clear, I am not challenging the problems nor the tenacity of the primitive trope in stagings of African American culture in the early twentieth century.<sup>27</sup> As I discussed at greater length in the previous chapter, exoticizing and primitivizing stagings of black women’s sexuality reinforced racist constructions of blackness as foreign/other, at best transient in Quebec and in Canada, regardless of the actual citizenship status of the performers. Yet I want to argue for the need to consider alternatives to the parody argument in scholarship on black woman performance, ones that allow for the reclaiming of black women’s agency while resisting the distancing from the erotic/exotic that seems implicit in accounts of black modernist play. Exotic dancers appear in the literature either as victims of the technologies of racism and sexism that were activated on the black variety stage, or as the artful modernist parodies of the performance

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<sup>26</sup> Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 282.

<sup>27</sup> As Kevin J. Mumford has argued, “considering the black female members of the urban theatrical community is key to understanding the ways black women’s sexual subjugation under slavery and post-emancipation peonage was linked to the eroticization of colonial women, lands, and the pleasure zones within city limits.” See Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black and White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 117.

frameworks it commended. As bell hooks has argued, there is little room for the displays of breasts, legs, and asses of exotic dancers to be presented as a comfortable expression of bodily delight rather than as a reality to be hidden, masked, or signified upon.<sup>28</sup>

At issue here is certainly the question of sources: To the inherent obstacles to research into black dance in the interwar years that Brian Harker identified, “the ephemeral nature of dance, the absence of a notational paper trail, and the paucity of sound film documentation,” the scarcity of records of these women’s voices has certainly contributed to make studies of exotic dance on jazz stages concerned above all, through the use of mass-mediated materials, with questions of representation, as well as on the structural issues that channeled these women’s lives in this direction and not others.<sup>29</sup> Patricia Williams has likened this kind of oversight to “black antiwill . . . the discursive legacy of slavery’s rhetoric of white paternalism, a continuing belief in the absence of self-reliance among African Americans—a tendency that also finds resonant analogies in recent scholarship on sex work.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Louise Toupin explains that “in the world of French feminist studies, the activity that is commonly called ‘prostitution’ is usually analyzed from the presupposition of exploitation—that is to say, exploitation is taken for granted, it is a premise.”<sup>31</sup> Yet exploitation can only stand as a premise when the scholarship

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<sup>28</sup> See bell hooks, “Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace,” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York, Routledge, 2015). hooks argues that Oscar Micheaux is one of the few filmmakers to portray chorus girls in a manner that “does not invite phallocentric . . . pornographic gazes from folks in the nightclub.” In the the “jungle” scene of his film *Ten Minutes to Live*, while the exotic dancers’ bodily movements call attention to their breasts, legs, and asses, “this display . . . is presented not as exposure of the taboo sexuality but as comfortable expression of bodily delight . . . Micheaux sees the black body as a site where nakedness and eroticism are not considered shameful realities to be hidden and masked.” hooks, “Selling Hot Pussy,” 139-141.

<sup>29</sup> Brian Harker, “Louis Armstrong, Eccentric Dance, and the Evolution of Jazz on the Eve of Swing,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 61, No. 1 (Spring 2008): 67.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Borshuk, “An Intelligence of the Body,” 42.

<sup>31</sup> Louise Toupin, “Analyser autrement la ‘prostitution’ et la ‘traite des femmes,’ *Recherches Féministes* 19, no. 1 (2006): 153. Translation mine. See also Toupin, “La Légitimité Incertaine des Travailleuses du Sexe dans le Mouvement des Femmes au Québec,” *Revue Internationale d’Études Québécoises* 12, no. 2 (2009): 109-127.

itself rests on the assumption that sex workers are not consenting to that experience “unless under (bad) influence,” or through a state of “false consciousness.” The premise of exploitation in sex work, Toupin argues, hides a scholarly denial of sex workers’ subjective experience, as well as a refusal to hear them as agents.

Along with studies of representation of black women performance in mass media and analyses of black modernist play, the oral histories of exotic dancers can give us a unique opportunity to challenge both the premise of exploitation and the rhetoric of erotic distantiation that organize narratives of black women performers on jazz stages. “The subject is certainly seen,” wrote black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers, “but she also *sees*. It is this return of the gaze that negotiates at every point a space for living, and it is the latter that we must willing to name the counter-power, the counter-mythology.”<sup>32</sup> Black feminists such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Audre Lorde have been strong advocates of letting voices from the margins guide research towards alternative worldviews, ultimately towards new theory that can encompass a much wider variety of human experiences, “for the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,” Lorde famously wrote, “they may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.”<sup>33</sup> Did black women performers consent to the exoticizing and primitivizing conventions of the black variety stage? If so, how? What critical apparatus do they deploy to resist vilifying hegemonic discourses while engaging—embodying even— stereotypes that were themselves racist and sexist? Lastly, how do their strategies of cultural legitimization depart from the narratives of

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<sup>32</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 163. Italics mine.

<sup>33</sup> Audre G. Lorde, “The Master’s Tools will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 112. See also Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000) and bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984).

victimization, the trope of parody, and the premise of exploitation that I have outlined above?

“The inwardness of happiness is there,” exotic dancer Bernice Jordan tells only seconds away from the end of her oral history:

and you gotta keep it there if you want to survive . . . That’s the only way for survival is to know what’s within you. Isn’t that right? If it’s within you it’ll pour out. In the right way. I hope I’m doing what’s right, ‘cause that’s what I wanna do when I close my eyes for good. And that’s all I can tell you from this little girl of St-Henri, seventy-five years later! . . . Life has been good to me and I thank the inward strength that keeps it being just nice.<sup>34</sup>

What is left of exotic dancers’ contribution to black women’s history if only the structures of oppression and the stories of aggression, and none of that dogged survivalism, none that inward strength—none of the happiness pouring out?

In their oral histories, black women performers frame dance above all as work—and not just work, but hard work.<sup>35</sup> For Bernice Jordan, “You could say I was an entertainer, but I never looked [at it] as entertain[ment], just a job! I never looked at this as nothing but a job.” Natalie Ramirez gives an astounding account of a night of work in Montreal’s entertainment business:

We tried to work in more than one club at the time, you know? Dancing in one and singing in another . . . We would have three shows a night. Well, you really worked hard in those days ahm, you’d have an early show around seven and one around ten and one around one. And . . . in between, we would work at another club and ah, we would ah, sing in one club, and ahm, maybe Olga [Spencer] and I would be dancing in another club, so, we would change our clothes in the taxi to go over to do the dance routine, and ahm. One day, we were getting ready, as a matter of fact, we were getting out the taxi and then the band saw that we were there, so Olga went to tell them we were ready, and as I was getting’ ready to go on the stage, I noticed that I had one tap shoe on, and one sandal on, so I had to run back to my bag, and get the other tap shoe and in the meantime, Olga’s out on the dance floor starting the routine and I’m saying wait, wait, wait! And she had to improvise ‘til I could get the other shoe on. And then we had to leave there, get back in the cab and change back into the evening gown to go back to the other club ‘cause Thelma [Spencer] was waiting for us to do the other show at the other place . . . It was hard work! It was hard work in those days.

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<sup>34</sup> Bernice Jordan (Whims), *Interview with Bernice [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0002 [7109], 1993-1994, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Bernice Jordan also come from this source.

<sup>35</sup> See Sherrie Tucker on glamour as a form of labor in context of women swing band musicians in *Swing Shift: All-Girl Bands of the 1940s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

A similar account from Tina Baines resonates with Ramirez' and Jordan's in terms of the strict work ethic that structured her relationship with show business:

I mean we didn't let all the glamour fool us, eh? We had to work! Seven days a week, yah. We had our routines to do. Everything had to be perfected. We were very serious about ourselves, our costumes, eh, what we'll do next. It was a business . . . A lot of girls who worked in the show business, there was no fooling around! . . . No gallivanting after hours.<sup>36</sup>

Ultimately, through their emphasis on variety stage performance as labor black women performers insist on their particular location as working-class subjects in early-twentieth-century North America. "When we worked the clubs," explains Baines:

Myself and the other girls, in the daytime we had the rehearsals, and then we had to work in the theatres also. And we made our extra buck to bring home, 'cause we all come from poor families. A buck here, a buck there, it helped! . . . In those days you know, we did not have help from the government. If you don't work, you don't get no money, so we had to feed ourselves, eh! . . . They say 'You sing for your supper, you dance for your supper,' and we sure did . . . My feet and my wits was my bread and butter.

Jordan also speaks of starting to perform as a child entertainer in amateur nights, where she "had to finish first or second to win . . . A little money came in handy to help my mother. I'd buy her lots of groceries with that money." Jordan and Baines both attend to the relatively few options available to black working-working class women during the Depression, war, and post-war years in Montreal. "I didn't want to wash pots and pans," explains Jordan, "so to me, that was a job, and that was a job I was gonna have to do if I wasn't gonna go in nobody's kitchen!" Baines speaks in similar terms about coming-of-age only a few years later at the beginning of the Second World War: "Either you work in the factory, or you do what you do best! So I did what I did best, like the other girls, and we danced!" Dancing appears here in an either/or conundrum,

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<sup>36</sup> Tina Baines (Brereton), *Interview with Tina [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0001 [7108], December 2, 1993, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Tina Baines also come from this source.

more or less as the only significant alternative to domestic or, into the Second World War, factory work.

This working-class, black, distinctly North-American and gendered outlook makes it clear that, as intersectionality feminists have long argued, black working-class women's horizon of possibilities doesn't lay at the confluence of racism against black men and sexism against white women. The early years of the 1930s witnessed a series of widely mediated antifeminist campaigns against French-Canadian women taking part in the labor force which swelled to unprecedented levels in Montreal in particular while it remained relatively subdued in other emerging urban centers in Canada. In 1933, the very worst year of the depression in Montreal, Quebec politician Méderic Martin wrote a passionate editorial called "Go Home, Young Woman!" in the popular female magazine *Châtelaine*, in which he called for women workers to leave the work force en masse in the name of patriotism. Two years later, Montreal mayor Camilien Houde aired a similar message on public radio, encouraging the replacement of female workers by their male counterparts.<sup>37</sup> While this episode is remembered by herstorian Margaret Hobbs as triggering amongst *Québécois* feminist circles the very first Canadian articulation of women's right to work from an equal-rights perspective as opposed to framing it in terms of economic necessity, it is also telling of the relatively low level of support that the state provided to women who, for one reason or for the other, sought participation in the work force. The situation changed somewhat during the Second World War: Women in Quebec obtained the right to vote *de justesse* in 1940 during a short Liberal intermission in Maurice Duplessis's long reign

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<sup>37</sup> See Margaret Hobbs, "Equality and Difference: Feminism and the Defence of Women Workers During the Great Depression," in *Canadian Women: A Reader* (Toronto; London: Harcourt Brace & Company, Canada, 1996), 218-219.



(1936-1939; 1944-1959), and factories started to open their doors to women.<sup>38</sup> Yet the war efforts demanded from women on mainstream platforms were primarily centered on house management. Housewives were asked to find ways to work with ration books, reduced food and cloth supplies, and to recycle various products that could be used by artillery factories. Slogans such as “*De la poêle à frire jusqu'à la ligne du feu!*” (“Imagine the satisfaction it would give you to pour that hot fat right down the back of Adolf, Tojo or Benito”), and the notion that prolonging the life of rubber household articles was “every woman's patriotic duty,” literally covered the pages of wartime newspapers and magazines.<sup>39</sup> As Montreal historian William Weintraub explains, married women who had taken part in the labor force during the war were expected to return to housewifery after the war was over, “and most of them did.”<sup>40</sup>

While white middle-class women begun in the postwar years to articulate what Betty Friedan has called the “problem that has no name,” black working-class women “could claim no mystique that inspired public celebration.”<sup>41</sup> The various ways in which women’s work was

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<sup>38</sup> Adrien Godbout had been able to persuade the francophone electorate, the vast majority of which was against Canadian participation in the Second World War, that he was the only one who could successfully protect Quebec's right of self-determination against the possibility of conscription. All Canadian provinces were ultimately subjected to conscription in 1944. See William Weintraub, *City Unique: Montreal Days and Nights in the 1940s and 50s* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1996), 108.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 176.

<sup>41</sup> Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 235. On the history of blacks in Canada, see in particular June Bertley, “The role of the Black Community in Educating Blacks in Montreal, from 1910 to 1940. With Special Reference to Reverend Dr. Charles Humphrey,” Master of Arts thesis, Faculty of Education, McGill University, March 1982; Benjamin Drew, *A North-Side view of slavery. The Refugee; or, The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada Related by Themselves. With an Account of the History and Condition of the Colored Population of Upper Canada* (New York: New York University Press, 1968); David C. Este, “The Black Church as a Social Welfare Institution: Union United Church and the Development of Montreal’s Black Community, 1907-1940,” *Journal of Black Studies* 35, no. 1 (September, 2004): 3-22; Shirley Small and Esmeralda M. A. Thornhill. “Harambec! Quebec Black Women Pulling Together,” *Journal of Black Studies* 38, no. 3, Special Issue “Blacks in Canada: Retrospects, Introspects, Prospects.” (January 2008): 427-442; Dawn P. Williams *Who’s Who in Black Canada: Black Success and Black Excellence in Canada: A Contemporary Directory* (Toronto: D. Williams, 2006) and *Who’s Who in Black Canada 2: Black Success and Black Excellence in Canada: A Contemporary Directory* (Toronto: D. Williams, 2002); Dorothy Williams, *The Road to Now: A History of Blacks in Montreal* (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1997); and Robin W. Winks, *Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997).

episodically claimed and disclaimed in public forums had little impact on black working-class women's participation in the workforce. Besides antifeminist campaigns, the Depression decade also exacerbated racist attitudes and policies, in Canada in general and in Montreal in particular. Compared to a national average of unemployment of 28% in Quebec in general and 38% for francophone Quebecers in particular, it has been estimated that more than 80% of the black community in Montreal was unemployed during the worst years of the Depression.<sup>42</sup> The engineering of black male working-class subjecthood by Quebec's emerging capitalist economy allowed different horizons of possibilities to black men than to black women. In 1928, it was estimated that more than 90% of the black male working population in Montreal was engaged as train porters.<sup>43</sup> "There was a certain type of glamour associated with it—an aura of prosperity, education, and class," remembers Sylvia Warner, the daughter of a black porter.<sup>44</sup> Still, the very conditions in which black men were allowed to work in Montreal prescribed that they would be away from their families more than half the time, which in turn pressed the vast majority of black women to assume the position of family heads in their absence. In addition, as Jacqueline Jones explains in *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*, the salaries they made were insufficient to provide for their families, a fact that explains at least partly why black women continued to serve as primary or supplementary breadwinners in an extraordinarily high proportion in comparison to white women.<sup>45</sup> The ideal of

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<sup>42</sup> Denise Baillargeon, "Montréal Working-Class Housewives During the Great Depression," in *Canadian Women: A Reader*, edited by Wendy Mitchinson (Toronto; London: Harcourt Brace & Company, Canada, 1996), 251. See also John Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise: The Story of Jazz in Montreal* (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1988), 53, footnote 7.

<sup>43</sup> See Wilfred Emmerson Israel, "The Montreal Negro Community," Master of Arts thesis, Faculty of Sociology, McGill University, 1928, 44.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Weintraub, *City Unique*, 45.

<sup>45</sup> Jones, *Labor of Love*, 154.

French-Canadian womanhood may have been a home-based mother of many until the beginning of the Quiet Revolution, but black and first-generation immigrant women worked through the Great Depression, war, and postwar years in Quebec.

In short, as in other urban centers in North America, sexist and racist structures of discrimination confined Montreal-based black women to the lowest levels of menial and service-work. In this context, the entertainment business provided their best hope for upward mobility.<sup>46</sup> Bernice Jordan's son Ralph Whims acknowledges that his mother's work allowed him to live a better life than his friends growing up: "Money was always coming in."<sup>47</sup> Ethel Bruneau similarly explains that her career made it possible for her to afford lessons in figure skating, violin, dance, gymnastics, "day camp every summer" for her daughter, and hockey and guitar lessons for her son. Shake dancer Tricksie put her daughter through University thanks to the money that she made working in the nightclub. Mary Brown also tells how:

The guys there, if they liked you, they used to give you these huge big toys, which I guess it cost them a small fortune, you know? And you know some of the girls didn't have children and they would give me these toys and . . . They would give me like great big yellow elephants and big ah dogs and stuffed, you know, stand this high [hand gesture], you know? And clothing for the children . . . My children were very happy... [they] played hockey, soccer.<sup>48</sup>

Clearly, the black variety stage provided black working-class women their best chance for upward mobility. As testified in their oral histories, they were acutely aware of the racial, class and gender-based discriminatory structures that channeled their lives towards the variety stage.

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<sup>46</sup> Jones makes a similar point in *Labor of Love*, 220. Brown makes a similar point in *Babylon Girls*, 108.

<sup>47</sup> Ralph Whims, *Interview with Ralph [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0003 [7110], 1993-1994, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Ralph Whims also come from this source.

<sup>48</sup> Mary Brown, *Interview with Mary [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0004 [7111], 1993-1994, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Mary Brown also come from this source

Yet exotic dance, and conventions of the variety stage more broadly, are framed in their oral histories less as a discriminatory apparatus than as an escape from racial and gender-based violence. For Mary Brown, being onstage made her feel like she momentarily escaped racial prejudice:

When you're on the stage, you're on the stage, you know? I don't remember any prejudice there. Dealing with ordinary people, now, that's a host of a different color. Theeeennnnnn you find out. You know? If you don't know what color you are you certainly will find it out! Once you leave show business! They will let you know!

For Tina Baines, performance provided an escape from a strict and damaging household: "I was free as a bird when I was on the floor working in the afternoon, in the nighttime, as long as I wasn't in the house I was happy [she pauses]. I was happy." For all of them, performance also felt like a temporary escape from the harsh realities of the precariat. "Men treated us like queens," reminisces tap dancer Ethel Bruneau, "we were like, you know? Royalty!" For Baines, the stage was, quite literally, "another world:"

I liked the lights and the people and the cheering. See *la grande madame* eh! It gets to you, you know, it gets to you after a while . . . It was another world. It was another world! . . . It was another world, to hear all the people and the cheering and the haring for you. It was another world, it was great!

As such, despite their acute awareness of the racial, class, and gender-based discriminatory structures at play in channeling their lives on the stage, oral histories of black women performers are resistant to being recuperated into a victimizing narrative. To be clear, the path to the stage was filled with violence: the bodies of black women performers were the routine target of rowdy customers, entitled bosses, and manipulative agents. Like Baines, who constantly changed her stage name in order to avoid her brother's admonishment, Mary Brown had to negotiate with and around her husband's jealousy on a daily basis, as he often worked on the same stage as a drummer:

My husband used to accuse me of prostituting myself because I would dance this one dance, and dance another dance and then I would work with a group, and you know . . . [There were] quite a few people who admired me. My husband wouldn't allow nobody to admire me. He'd come down off the bandstand [and] wanna fight [she laughs]. If he seen them looking at me too long, he's come down off the bandstand and really wanna fight, no no no. And he was watching when he was on [stage], and I was at the back of the chez Paree, and ah, a man approached me, he was busy watching and they, he['d] come down and ask what he had to say. I wasn't allowed to have admirers with my husband. . . If anybody came here and say 'Oh Gee, she's nice, you know he would say [Brown now speaks to the interviewer:] Can I say that? 'You must have slept with him.' You know what I mean? You know I says 'You know I slept with all over Montreal!' He says 'Oh don't be smart.' You know? This is the way he was. My husband would give me a time to come back when I went out, by trolley, to sign my contract. We had trolleys! They run better than the bus.

Clearly, the entertainment business was not an easy tradeoff. It allowed a degree of economic independence and social mobility virtually unheard of for black working-class women in Canada, yet the class-based advantages it offered resulted in even further gender-based violence that associated eroticism with gender and sexual deviancy. In other words, on the path between their homes, the street, the dressing room and the stage black working-class women encountered even further discrimination as a consequence of their professional occupation. But the stage itself appears in their oral histories as a space where they felt they could escape violence and discrimination almost entirely, a space where they felt safe.

Obviously, these testimonies should not be heard as repositories of unmediated truths. Like autobiographies and other kinds of written and spoken statements about one's self, they articulate specific narratives about an individual that historians can only at best ever recuperate as seamless blends of factual evidence and strategies of deflection; a riff on one's past, pushing against current and long-gone discourses that continue to affect how a subject sees itself. To say that these women *were* free or safe onstage would of course overstate the case. Still, in their oral histories they explicitly resist being boxed as victims of gender-based, class-based, and racial-based structures of oppression "A lot of times," explains Mary Brown:

when you' walkin' through the aisles they would put cigarettes through your stockings which was expensive, very expensive during those days, you know. Eight dollars. Fifteen dollars . . .

So, I mean, I didn't bother to ask who did it, I just used to give them a back hand slap, that's it. And go about my business . . . There was no such thing as "Yeeesss, nooooo" [lazy-sounding] or maybe "No!" [high-pitched, coquettish]. No, I didn't go "Neooow" [low-pitched, flirtatious], I said "No" [assertive, firm] and when I said "No" everybody seemed to know that I meant no. I didn't really have no problem with the customers with that . . . One customer . . . I laid over the bar to get my purse and he hit me on my behind and I just knocked him right off the bus. They say 'Well he was drunk!' and I say "Yeah, an-han, so? He won't do it again!" That's all.

Ethel Bruneau's stories of gender-based violence are also systematically incorporated into narratives where she ultimately gains the upper hand:

I remember one boss, he would just, come in to your dressing room without even knocking on the door! 'How dare you come in my dressing room, without knocking on the door. You come in here again, you're gonna find a tap shoe comin' towards your head!' So they knew better . . . Some of them were like, real characters, sex maniacs, and you had to know how to put them in their place.

When she worked in hotels outside of town, she would put furniture in front of her door to feel safe. One time, when she was travelling with her children:

The boss didn't know that I had the kids so . . . He had a pass key and he came through the door, and I took the baby bottle and knocked him in his head. He said 'Miss Swing are you in there? Can I come and give you a kiss?' and I says 'You open this door and' *boom* I hit him in the head. He had a big null in his head and his wife wanted to know where he got it from!

In other words, black women frame stagework as an activity that did not make them feel trapped or victimized, alienated or exploited the way domestic or factory work had promised to. "You had to work the joints," she explains, "to work the good clubs, you know? But eh, it was fun, you know! . . . I had a good time everywhere I went." In the words of Nathalie Ramirez,

It was hard work but it was fun, it was great fun! . . . Sometimes the clientele was nice and sometimes you got the rowdy ones, you know? But we took it with a grain of salt . . . back in those days it was fun, I enjoyed it!

In this sense, the premise of exploitation hardly seems adequate to account for these women's relationship towards stage labor. Clearly, they acknowledge and account for the racialized and gendered engineering of the precariat. Yet rather than engage narratives of

victimhood, black women performers describe the particular ways in which they identified and harnessed the erotic potential of their body. “There’s always one customer who wants to come participate while you’re dancing,” tells Tina Baines:

I mean, he’d like to get on the floor with you, sure, there’s lots of them like that, and eh, we paid no mind. They, they’d handle it with care [she looks severe and serious] . . . They’d all wanna hit for the bum . . . I used to be furious. Ooh. They’re so insulting. Please don’t . . . don’t touch the girls. You don’t free-lunch on us like that. . . I couldn’t understand why they have to go crazy like that . . . And we’re all young girls eh? But they see all the little bums going and, [she laughs] can’t help it those guys, they can’t help it, they get crazy. And I couldn’t understand, I couldn’t understand why they had to go crazy like that. Now I understand more . . . These were bum guys we used to call them bum guys . . . Not bad men. These guys, they just loved the bums! ‘Cause we worked the bum, you know [she laughs]. The bum was supposed to get them excited, and eh, it did apparently. When you give the bum a good working, that’s it!

In this excerpt, Baines moves between expressing anger towards the members of the audience who wanted to touch the girls to an amused, and then an empowered statement about her (bum’s) ability to dictate the parameters of the exchange. “Not bad men,” she states while shrugging the shoulders, just controlled by Baines’ skill(ed bum). Similarly, in Bernice Jordan’s words,

I was working, but it was fun! It was like going to a party every day! That’s what it was like, when you had to work to dance. I think even, Tina [Baines] and Marie Claire [Germain] and all those girls, I’m sure that they’d tell you the same thing . . . It was good clean dancing, it was good clean living and, it was good clean fun for all of them in those days. The men, they, they, they’d love it, that was something, that was their relaxation, that was something they enjoyed, and, you were there doing a job . . . It’s all innocent, it’s a job, you gotta body and you made a good living, looking nice! . . . People say, ‘She’s awful fresh eh’ but to me it was [she pauses] a dance! A routine! It’s not about sex! It’s about dance! Growing up as a young woman, people looked at me and said ‘Oh, she’s bad, she’s tough.’ I wasn’t! I was a simple human being! [Those were just] things that I copied from other people to become a dancer. And I had to learn fast! And made money to take home to my mother all my life. . . [she frowns unhappily] People say ‘She’s lazy’ [she pauses] . . . So, being lazy I got myself a talent. I pushed a talent out of my [she pauses] out of my being, to, eh [she pauses] survive.

Jordan’s excerpt here offers a sophisticated critique of the gendered and classist constraints that politics of black respectability imposed on black women’s lives, in particular on the mutual exclusivity between upward mobility and the erotic potential of their bodies. In their quest for economic security, black working-class women were expected to disavow the eroticism of their

bodies. Rather, black women performers position the erotic as a powerful tool to overturn the impact of class oppression in their lives, as well as one that allowed them to temporarily escape gender and racial-based discrimination.

Audre Lorde has written that:

The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives . . . We have been taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within Western society. On the one hand, the superficially erotic has been encouraged as a sign of female inferiority; on the other hand, women have been made to suffer and to feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of its existence . . . But the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough.<sup>49</sup>

For many women-in-jazz, the process of distancing the jazzwomanship from the erotic was an important black feminist strategy, one that in many ways resonated with the ideas of racial uplift and black respectability that circulated during the Harlem Renaissance. At the same time, exotic dancers recognized and harnessed the power that the erotic potential of their bodies could have on their lives to access work that was fulfilling, that provided a way out of poverty, as well as a temporary escape from racial and gender-based violence.<sup>50</sup> The strategic harnessing of that power and their resistance to a sexist ideology that to this day devalues their artistic contribution as a representation of the very oppression they sought to escape should also be highlighted as an important black feminist voice from the past. Against abhorrence towards primitivizing costumes and sets, against powerlessness towards exploitative and objectifying labor, against disdain

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<sup>49</sup> Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 53-4.

<sup>50</sup> For a similar argument, see Sherrie Tucker on Billie Holiday and the Darlings of Rhythm in Tucker, *Swing Shift* 210-216.



towards conventions that required them to self-exoticize and self-other, Tina Baines and Bernice Jordan frame their relationship towards their labor as *love*. “You have a nice bust,” starts Jordan,

that stands up and your tassels were moving, you shake, twirl, do a bump or a grind. People in those days, that was a thrill. Oh but, I used to enjoy doing that! Especially in the theatre when you'd prance down the ramp, I used to *love* to do that. See the men lookin' up atcha, ooh! I used to [she laughs].

For Baines, performing was “the thrill of a lifetime:”

I jumped in with glee, and never regretted it . . . It was hard but I loved it, every minute of it. If I had my life to live over again, I'd go right back again . . . I was in love with myself. And I was in love with my work.

This theme –the fun, the joy, the *love*– so unequivocal and ubiquitous in the testimonies of exotic dancers, is an important historical signpost of what black feminist bell hooks has called “re-thinking the nature of work” for black working-class women. “Like other exploited groups,” she writes, black working-class women “do not develop an attitude towards work that sees it as an expression of dignity, discipline, creativity.”<sup>51</sup> Stage work did not just allow a sense of creative and economic relief in opposition to the menial and service opportunities that were available to them. It made space for “*love*,” as Julia Kristeva beautifully frames it, “the time and space in which ‘I’ assumes the right to be extraordinary. Sovereign yet not individual. Divisible, lost, annihilated; but also, and through imaginary fusion with the loved one”—their work— “equal to the infinite space of super-human psychism. Paranoid? I am, in love, at the zenith of subjectivity.”<sup>52</sup> Stage-work allowed black women performers a sense of wholeness when they stood onstage that they were denied in broad daylight, a temporary escape from, and a sense of standing above the multi-fragmenting traumas of hegemonic discourse. It was a space where they could be an observer as much as thing observed, the product of a discursive network of ideas

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<sup>51</sup> hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, 104.

<sup>52</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 5.

about gender, race, and class at the same time as a subject in love, where the “idealization of the loved object,” to quote Sara Ahmed, allowed them “to be itself in or through what [they had]” rather than in or through what [they lacked].”<sup>53</sup> Crucially, it was one of the few places where they could reclaim both the erotic potential of their bodies and the glamour—the upward mobility. On stage, black working-class women *had* work. On stage, black working-class women *had* sexuality. On stage, they seized the right to be extraordinary, the right to claim for themselves both the upwards mobility and the erotic potential of their bodies that discourses of black respectability and structures of racial and gender-based discrimination made mutually exclusive. On stage, they stood at the zenith of subjectivity.

*Drawing the Line Top-Down: Against “The Other Girls”*

Positing exotic dance as work, and as work that they loved, was a central survival strategy for black women performers. But the harnessing of the erotic potential of their bodies was also accomplished through the disarticulating from hegemonic discourses of vice. When asked to clarify to the interviewer what the difference was between “shake dancers, exotic dancers, strippers, and strip-and-teasers,” Baines answers as such:

Strip-dancer was not a stripper. A stripper takes off everything. You’ll find that a lot in burlesque. A stripper was one thing, a strip-teaser was another . . . A shake dancer, she shake. Her whole body. That’s a work of art, that’s beautiful. Exotic dancer, is exotic dancing, it’s a different type of shake dancing. It’s [she hesitates] you do everything in an exotic way. [discardedly:] It was beautiful.

Beyond Baines’ claim that a shake dancer “shakes,” that an exotic dancer “does everything in an exotic way,” that a teaser “teases” and that a stripper “strips,” she is well aware, for

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<sup>53</sup> Sara Ahmed, “In the Name of Love,” in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 128.

having shake-danced, exotic-danced, teased and stripped herself, that *doing* it and *being* it are not quite the same thing. Baines describes her own acts of strategic undressing as such:

So strip-teasing was, you go you tease, I have five costumes on and I take off four and I got one on, and that's it! That's as far as it goes, but we never take off [all] our clothes. No they had other girls that would take off everything. Not allowed. Family wouldn't allow it. No way, and thank god for little graces we didn't! 'Cause I can go anywhere and say that nobody saw me! [she laughs] but it was a no-no for us, no, no. It was fun, and they say 'Take it off'. But it never got like that . . . It was really teasing, that's true, and teasing it's fun. Too bad they don't have that today. If they get out there, put a few costumes on, and *tease*. Keep one on and leave something for the imagination! But today there's nothing left for the imagination!

I would argue that much is left to (the historian's) imagination. Despite the commonalities in costumes, routines, and performance spaces I have outlined in the previous chapter between exotic dance and strip-and-tease acts, and to the fact that Baines herself strategically undressed, she never identifies as a stripper. In order to produce difference between what they did and vice, black women performers invoke an arguably "worse," more viceful other. As Baines explains it, "I can't condemn them, they have no choice, some of them eh? There's a reason for everything." Ethel Bruneau's description of "the other girls" who worked at the Chez Paree in the 1950s draws on a similar rhetorical strategy, where difference is produced between herself and an 'other' which she imagines as being less agentive, less free to choose:

I say 'My God, how could they do this!' you know? 'Cause I obviously was very straight. I couldn't figure out how anybody, if you didn't like somebody, could go sit and put your arms around him [she makes a horrified face]. You've never seen them before [she pauses, makes another horrified face]! And kiss them! That was like, yuck!

This aspect of black women's self-narration also comes out clearly when they invoke distance, both physical and critical, from "the customers." For specialty dancer Mary Brown, putting a safe distance between her and the people in the audience involved refusing to look at them directly when she danced:

The only time you're really looking at the audience is when I'm singing . . . I find somebody there, you know like a couple and sing to them or an older person, you know. You don't ever sing to a new young boy, 'cause he get the wrong idea.

For Baines, it also involved refusing to be touched by the customers:

I remember a lot of places I worked on my own, as a dancer, it was hard for me to get to go on the floor, because, they were all standing in line waiting to catch you! [she laughs] . . .  
*Madame, juste pour toucher, un p'tit peu là, you know, just to touch you a little bit, I says*  
'Stop it.'

Clearly, refusing direct eye contact, refusing to be touched, refusing to sit and put one's arms around somebody you didn't like—or telling the interviewer as much— were important sites where black women performers produce difference and articulate ideologies of self-worth. For Bernice Jordan, refusing to work when sexual favors were requested or assumed in exchange involved the crucial delineative work between selling one's body onstage and selling one's body offstage. "I didn't want no fame and fortune I guess," explains Jordan, "if I wanted it, maybe I could have had it, I don't know because you had to be nice to too many agents and I wasn't gonna be nice to no agent just to be able to get anywhere." Similarly, Ethel Bruneau explains:

You go there and they want you to get on the couch with 'em? . . . I say 'I'm sorry, I don't need no job that bad!' You know? And when they knew that you weren't gonna do things like that, then they respected you . . . When you went to the agent, you went in there as though you were worth a million dollars. I'm talking about the way you present yourself. You could be hungry, you could have not eaten, I could have been hungry or I could have not eaten, and I would have gone in there with my best clothes on, looking my best . . . I never had to go to an agent and sit make them think like they were giving me a favor.

Stories of refusing to "mix" with clients are another way in which black women performers articulate difference between what they did and what an arguably worse other would do:<sup>54</sup>

I *never* mixed in a club, I *never* mixed with the customers [emphasis hers; her facial expression evokes panic, disdain], I, I, I *never* sat there drinking phony drinks to make money. I told them

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<sup>54</sup> Mixing refers to the practice of entertaining a client at their table after or in-between performances. It could involve everything between sitting at the table with clients, having a drink with them, flirting, and/or accepting gifts in exchange for sexual favors. Girls who mixed generally made extra money off the drinks that the customers they sat with ordered.

that I was an artist, I do your shows and that's it. And when I'm finished doing shows, I go sit and read my book . . . So years later, when I would see them, and meet them on the street, they['d] say 'You know, Miss Swing? You were the one dancer that we had great respect for 'cause you spoke back to us.' So, you know, this was something that I was proud of, 'cause I *never* [she interrupts herself], and there was a few of us like that, there was myself, there was Mary Brown, there was a Tanya Grace . . . A few of us did not mix, because we were artists. And there's one thing about artists, they recognized us as artists. They did not treat us like they treated those strippers and walkers. They treated us like dancers. 'Cause we demanded it. When they asked us to mix we says 'We don't mix we're artists.' We are acts. And acts do not mix. So the only way they got these girls to mix, 'cause they couldn't dance! And that's what they were there for, they were there to mix with the customers, and make money for the clubs, and that's what it was.

This stands in sharp contrast with the point that Hazel Carby makes when she speaks of the kind of bonding that blues singers Alberta Hunter and Ethel Waters describe with the sex workers with whom they worked. "The prostitutes were so wonderful," Carby quotes Hunter saying, "they'd always make the 'Johns' give me money you know . . . They'd go out and buy me little dresses and things to put on me so I'd look nice." In Waters words, "Being hardly more than a child herself, Blanche often played with me, read me stories, and sang little songs with me. Her beauty fascinated me. I loved her. There was a great camaraderie between us, and that young prostitute gave me some of the attention and warm affection I was starving for." Carby argues that Hunter and Waters' descriptions of the sex worker as a figure of maternal care and nurturance is a strategy that stands "in direct contrast to, and indeed, in direct conflict with the attempts of the black middle class to police and discipline female sexuality."<sup>55</sup> Ethel Bruneau expresses a related fondness for one of the performers she worked with, Tricksie, who was also a sex worker:

Besides she was being what she was, she was a wonderful person, and I'll always remember her . . . She'd say 'Miss Swing, I gotta go turn a trick around the corner. I'm gonna be gone for my spot!' And when she'd come back in, 'Here Miss Swing, that's fifty dollars.' And I says 'No no no!' And she says 'No no no. You had to do my spot.' And then, sometimes I'd be singing, and she'd say, you know, 'Miss Swing, I'm with this guy, he wants to hear 'Down by

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<sup>55</sup> Hazel Carby, "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (Summer 1992): 753.

the Riverside,' and she said 'Sing it two times.' And she was, 'You gotta pay her a tip for doin' that!' And she'd come: 'Here's fifty dollars.' She was like that! Very, very kind!

But in the vast majority of cases, Bruneau and other Montreal-based black women performers produce difference between what they did and what a “worse” other did in order to disarticulate from mainstream discourses of vice.

Once again, I am less concerned here with whether or not Bruneau (or Mary Brown, or Tanya Grace) mixed than with the ways in which her story of refusal accomplishes the boundary-work between vice and morality, between a righteous self and an immoral imagined other. Clearly, what's at work here is as much Bruneau's refusal to mix as it is a story of demanding to be treated as an artist on the grounds that she could dance, and that “the other girls” couldn't. A similar disdain towards mixing emerges in Mary Brown's oral history, yet the various anecdotes that punctuate her narrative throughout her oral history make it clear that marking difference between self and other is more important than maintaining intact her claim that she didn't mix:

At the Chez Paree, they mix. And at the Metropol, they mix. And I think the All-American, they mix. But I worked at Chez Paree, and ah, I ah, worked at the [she interrupts herself] when my husband was there to replace somebody, you know. Me? I don't mix. I don't like hands, you know? . . . You'd make money out of making the men drink. If you had enough champagne, you make like ten dollars or, quite a bit of money, you know, for that. Sometimes I would talk to people who came to see me for a few minutes, but I'd get the girls to sit with them. . . I used to drink ginger ale with cherries and lemons. They used to drop a little bit of vodka around, just so they would smell it, and that's it. But other girls just drink it and get very sick. You know? . . . When you're at a place where you just had to hold a glass in your hands because some of the customers see you not holdin' anything and then they, you know, get very upset. . . I used to pour champagne in a towel. I know! I used to pour [she interrupts herself, and laughs]. That's not nice to tell. I used to pour it in a towel [she laughs]! The men spent forty or fifty dollars. I'd pour it for them, and I'd pour it in the towel [she laughs].<sup>56</sup>

Brown also speaks of receiving gifts from audience members: a mint coat, a sheer beaver, “both of them I gave back, because what came behind it was more than what I was willing to do, you

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<sup>56</sup> This note is significantly edited: It collates together excerpts from across Mary Brown's oral history in order to put them in dialogue with each other.

know?” But the diamond watch, “somebody stole it from me in a dressing room.” And the toy ship that had been made for her by a “fella in the navy . . . I gave it to my son. He tore it up and I found out it was worth a lot of money, you know?” In other words, asserting that she didn’t mix is less important as factual evidence, as “data,” than as a self-fashioning strategy that allows her to mark difference between self and other on moral grounds. Distancing exotic dance from stripping and sex work was therefore an essential component of black women performers’ resistance to a hegemonic discourse that decried what they did as morally deviant.

Crucially, if as many of them mixed as the above testimonies suggest, black women performers’ interactions with their agents, bosses, peers and audiences must be heard as potent sites where primitivist and exoticist notions of blackwomanhood were also resisted. Because of the permeable boundaries between the stage and the club for entertainers, their outspoken resistance to hegemonic discourses of vice provided an opportunity for jazz publics to mediate between ideas of eroticism and primitivism that were associated with the black female body on stage. Despite being advertised as coming from “the outside,” once they stepped off the stage, wearing “little flat shoes and a shirt and a sweater,” as Bernice Jordan describes it, “with my little suitcase to get to another club,” the dream dissolved—for them, as well as for the audiences. On stage, she continues,

You look like some glamorous girl . . . You're made to look taller, you look so gracious! You just felt, oh boy, this is, this is heaven. Then when you come off the stage you know who you really are you're not gracious [she laughs]. But on the stage, you feel like a million dollars.

Audiences knew, of course, that these women were local; that they were urban, modern, that they were working. In this sense, these women’s stories should not be heard exclusively as self-fashioned attempts to straighten up the record before they “close their eyes for good,” to use once again the words of Jordan. They should also be taken into consideration when assessing

what black dance ‘meant’ to French-Canadian audiences at the time. The relationship between black women performers and mainstream discourses was not exclusively defined by white consumption of erotic, exoticized, and primitivized black female bodies. On the one hand, black women performers, though critical of the structures of discrimination that channeled their lives towards the black variety stage, engaged the frameworks it commended. On the other hand, their multiple refusals onstage as much as offstage must have unsettled racist assumptions about black women’s bodies as sites of colonial fantasy and imperial conquest. Black women’s disarticulation from vice must be heard as a potent site where the boundary-work between what was moral and what was viceful was unsettled, one which troubled the hierarchies and dichotomies upon which mainstream discourses of vice rest. In other words, in the dialectical relationship between onstage eroticism and offstage disarticulation from vice, black women performers could claim a space that unsettled the hegemonic grip of exoticism and primitivism in representations of black vernacular forms of cultural expression. By refusing to engage in the colonialist fantasies of audience members, perhaps not onstage so much as offstage, the “highly portable ideological artifact of the primitivist jungle,” to use the words of Lisa Barg, was ripped open—revealed in its artificiality.<sup>57</sup> As long as black women performers could break open the confines of the performing stage in which they were cast as unthinking, uncivilized exotics, their self-fashioning strategies functioned the same as they do today: by interrupting the processes of literalism through which black women performers are reduced to “the idea expressed.”

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<sup>57</sup> Lisa Barg, “National Voices/Modernist Histories: Race, Performance and Remembrance in American Music, 1927-1943,” PhD thesis, Faculty of Music, State University of New York at Stony Brook, August 2001, 133.



*Drawing the Line Sideways: Against the “Picture Shows”*

In their oral histories, black women performers produce another kind of ‘other’ that is also crucial to processes of cultural legitimization: an imagined less capable and “stiff” white other.<sup>58</sup> “When [black and white patrons] wanted to see a *good* show, down to earth,” explains Tina Baines,

they would come downtown. And that was it, Rockhead’s and St-Michel, and you got it! It was all black shows and, *that’s* the difference, you know? The white shows were great too, they had some nice shows, the white shows. But they want to see some black shows, then you get right into it. They wanted to hear the music, they went to hear the music, to hear the songs, to see the dancing, you know? That’s a different kettle of fish, eh? That’s it . . . We call ourselves hoofers when you are dancers, eh? You go *dance* it. And a lot of the white girls too, a lot of them white chorus girls they went and *danced* it, they weren’t in the streets selling. They were dancers and they went and danced, sure. Even if they couldn’t do two steps right, they went and worked just the same, you know? E for Effort? They were good. Sometimes they come down and watch our numbers . . . the girls in the Esquire used to come down and catch our numbers, and I says ‘Catch that!’ They can catch it! Won’t be done the same way!”<sup>59</sup>

In this excerpt, Baines engages in processes of cultural legitimization by producing difference not just with one, but with two imagined others: those who were selling in the streets, and those who couldn’t do two steps right and worked “just the same,” though not in “the same way.” The sex worker is delegitimized on moral grounds here and serves once again as a vehicle to disarticulate black dance and vice: “There was no thinking of going on the street like these girls going they *Hustle Hustle on the Street!*” Baines continues, “Ooo you’re not allowed. Wouldn’t do that. That’s bad, *b-a-d*.” But difference is also produced between a black woman’s aptitude as a dancer and the imagined lack of aptitude of a white other. Baines’ argument makes clear that she legitimizes white chorus girls’ work as work—white jazz dance is not vice either—but black and white chorus girls were not “the same;” they are “a different kettle of fish.” A hierarchy of

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<sup>58</sup> A similar dichotomy was used by black show musicians to discredit the music that was performed by the white jazz ensembles. Terms like “mickey-mouse music” and “ballroom music” are used to articulate difference between a more authentic jazz and a stiffer form.

<sup>59</sup> Italics mine to account for her emphasis.

worth is produced here between the “good shows” downtown and the “E for Effort” routines of white chorus girls. Mary Brown produces difference between black and white dancers by describing audience expectations for the black shows: “They didn’t want to see you up there just singing and shaking your fanny. They wanted to see you dance!” Bernice Jordan’s recollection of a number she did with a fan is also particularly striking for the clear sense of difference that emerges in comparison to an arguably blurry line between her routine and the fan dance that by then was most famously associated with white burlesque star Sally Rand:

We used to do soft-shoe with the fans, and all kinds of nice numbers with big chiffon dresses and, [we’d] twirl the fans, you know? People would ask ‘Oh you’re a fan dancer,’ and I says ‘No! [she sounds, and looks insulted] These fans were given to me and I do a routine with them,’ you know?

Jordan’s emphasis here on the routine and on the fans as performance artefacts, as well as her wholehearted rejection of the identity label of the fan dancer, are based on a doing/being dichotomy that works to increase the distance between her and her act as well as to emphasize her skill as a performer. In opposition to an imagined other whose skill could be reduced to a single performance style, Jordan emphasizes black women performers’ artistry and performanceship, and she produces the white other as a less valuable commodity on the entertainment stage.

Musicians and admirers of black women performers draw on a similar legitimizing ideology to talk about the way black women’s bodies moved on stage in comparison to white women. In saxophone player Herb Johnson’s words, “Man, if you’ve ever seen eight, ten, or twelve coloured girls dancin’, you saw something that

stirred your heart, man . . . ‘cause that’s all they had. Dancin’. And dancin’ they did.”<sup>60</sup>

Johnson and others contrast the black acts with what they call “the walkers,” or the

“picture-shows” uptown:

I mean the girls call themselves ‘dancin’ [he pauses]. I call them ‘trottin’-around on the stage’ . . . I would go there and watch these well-known performers do their act and perform . . . It’s pictures! They’d do a picture act! Beautifully gowned, and the man has a wonderful tuxedo or a special sort of uniform . . . it’s beautiful to look at, but it doesn’t do a thing to inspire the heart and the soul! . . . To us, seeing a show like this was just like people doing pantomime or something like this.

Pianist Bob Langlois also marks difference between the women who danced and the women who stripped at the Chez Paree around the middle of the century in similar terms:

We played for about forty dancers a night, that’s a lot, you know. . . we would start, nine o’clock, go out at two o’clock, and it was music . . . nonstop. And there are forty dancers to play for, it’s almost all dancers who dance on jazz. No, not like today . . . They danced, they had to dance. They did not just walk. *They had to dance*.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, drummer Dennis Brown articulates difference between the various kinds of acts he accompanied following a similar legitimizing ideology:

The better dancers had some good music, you know? The walkers, as we called them, if they didn’t have music, we’d say ‘Okay we’ll play something nice for you’ . . . Although we accompanied strippers, and some real dancers, because they spaced it . . . we had enough good dancers to [he interrupts himself] we had some good strippers too! We had people that came out with three thousand dollars’ worth of costumes, for one show! Some of the big names out of Minsky’s and Strip City.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Herb Johnson, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0026, February 8, 1981, audio CD. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Herb Johnson also come from this source.

<sup>61</sup> Bob Langlois, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0033, November 25, 1982, audio CD. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Bob Langlois also come from this source. Translation mine. Italics are in English in the original.

<sup>62</sup> Dennis Brown, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0010, April 15, 1983, audio CD. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Dennis Brown also come from this source.

Finally, when asked by interviewer John Gilmore “What exactly is an exotic dancer?” May Oliver, who worked as band manager for Louis Metcalf and was a frequent attendee of the shows at Rockhead’s and the Café St-Michel, answers:

Actually, they were darn good dancers. An exotic dancer is not anything like you would see today in a strip club. First of all, nobody stripped. Certainly not ah, to the buff [sic], that’s for sure. And believe me, some of the girls were absolutely fantastic dancers, absolutely marvelous dancers. And some of them went to the point where they could tell a real story in dance . . . it was fantastic. Sure, okay, sexy dancing and all that, but it was well done. It was not, say, sleazy by any means, it was an art.

Pressed to expand (“What made it exotic, was it the costumes they used?”), Oliver hesitates, then explains:

Possibly, but I mean, it was erotic [emphasis hers]. Yes, but I mean, I, as a woman, would not take offense. *That’s* what I mean . . . There was no offense to it . . . They always had beautiful bodies, and ah, I mean they were so athletic, there wasn’t an ounce of fat on them, you know, beautiful, beautiful girls. I, I never ever would be offended at any exotic dancer. Not at all. And ah, and for the day, they were a little bare, perhaps. But I, I never took offense, never. And that was the difference . . . they were really good dancers, excellent dancers. A great deal of muscle control . . . Believe me, the tassels were strategically placed, and a girl could spin those tassels in one way or the other, I mean, believe me, that is an art!

In all the above cases, images of the white dancing body are delegitimized, either through ridicule and stiffening-up, or for a perceived lack of critical distance from the expectations of the male audience. In other words, two distinct strategies are at play to delegitimize the white other: First, black dancers are elevated for their expertise in comparison to an imagined less capable white other, and second, black teasing is framed as performative while white teasing is produced as lacking critical distance. Crucially, to use May Oliver’s words, what made the white tease acts offensive in opposition to the black tease acts was their inability to justify the eroticism as a result of skill and hard work.

Brenda Dixon-Gottschild has argued that black dance itself is also an important site where difference between black and white bodies is articulated. As she explains, the emphasis on the

buttocks in black dance in particular puts in sharp contrast “the Africanist value placed on the democratic autonomy of body parts” with “the Europeanist value on unity and line (meaning straight line) working toward one objective:

The Africanist dance aesthetic favors flexible, bent-legged postures with the component parts of the torso independently articulated forward, backward, sideward, or in circles as well as in different rhythms . . . From the Africanist standpoint a vertically aligned stance and static carriage indicate inflexibility and sterility.<sup>63</sup>

The lack of archival video footage makes it difficult to analyze the specific ways in which exotic dancers such as Tina Baines, Mary Brown, and Bernice Jordan moved on Montreal stages, yet as I discussed in Chapter 1, generic assumptions can be made about a likely similarity between the practices witnessed on Montreal stages and those that Dixon-Gottschild describes on United States stages. Jordan’s recollection of three of the best-known travelling shake dancers, all three of whom performed regularly at Rockhead’s Paradise, emphasizes the importance of working the buttocks in black female performance:

Flash Gordon, and Sonya Millburn, and Chinky Grimes, their routines were almost the same. One gets flashlights, the other one has fire, and Chinky Grimes gets the floor and [the] acrobatics, and they shake. Every shake is the same shake! Every bump is the same bump, every grind is the same grind! At the end of her routine, Flash Gordon had things that twirled on her bottom . . . The flash lights were on a belt, hanging down, all around. And then she goes all around, and they’re all on . . . it’s a terrific number.

Similarly, when choreographer Chuck Hughes speaks of teaching his young trainees how to shake dance:

We would show the girls that it’s mostly action from your waist, and then when you get to your waist, you manage your hips that are not to be vulgar. Smooth, smooth, like ocean waves . . . I was trying to tell them how to do it. Especially with this one Bea [Morton]. Yah. Especially with her. ‘Cause she had a nice body Bea, and her hips was in the right places and her breasts was in the right places and everything. So, she did, she finally did it and it looked

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<sup>63</sup> Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 147-8.

very very nice, she had a lot of good hands on it [i.e. applause]. The show did really go very good.<sup>64</sup>

Finally, Baines' above-quoted comments about working the bum is well-aligned with an Africanist aesthetic that saw the dancing buttocks as liberating and empowering, in comparison with, in Dixon-Gottschild's words, the "fear and restraint of buttocks power [. . . that are] a fundamental component in Christianity's dialectic on the corporeal capacity for sin."<sup>65</sup> In other words, even in the very way that they moved onstage, black dancers entered in a dialectical relationship not only with the white dancers but also with contemporary hegemonic discourses on women's bodies and vice.

To summarize, Montreal-based black women performers engaged in processes of cultural legitimization in two ways. First, they mark black dance as a site where cultural capital can be gained at the expense of a white other, and second, where what mainstream criticism deems viceful can be resisted through the outing of an allegedly "worse" other, the stripper/sex worker. By foregrounding aesthetic values that are distinctly gendered and racialized, exotic dancers and supporters of black dance produce racialized hierarchies of cultural capital and engage a dialectical relationship with hegemonic discourses on women's bodies and vice.

#### *Between the Bump-and-Grind and the Branlements-et-Grouillements: Legitimizing White Dance*

What registers as stiffness in the oral histories of black dancers, musicians and their fans is presented on the other side of the color line as a deliberate attempt to disarticulate from black dance. Many scholars have discussed the ways in which African-diasporic dance was "adapted"

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<sup>64</sup> Chuck Hughes, *Interview with Chuck Hughes [audio]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-11-004, November 20 1993, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Chuck Hughes also come from this source. Bea Morton is advertized as the "Sepia Mae West" in Myron Sutton, (Fonds), Concordia University Library, Special Collections, P-019, Digitized scrapbook.

<sup>65</sup> Dixon-Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, 147.

in order to appeal to a predominantly conservative white clientele in the United States, and beyond. “As far as the press was concerned,” argues Danielle Robinson, “it was Ann Pennington’s Black Bottom and Gilda Gray’s Shimmy . . . not Josephine Baker’s or Ethel Williams.””<sup>66</sup> Robinson, Anthea Kraut, Rebecca A. Bryant and Susan Cook have also discussed the colonial parameters of this exchange, where white theatrical dancers appropriated black dances and reaped the benefit from the invisible labor of black dancers and teachers.<sup>67</sup> In her research on social dance in Quebec, Peggy Roquigny deplored the lack of sources to map the actual dancing that occurred in the cabarets and dancehalls.<sup>68</sup> She draws instead on the teaching manuals of dance teacher Adélard Lacasse, who routinely travelled to the United States to bring the newest fashions in modern methods and dances, to speak to the ways in which white bodies were encouraged to move on the stage and on the dance floor. “Avoid moving the shoulders, which must always remain still,” suggested Lacasse in 1918 a thinly-veiled diatribe against the shimmy: “it’s not, like some people seem to believe, with the shoulders that one dances but with the legs.”<sup>69</sup> Similarly,

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<sup>66</sup> Danielle Robinson, “‘Oh You Black Bottom!’ Appropriation, Authenticity, and Opportunity in the Jazz Dance Teachings of 1920s New York,” *Dance Research Journal* 38, no. ½ (Summer-Winter 2006), 27.

<sup>67</sup> As Jayna Brown argues, “white use of black dances spelled the gained restoration of cohesiveness to what felt like fragmented bodies. To counter-act the mechanization of the white body, in the shifting moment of industrialization, white people used black dance to restore their bodies with the spontaneity and exhilaration promised by the dream of a new democracy . . . they created acts of female mimicry that embodied a new era of freer physicality for Western women.” Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 67. See also Rebecca A. Bryant, “Shaking Things Up: Popularizing the Shimmy in America,” *American Music* 20, No. 2 (Summer, 2002): 168-187; Susan C. Cook, “Passionless Dancing and Passionate Reform: Respectability, Modernism, and the Social Dancing of Irene and Vernon Castle,” in *The Passion of Music and Dance: Body, Gender, and Sexuality*, edited by William Washbaugh (New York: Berg, 1998) and “Watching Our Step: Embodying Research, Telling Stories,” in *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity, and Music*, edited by Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamelessley, 177-212 (Zürich; Los Angeles: Carciofoli, 1999); and Anthea Kraut, “‘Stealing Steps’ and Signature Moves: Embodied Theories of Dance as Intellectual Property,” *Theatre Journal* 62, no. 2 (May 2010): 173-189.

<sup>68</sup> Peggy Roquigny, “Les plaisirs de la danse à Montréal: Transformation d’un Divertissement et de ses pratiques, 1870-1940,” PhD thesis, Department of History, Université du Québec à Montréal, April 2012.

<sup>69</sup> Adélard Lacasse, *La danse apprise chez soi: Conseils pratiques. Explications de trois principales danses: One Step, Fox Trot, gavotte, danses de fantaisie, danse carrées* (Montreal, s.n., 1918). Quoted in Roquigny, “Les plaisirs de la danse à Montréal,” 325. Translation mine.

The ‘One Step’ is certainly the most popular dance of the day, and without wishing to discuss or to lessen its popularity, this extraordinary vogue amazes those who see it danced in places where it is exaggerated and disfigured. Its success would certainly be more legitimate and more understandable to people of good taste if it was performed with the ease and moderation it demands. The *cachet* of the ‘One Step’ is its simplicity and its naturalness; effort and misdemeanor must be completely banned.<sup>70</sup>

Lacasse’s emphasis on containment, straight lines, and lack of effort when performing jazz dances follows through in an advice given in 1931 and again in 1935 by Professeur Vachon on closed-couple dances:

The gentleman puts his right hand in the back above the waist, and his left hand supports the right hand of his partner in the air. The bodies are close but not directly facing each other. The lady rests her left hand on the shoulder of the gentleman, and for hygienic reasons it is preferable that each looks over the shoulder of the other.<sup>71</sup>

Beyond quoting the two most important French-Canadian modern dance teachers of the interwar years period, Roquigny also looks at advertisement in the cabarets and dancehalls uptown to speak to the kinds of socialities that were encouraged in the locations where modern dance was commercialized in its “adapted” form. Her observations regarding the ways in which respectability was encouraged uptown are particularly significant here.<sup>72</sup> Uptown ads overwhelmingly featured women in glamorous dresses, their bodies always slightly angulated and looking away from their dance partners. Men’s hands were drawn high on the backs of their partners as per Vachon’s instructions, and they usually wore tuxedos. Uptown clubs advertise a “cordial and friendly” atmosphere “where you can rub elbows with the ‘smart set’”—a sharp contrast to the ads of black shows that I discussed in the previous chapters and which used dark

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<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Roquigny, “Les plaisirs de la danse à Montréal,” 325. Translation mine.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 329. Translation mine.

<sup>72</sup> For a similar argument in the United States, see Kathy Lee Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in the Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986). In Ireland, see Jim Smyth, “Dancing, Depravity and All That Jazz: The Public Dance Halls of 1935,” *History Ireland* 1/2 (Summer, 1993): 51-54. See also Howard Spring, “Swing and the Lindy Hop: Dance, Venue, Media, and Tradition,” *American Music* 15, No. 2 (Summer 1997): 183-207; Helen Thomas, *Dance, Modernity and Culture: Explorations in the Sociology of Dance* (London: Routledge, 1995); and Tucker, *Dance Floor Democracy*.



teasing female bodies, either almost or completely naked, as their main advertising strategy.<sup>73</sup>

The most segregated clubs, those located uptown, advertised sophistication and respectability, while the least segregated clubs, those located downtown and around the Main, capitalized on the promise of intimacy and promiscuity. The clubs' advertising strategies thus foreground aesthetic values that are distinctly gendered and racialized: gendered-feminine and racialized non-white for the downtown clubs, and through the uptown clubs' emphasis on values of restraint, racialized-white and gendered-masculine.

Montreal nightlife chronicler Al Palmer legitimized the dancing of white chorus girl Gisele Lepine in this very manner in his 1949 novel *Sugar-Puss on Dorchester Street*. The novel traces the trajectory of a French-Canadian girl who decides when she turns eighteen to leave the country and move to the city where she eventually finds work as a chorus girl. During Gisele's very first encounter with a club owner, he tells her: "I am in need of one girl to fill in with the chorus at my club . . . I do not care if you are without previous experience."<sup>74</sup> Similarly, after Gisele coyly asks her new boyfriend what she needs to prepare in order to be ready for the first rehearsal, he answers:

Well, Sugar Puss, you're a surprising person. Here's what you do. Go out tomorrow and buy yourself a pair of comfortable loafers and bring them to a shoe repair store. Get rubber soles glued on them. Then . . . take this over to my friend at this address . . . and he'll give you everything else you need [i.e. "the doo-dads chorus dolls wear when they rehearse"]. Then get a small traveling bag and... *voila!*... you're a chorus girl. Almost.<sup>75</sup>

In this excerpt, white dance seems legitimized against seriousness of black dance; against their expertise, against their emotional investment. White dance is not a serious activity, it is not hard

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<sup>73</sup> Roquigny, "Les plaisirs de la danse à Montréal," 362.

<sup>74</sup> Al Palmer, *Sugar-Puss on Dorchester Street*, 1949 (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 2013), 38.

<sup>75</sup> Palmer, *Sugar-Puss*, 43.

work, it is disinterested. After her very first show, an audience member welcomes Gisele by telling her:

Gisele ma petite *bebe* you are the greatest thing to hit show business here since Fifi D'Orsay. You are superb, magnificent, you are – shall we say – *tres, tres*? A combination of Pavlova [sic, Anna Pavlova the Russian ballet dancer] and *Mam'selle* St. Cyr.<sup>76</sup>

Clearly, white dance must not claim to be hard work if one can be *très très* on their very first show, and without any prior training. Gisele is likened to Fifi D'Orsay, Anna Pavlova, Lili St. Cyr. Not to Josephine Baker.

Lili St. Cyr was a famous Montreal-based white chorus girl and strip-teaseuse in the 1940s. She also drew on a similar dichotomy to legitimize her tease acts against a charge of blunt indecency in the early 1950s. St-Cyr was specifically asked to prove to the court that she did not perform any “branlements ou grouillements”—a very loose, to say the least, translation of a bump-and-grind. “They would not have been appropriate in my number, at a place like the *Ciro* . . . I don't do numbers that require *branlements* and *grouillements*.”<sup>77</sup> Much like Adélard Lacasse, a crucial strategy for St-Cyr to legitimize white dance was to distance her routines from a long history of black burlesque shows that featured the bump-and-grind as one of its trademarks. St-Cyr argued in front of the court that: “This was not a striptease, but an artistic spectacle in its most beautiful form,” thus aligning her performance style with an emerging interest among French intellectuals of the time, notably Roland Barthes, to elevate striptease to the status of classical art.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Palmer, *Sugar-Puss*, 66.

<sup>77</sup> Lili St. Cyr and Louis-Jean D'Amour, *Ma Vie de Stripteaseuse: Biographie* (Outremont, Québec: Quebecor, 2005), 202. The *Ciro* was a club in Los Angeles. As I discuss below, she was arrested for the first time in Montreal in 1949 for a similar charge, while performing at the *Follies*, a similarly upscale nightclub in Montréal.

<sup>78</sup> St. Cyr, *Ma Vie de Stripteaseuse*, 198. Quoted in Rachel Shteir, *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 181. Roland Barthes's 1957 essay “Le Striptease,” for instance, argues that “striptease is based on a contradiction: woman is desexualized at the very moment when she is stripped naked.” Roland. “Le striptease,” in *A Barthes Reader*, edited by Susan Sontag, 1957 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

Specific kinds of music also had the power to rescue white women's bodies from the threat of racialized eroticism. It is well emphasized in Palmer's book that Gisele preferred to dance to a Strauss waltz than to the other show pieces (read: jazz), and every time Gisele transgresses ideals of heteronormative behavior in the novel Palmer makes Debussy's piece "Clair de Lune" recur in the background. Similarly, St-Cyr called her stripteases "pantomimes du ballet," and she explains in her autobiography that she was inspired to become a dancer after attending a performance of David Lichine in *L'après-midi d'un Faune*.<sup>79</sup> In her very own words, "le jazz me laissait froide."<sup>80</sup> In this sense, legitimizing white dance is accomplished through the articulation of identity politics that pits the self against an imagined hypersexualized and primitive black other. White dance can be redeemed if it is disinterested or if it can be aligned with classical art and music—strategies that black women performers have historically not easily been able to claim as their own.<sup>81</sup> The strategies used to legitimize the way white bodies moved also worked to "stiffen up" images of the white dancing body in comparison to a long tradition of overdetermining the black female body as hypersexual. Legitimizing white dance actually involved reclaiming "trottin'-around-the-stage" as an aesthetically valuable performative framework. St-Cyr, Palmer, the uptown club owners and the white dance teachers arguably built willingly on the other side of the dichotomy with which black women performers produced difference in order to gain cultural capital. As much as exotic dancers valued the expertise and the freedom of movement in their acts, proponents of white dance valued straight lines and the containment of body parts. Legitimizing white dance required the articulation of a hierarchy of worth that

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<sup>79</sup> Lili St. Cyr, *Ma Vie de Stripteaseuse*, 41.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 200.

<sup>81</sup> See in particular Farah Jasmine Griffin, "When Malindy Sings: A Mediation on Black Women's Vocality," in *Uptown Conversations: The New Jazz Studies*, edited by Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin, 102-125 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

recycled the very strategies that black women performers, musicians, and fans of black dance had articulated against it.

The legitimizing ideologies outlined above, it should be pointed out explicitly, were meant to neutralize the racial threat that jazz dance was believed to pose, and in particular to defuse the possibility of the co-mingling between black and white, national and foreign bodies and cultures. Black moves in white bodies stood as living proof that the body politic had been penetrated by “foreign” cultural influences. Still, as white women performers sought to distance themselves from black dances, they welcomed the license that jazz sound granted to the new ways in which their bodies could move on jazz soundtracks. Modern dances allowed significantly more freedom of movement to dancers than the traditional dance forms.<sup>82</sup> The Charleston in particular “was renowned for the lanky body movements it allow[ed] women to do, with its famous *peek-a-boo*. Against the traditional and classical dances which French-Canadians were used to, the Charleston was not a closed couple dance nor a group dance: “the couple breaks, one can even change partners during the dance or dance it alone.”<sup>83</sup> As Roquigny argued, modern dance allowed French-Canadian women to experiment with new forms of heterosocial behavior, ones which allowed them greater freedom over the ways their bodies could move in public spaces. Black dance is therefore not just marked as an object of derision, but also, to paraphrase Homi Bhabha, an object of desire.<sup>84</sup>

The road that takes Gisele from the conservative agrarian community to the sensuous atmosphere of the nightclub in Palmer’s book is clearly a racialized trajectory between ingenuousness and sexual maturity. As Palmer explicitly states in the preface that Gisele “traded

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<sup>82</sup> Roquigny, “Les plaisirs de la danse à Montréal,” 319.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 326.

<sup>84</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994).

the cool cleanliness of a Laurentian village” for the “squalor” of Dorchester Street.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, the way Gisele's body is described just as she is about to lose her virginity is striking:

Her ebony-black hair fell to a point just below her shoulders and the soft glow of the light played upon it to form a hazy halo when she was between him and the lamp. Her thin skin was dark. Like the color of coffee with too much cream, he thought. There were no white patches where a bathing suit had obstructed the rays of the sun. He wondered about this.<sup>86</sup>

While there is no doubt about Gisele's whiteness throughout the entire book, at the very moment where we see her body transgressing ideals of bourgeois womanhood for the first time, Palmer casts a doubt: maybe she's not as white as she looks. The morning after, Gisele looks at herself in the mirror and says to herself: “Today, Gisele, you are a woman.”<sup>87</sup>

The process through which Gisele's body becomes eroticized and sexually mature is virtually indistinguishable from the negotiation of racialized and classed notions of womanhood as she encounters them in the city. In other words, Gisele becomes woman through the eroticization of her body, and a specific “kind” of woman, one which articulates itself against various other available models of womanhood. She rejects “women who were over-painted and wore dresses which she hadn't seen in the West End. They were loose types of persons.”<sup>88</sup> Moreover, “houses of ill-repute [i.e. brothels] filled her with repulsion.”<sup>89</sup> Clearly, Gisele is trying to come to terms with what her friend, self-appointed “guardian of her morals and chief

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<sup>85</sup> Palmer, *Sugar-Puss*, 18. Gisele's father even asks her if her decision to move to the city as the result of “some condition which you find yourself in and wish to escape [i.e. pregnancy].” Palmer, *Sugar-Puss*, 26.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 131.

adviser of her behaviors,” meant when he said: “If you don't sell it—sit right on it. Don't go givin' nothin' away.”<sup>90</sup> The sex worker is also produced here as “other” to respectability ideals.<sup>91</sup>

At the same time as Gisele aligns herself to an extent with bourgeois morality, she, too, is “unmarried and sexually mobile . . . and therefore eccentric to the gendered and sexual ideals of normative (i.e. patriarchal) heterosexuality”—eccentric to Quebec’s gender and sexual order.<sup>92</sup> The scene of the sexual encounter in *Sugar-Puss* stands indeed in sharp contrast to Gisele’s first request for love-making made to her by a fellow Laurentian while she was still in the country, teenager Pierre, which ended with her “belaboring his head and chest with her fists” and screaming “*Cochon! Cochon!*” after his retreating figure.<sup>93</sup> We sense a new willingness in the figure of the young white urbanite to challenge heteronormative behavior, ideas that can be linked directly to Gisele’s participation in Montreal’s thriving nightclub industry and her encounter with racialized models of urban womanhood on entertainment stages. Compared to Gisele’s parents, whose honeymoon in the city (they had rented a room on Dorchester Street which, instead of being “the bridal suite for which they had hoped,” was “a place where there is also living persons whose morals are loose”) had convinced them “that they necessarily were country people,” Gisele’s body is eroticized from the moment she begins to dance in a nightclub.<sup>94</sup> Gisele’s trajectory towards adulthood involves the articulation of difference between herself and the sex worker, as well as a derision/desire relationship with an imagined primitive and hypersexualized black female other.

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<sup>90</sup> Palmer, *Sugar-Puss*, 6.

<sup>91</sup> See Roderick A Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

<sup>93</sup> Palmer, *Sugar-Puss*, 15.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 19-20.

Ultimately, it is a soundtrack that rescues Gisele from such racialized eroticism. “Her slight gasp of pain [as she was losing her virginity] could not be heard above the lilting strains of ‘Clair de Lune’ as the record player played it for the twelfth time.”<sup>95</sup> Debussy's piece works as the moral uplifter of the sexual encounter here; it is “Clair de Lune,” played twelve times no less, and a few more throughout the book—clearly a kind of *idée-fixe*—that rescues Gisele's racialized eroticism from the threat of gender deviance. Needless to say, the intercourse scene in Palmer's book played to the soundtrack of Ellington's “Caravan” would have painted quite a different tableau.

Two songs printed in French-Canadian magazines similarly produce difference between a racialized-white self and a racialized-black other while engaging blackness through African-diasporic dance. “Elle Danse le Black-Bottom” is a one-step that was composed at the very peak of the black-bottom craze in the United States in 1928, by composers Ludo and Theo Langlois with lyrics by Fernand Servais and Fred Dolys (see Figure 3.1 for score).<sup>96</sup> Printed along with headshots of “M. Pagé” and “Mlle S. de Varennes,” it is likely that the piece was originally conceived as a stage-piece that was part of a French-Canadian burlesque skit, yet its publication in *Canada qui Chante* and the fact that it appears without harmony points to its function as a parlor, perhaps revivalist piece for amateur musicians, the vast majority of whom, as I discuss in Chapter 4, were women.<sup>97</sup> The lyric of the song takes the point of view of a young man who tells the story of his encounter with his neighbor, a young “blonde with crazy eyes” (“she's the type

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<sup>95</sup> Palmer, *Sugar-Puss*, 58.

<sup>96</sup> Langlois, Ludo and Theo Langlois, “Elle Danse le Black-Bottom,” lyrics by Fernand Servais and Fred Dolys, *Canada Qui Chante* 2, no. 5 (May 1928): 5.

<sup>97</sup> Donald Cuccioletta's research on French-Canadian burlesque skits of the 1920s and 1930s suggests that a band often accompanied songs performed by the comedians. See Donald Cuccioletta, “The Américanité of Quebec Urban Popular Culture as Seen Through Burlesque Theater in Montreal, 1919-1939,” Doctoral thesis, Faculty of History, Université du Québec à Montréal, 1997, 189.

# Elle danse le Black-bottom

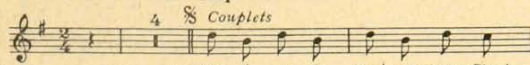
201

ONE STEP

Paroles de  
Fernand SERVAIS et Fred DOLYS.

Musique de  
L.-Th. LANGLOIS.

Mouv! de One Step



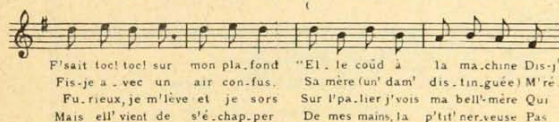
- 1 Elle e . tait du ' typ' que j'aime: Blonde
2. Elle e . tait tell' . ment gen . tille Qu'pour
3. Vient . le grand jour du mar . iage Et
4. Mais en . fin l'a . mour tout d'même Fi



a . vec des yeux fous Elle oc . cu . pait le cin . quème Et  
ell' j'eus l'ort bé . guin Je m'ren . dis dans sa fa . mille Pour  
l'mo . ment du do do C'est pas d'l'a . mour, c'est d'la rage Vit'  
nit par prend'le d'issus. Et ma femm' . bon . heur su . prême Eut



moi l'é . tage en d'ssous Tout' la jour . née ma voi . sine  
de . man . der sa main. Quell' dot lui est ac . cor . dée?  
je tire les ri . deaux. Mais, hé . las! y'a rien à faire  
un bé . bé jout . flu C'est un' fill' erie l'ac . cou . cheuse



F'sait toet toet sur mon pla . fond "El . le coué à la ma . chine Dis - j'  
Fis - je a . vec un air con . fus. Sa mère (un' dam' dis . tin . guée) M're .  
Fu . rieux, je m'lève et je sors Sur l'pa . lier j'vois ma bell'mère Qui  
Mais ell' vient de s'é . chap . per De mes mains, la p'tit' ner . veuse Pas



quelle ap . pli . ca . tion Ma con . cièr' me ré . pon .  
- pon . dit: "Mont là - d'ssus! Sa dot? Voy . ons mais elle  
m'dit. Dé . jà de . hors? J'lui ré . pliqu' j'en ai as  
mèch' d'la rat . trap . per! V'nez la voir, mon bon mon .



M. PAGE



Melle S. DE VARENNES



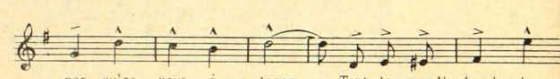
dit En ri . go . lant: "ah bien oui! El . le  
est Dans ses g'noux, dans ses mol . lets  
- sez Y'a pas moy . en d'em . bras . ser  
sieur C'est à n'en pas croir' ses yeux



dans' le cher . les ton C'est ri . go . lo El . le



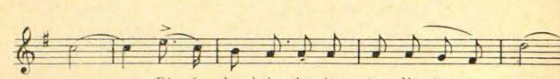
dans' le char . les ton C'est l'gen' nou . veau Il ne faut



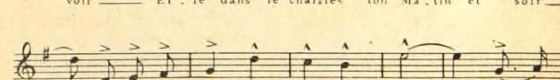
pas qu'sa vous é . a . tonne Tout le mond' dans' le



char . les ton, El . le dans' le char . les . ton Venez la



voir El . le dans' le char . les ton Ma . tin et soir



Tou . te la ma . son en fris . sonne El . le



dans' El . le dans' El . le dans' le char . les . ton

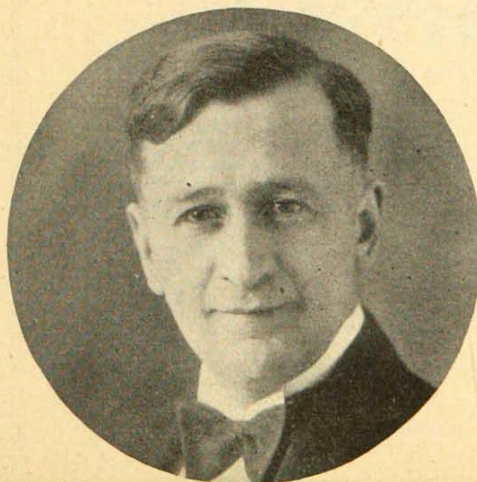


Figure 3.1: "Elle Danse le Black Bottom," score



of woman I like”). The song is strophic: Four iterations of the music take us from their first encounter to the narrator asking for her hand in marriage to their wedding-night to the birth of their first child, arguably the archetype of a Victorian heteronormative narrative.

Yet at all these stages, the woman manages to escape the patriarchal order through her dancing of the Charleston. In the first strophe, the narrator states with surprise that the constant “toc-toc” he heard on his ceiling, which he had originally attributed to her zealous use of a sewing machine, turned out to be the sound of Charleston dance steps. In the second strophe, when he goes to her mother to ask what the dowry would be if he asked to marry her, she answers: “But it’s obvious! It’s in her knees, it’s in her calves!” In the third strophe, the narrator narrates his wedding-night, when he approached the blonde “not with love, but with rage” yet ended up disappointed again: “Alas! There was nothing I could do/Furious, I get up, and I go out/I can’t kiss her!/She keeps dancing the Charleston!” Finally, in the last strophe, she gives birth to a little girl who manages to escape the hands of the midwife: “It’s just impossible to catch her!” the lyric goes, “She [too] dances the Charleston!”

The humor in the song is emphasized by harmonic and formal means. An AABA’ verse that prolongs tonic harmony cadences on V through the use of a secondary dominant, and is then followed by a bridge on a dominant-pedal that ends on a fermata. It is always at this moment that an explanation is given to the “deviant” behavior, when the chorus begins with the words “Elle danse le Charleston.” By the second strophe, the listener has identified the verse-chorus form and can anticipate the words that come after the fermata. As such, the fermata serves both to increase the harmonic and rhetorical tension as it would have worked as an efficient time buffer for, ideally, the peals of laughter. Each strophe is set up to stage a dichotomy between verse and chorus, where the verse emphasizes the downbeat and the regularity of four-bar phrases (all

stanzas begin on a downbeat except from the second), while the chorus displays syncopation and irregularity in the verse pattern (7+4, 7+4, 8, 8, 7+4, 7+4 8, 3+3+7). Here, almost all phrases begin on an upbeat, and the use of slurs, ties across the bar, accent and marcato markings on upbeats and dotted figures all work to allude to popular syncopated music. In other words, if dancing the Charleston is what repeatedly challenges the heteronormativity of the narrative in the lyric, the musical borrowing of figures associated with early-twentieth-century American popular music is also presented as disruptive of the gender and sexual order.

The piece “Charleston” by Charlys, another strophic song based on a Verse (AA’)—Chorus (BB’BC) format, paints a scene of dancing that is in many ways similar to the descriptions of dancing manias that appeared in the French-Canadian francophone press (see Figure 3.2 for score).<sup>98</sup> People who were originally going out for supper forget even their need to eat: “It’s a madness that surrounds us/Here comes the Charleston,” reads the end of the first strophe. “As a substitute for roastbeef or *gigot bretonne* . . . everybody charlestons/to the sound of the banjo and the saxophone. . . In my grandmother’s time, the dance that consisted in stirring the behind as such . . . was called *la dans’ de Saint-Guy*/Now here’s the advantage of progress:/In the past, that which seemed silly/has become just fine/due to it becoming fashionable.” The chorus goes: “now everybody charlestons. . . at the sink and at the telephone, *les garçons et les garçonnnes* . . . the manager with the landlady . . . myself with the concierge, or with the maid.”

If the tone is overall cynical, the awkwardness of Charlys’ use of syncopation and his continued emphasis on scale degree 5 until the very end of each strophe contributes to an ethos

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<sup>98</sup> Charlys, “Charleston,” *Canada qui Chante* 4, no. 4, April, 1930, 4.

# CHARLESTON

Paroles et Musique de CHARLYS

Dans l'monde en-tier tout comme en Fran-ce On cher-che de-  
 - puis quel-que temps U-ne ca-den-ce Pour u-ne dan-se  
 Sur un rythme extra-va-gant Il nous vient tout droit d'A-mé-ri-que  
 Un pas qui rem-plac' le shimmy Très ex-cen-tri-que Que l'on pra-ti-que  
 Dans tous les quartiers d'Pa-ri-s A Mé-ni-mon-tani comme à Charonne On  
 char-les-tone On char-les-tone Même au Saint Ger-main  
 chez la ba-ronne Tout le mond' Char-les-tone Au la-va-bo comme  
 au té-lé-phone On char-les-tone On char-les-tone  
 C'est un' fo-lie qui nous en-vi-ronne Voi-là le char-les'-tone

2

Dans tous les endroits à la mode  
 Dans les bars, dans les restaurants  
 C'est un' méthode  
 Vraiment commode  
 Pour attirer les clients.  
 On peut négliger la cuisine,  
 Du moment qu' l'orchestre est parfait,  
 C'est un' combine  
 On croit qu'on dine  
 Mais on dans' devant l'buffet.

REFRAIN

En fait d' "roastbeef" ou d'gigot bretonne  
 On charlestone  
 On charlestone  
 Les garçons et aussi les garçonne,  
 Tout le monde charlestone.  
 Au son du banjo, du saxophone,  
 On charlestone  
 On charlestone  
 Le gérant danse avec la patronne,  
 Voilà le charlestone.

3

Au bon vieux temps de nos grand's-mères  
 La dans' qui consistait ainsi  
 À r'muer l'derrière  
 Sans plus d'manières,  
 S'app'lait la dans' de Saint-Guy.  
 Du progrès, voici l'avantage  
 Autrefois c'qui semblait idiot  
 Par notre usage  
 D'être à la page,  
 Est dev'nu très comme il faut.

REFRAIN

Dans ma maison, c'n'est pas monotone,  
 On charlestone  
 On charlestone  
 Les p'tits enfants comme les grand's personnes  
 Tout le monde charlestone.  
 Avec mon concierge, avec ma bonne,  
 On charlestone  
 On charlestone  
 Et comme on n'a que l'plaisir qu'on s'donne  
 viv' donc le charlestone.

Figure 3.2 "Charleston," score

of unsettledness that is sustained until the very end of the last musical phrase of the refrain. The upward stepwise motion of the first two quarter notes would without a doubt have reminded the amateur of the half-measure upbeat that usually begins a gavotte, yet the following string of syncopated figures, interrupted by the same upbeat-like figure on a downbeat at bar three would have been enough to unsettle the amateur. We reach the downbeat of bar eight at the end of the first stanza with only a mild sense of relief as it cadences not on the tonic as we would expect but on V following a secondary dominant chord. The half-measure rest is followed once again by the gavotte, upbeat-like figure on a downbeat, a play with musical rhythm and syntax that would

suffice to throw the amateur off-balance once again. After a cadence on V that brings the verse to a deceiving end, the melody of the refrain begins outlining the scale degrees of a subdominant chord and then oscillates around scale degree 5 in-between uses of secondary dominant and subdominant chords. The amateur is thus allowed to experience a sense of relief from this significant build-up of rhythmical, melodic, harmonic, and overall syntactical tension only at the very end of each strophe. Overall, the piece leads the performer to develop a heightened sense of awareness towards the metrical syntax. As the song unfolds, the performer finds herself striving increasingly for a harmonic downbeat. Much in the way that an amateur dancer would become keenly aware of the lag that continually separates her moving body from the piece's metrical structure, Charlys' "Charleston" parodies the sense of unsettledness that comes along with learning dance steps that perhaps aren't one's own. It is not a coincidence that the song begins with the words "For some time now/people worldwide/have been looking for a cadence/on a dance on extravagant rhythms." Only after "Charleston" has ended can the body finally experience relief.

Parlor songs such as "Elle Danse le Black-Bottom" and "Charleston" engage African American dance forms in ways that allow for the articulation of a dichotomy between what is the national and what is the foreign, the self and the other. As I discussed briefly in the previous chapter, American popular dance forms were never made "Quebec's own" by French-Canadian composers during this time period. The parlor and art music songs that appeared in French-Canadian magazines and that borrow or allude to African American dance forms always articulate tropes about gender, racial, and cultural difference that are coherent with the anxieties about women's bodies, class and racial order, and the French-Canadian nation-building project that animated jazz criticism in the first half of the twentieth century. To put it bluntly, the

syncopated, deviant rhythms of the Charleston, shimmy, and black-bottom endangered too much that was too dear to ideals of the French-Canadian nation. Still, these songs provide an interesting challenge to the dominant discourse, primarily when positioned in their particular performance context. Printed as they were in magazines and written primarily for women to perform in the home, “Elle Danse le Black-Bottom” and “Charleston” allowed women to play with black rhythms from their own piano benches, arguably the archetypical image of Victorian domesticity.

Reclaiming jazz dance for white women often similarly involves positioning themselves firmly within the contours of heteronormativity:

“Cleaning up the house, it’s a matter of rhythm!” the woman said to a *New York Sun* representative as she trotted from one piece of furniture to another, dusting and restoring order, while the gramophone threw the bright tones of a fox-trot. “I saw somewhere that bricklayers and some factory workers easily accomplished a greater task using rhythmic movements. If the craftsmen do this, why not the housewives?” . . . The young woman had leaned on the arm of an armchair where she waddled provocatively, all the while classifying a pile of old newspapers.<sup>99</sup>

Similarly, quoted at length below is an entry from “Courrier de Ninon” in *Le Bulletin des Agriculteurs* from 1921, where Ninon answers a letter that had been sent to her by a “foremother:”

You are not very kind, grand-mother, with the young girls who dance the fox-trot. Yet you must have jumped too when you were young. You even admit to dancing the *rigodon*, the gig, the Scottish, and even the mazurka and the Pavane. Every decade brings a new way of moving the legs in time, and the dances of your time had their excesses as much as today’s dances have theirs. . . You don’t remember dancing to the dances I just mentioned? Be honest, grand-mother, refresh your memory a little bit: close those beautiful eyes that still shine like diamonds despite eighty-years of age, and try to remember . . . even better: why don’t you take out that small [*carnet de bal* (“ball book”)] hidden in one of your drawers . . . Ah! I knew you would find it. How charming, with its small enamel wooden pencil, pale-rose with an ivory head, attached to the *carnet* by a silk ribbon that must have been pink too . . . As overture for the ball, we read: ‘Tannhauser’s March’ Wagner; and after, “The Beautiful Blue Danube,” waltz, and, written in pencil, in a hesitating hand, “Paul” . . . Ah! Grand-mother, if you could, if you would describe to me the emotions you felt when this tall handsome young man came

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<sup>99</sup> “L’influence de la musique,” *Le Passe-Temps* 28, no. 709, June 10, 1922, 163. Translation mine.

timidly to offer his arm for this waltz! If you would, let me play it for you on my gramophone, softly, sweetly, as if it was coming through the ages from this distant ball . . . let the languorous harmonies of this Strauss waltz, still so stirring, so simple, and so beautiful penetrate you. Imagine dancing it again with Paul, your *cavalier* then, your husband later . . . So, grand-mother, let's get back to your *carnet de bal*; the waltz has ended. What? You can still hear it? Still? Always, you say? After that waltz, it's a Mazurka by Chopin that you danced with Colonel Smith. Ah! What a handsome serviceman he was . . . Then, as if to provide an even less gracious counter-weight to my fox-trot, your *carnet* grand-mother teaches us, you danced the Pavane, this dance from Spain that we no longer know, but which, as Saint-Saens so aptly used to say, 'was danced to the sounds of a music that was as ravishing and warm as the Andalusian sun, colored as much as the Spanish peppers. . . Have I revealed too loud what lay below the veil in that small corner of your past? If so, please forgive me. We are of the new generation; we know only a few of the dances you used to dance; we dance those we know, but we dance them decently, without *dandinements* (jiggling), without contortions, without *frétillements* (wriggling"). We are daughters of Eve, after all. Since her time, women haven't changed, it's what's around us that changes.<sup>100</sup>

In short, when white women legitimize jazz dance, they do so while standing firmly within the contours of heteropatriarchy: from the piano bench, while performing domestic work, and through the alignment with cross-generational narratives of heteronormativity.

The legitimizing ideologies produced on this side of the color line thus built on common tropes of racial difference that ultimately reinforced the racial status quo in *La Belle Province*. The hierarchy of worth that white women performers create against black women performers recycles strategies used by French-Canadian elites to delegitimize black bodies as exotic and primitive others. In order to legitimize white dance against vilifying mainstream discourses, white dancers align themselves with the body politic through the emphasis on masculine values of restraint, rationality, and moderation in their routines, including an aesthetic alignment towards classical artistry, positioning in the domestic sphere, and the alignment with heteronormative ideals. In other words, the dancing daughters of Eve can be legitimized through the straightening-up of their bodies (on a jazz soundtrack), or the straightening-up of the soundtrack (behind their unruly bodies). Either the blackness in sound or the blackness in movement has to give way. As the same time, the legitimating ideology that white women

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<sup>100</sup> Ninon, "Autour du Foyer: Courrier de Ninon," *Le Bulletin des Agriculteurs*, January 29, 1921, 90.

performers articulate cannot be understood apart from the challenge that black women's erotic bodies posed to hegemonic discourses of female respectability. While white women were encouraged to distance the kind of dancing that they did from black dance, they greatly enjoyed the greater freedom of movement that modern dance forms offered in comparison to the heavily ritualized couples' dances popular with their grandmother's generation. White dancers may have derided the aesthetic of uninhibition that framed black women's performance, yet they also welcomed the greater freedom over the way their bodies could move to a jazz soundtrack.

As I discussed above, the valuing of feeling over rationality and the celebration of pleasure and sexuality in the excerpts quoted above from black women performers' oral histories also contributed to their disarticulation from the body politic, which in turn functioned as a racist apparatus to segregate black female bodies outside national discourse. Black dancers' hierarchies of worth against an imagined white other is also based on dichotomies like nature/culture, eroticism/stiffness, freedom/containment, intimacy/distance, rupture/order, improvisation/rote, and feeling/rationality that have historically functioned to activate racist and sexist tropes of gender and racial difference that have contributed to the maintenance of hierarchies between black and white women and men in the West. As Sherrie Tucker has summarized, "even at their most laudatory, equations of racial identity and jazz ability betray their roots in nineteenth-century racial science, in which European-descended positivists classified people of African descent as intuitive, sexual, and uninhibited, and people of their own backgrounds . . . as rational, intellectual, and disciplined."<sup>101</sup> Representations of the black body as an authentic source of emotion, bodily knowledge, and sensuality reproduce tropes about the noble savage that have functioned primarily to withhold the testimonial credibility of black women's voices from

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<sup>101</sup> Sherrie Tucker, "Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies," *Current Musicology* 73 (2002): 380.

historical narratives. At the same time, such processes of self-exoticization allowed black women performers to be neutralized in the eye of the moralists—an important strategy of survival in facilitating access to creative and sustainable work within the geographical borders of Quebec. Through the harnessing the erotic potential of their bodies on stage, an element that arguably further-ostracized black women from the body politic, black women could obtain relief from the menial and service work opportunities available to them at the time by making creative, artistic, and highly lucrative use of their beautiful bodies instead. In this sense, black dancers also marked the imagined white female other as a site of derision and desire. While black women performers derided the stiffness associated with white female performance, they drew on a similar politics of respectability to disarticulate what they did from vice and to access levels of social mobility that had been traditionally reserved to their white counterparts.

The legitimizing ideologies produced on both sides of the color line worked to unsettle gendered and racialized understandings of the embodiment of morality and vice articulated in mainstream French-Canadian criticism. As an acoustic space, jazz gave license to forms of theatrical and social dancing that challenged the normative ways in which women's bodies black and white were allowed to move in public spaces. As a discursive space, it allowed black and white women to imagine new ways of legitimizing bodily pleasure and of claiming their bodies as their own. Ultimately, until Drapeau took seat at city hall, the strategies used by both black and white women performers were essentially successful in appeasing the ire of the moralists and in maintaining a space where a complex web of gender, racial, and national politics could be challenged in the public sphere. Jazz at the very heart of *La Belle Province* provided an important discursive and acoustic space where a future in which female bodies not confined to



the racialized either/or between frigidity or to sexual deviancy could be imagined, rehearsed, and acted out in public spaces.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Vera Guilaroff and the *Maple Leaf* (in D)Rag: Issues of Historiography, Musical Genre, and Improvisational Agency in the Novelty Style**

Vanessa,

Before we even get together I want to impress upon you that Vera was not a ‘ragtime pianist’. She was a pianist of many talents, ragtime being just one of them. Her repertoire included all genres, popular, jazz, classical, Broadway, etc. She was a very special lady, married to a successful Montreal businessman, so playing piano was more of a hobby than a profession for her. I look forward to meeting you and sharing my memories of this remarkable woman.

James<sup>1</sup>

It wasn’t long after I had reached the conclusion that the materials related to the first Canadian woman to make a jazz record had yet to be compiled in an institutional archive that James Kidd’s message appeared in my inbox. He had been the only Canadian member of the Record Research Associates, a discography group based in New York that in the early sixties had attempted to reconstruct the label listing of the Pathé/Perfect record label. Upon the group’s discovery of some of Vera Guilaroff’s records (originally for the Montreal-based Apex, but also distributed in the United States), Kidd took on the mission of finding out more about her, eventually meeting her on several occasions between her art-deco home in uptown Montreal and her country-house-on-the-lake in the Quebec Laurentians.

She was thrilled that anyone was interested in her and her recordings! She had long since been retired of course and played only for pleasure. The obvious next step was to record her, so on a warm night in June of 1964 I drove her to the CFCF studios (about 8PM), wheeled the grand piano from shipping into the large studio (nothing had been booked for the studio so we were alone), set up two microphones (one for voice the other for the piano) . . . and asked her to play whatever she wished. She wore a very fancy dress and was prepared for the session. She looked great and was in a happy frame of mind. . . Needless to say, the guys at Record Research were delighted with the recording that I send [sic] them afterward.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James Kidd, “RE: Regarding Ragtime Pianist Vera Guilaroff,” answer to e-mail from author, July 18, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> James Kidd, “RE: 2 questions,” answer to e-mail from author, December 7, 2016.

This particular recording that he arranged, where the then “comfortably retired . . . older lady” intersperses some of her favorite pieces with thoughts, memories, and anecdotes from earlier times—in Guilaroff’s words, “there’s going to be some rambling tonight”—turns out to be one of the most richly textured archival documents to contextualize her music-making and to testify to her own outlook on her musical career.<sup>3</sup>

Yet the issue of labeling —was she, or wasn’t she a “ragtime pianist?”—emerged clearly in Kidd’s initial e-mail, an issue that continues to be implicated in Guilaroff’s lack of historical visibility. As a pianist, improviser, radio broadcaster, composer and recording artist, Guilaroff enjoyed a musical career of international standing that lasted more than half a century. She also currently stands as the first Canadian woman to have made a record of popular syncopated music.<sup>4</sup> Still, to this day, her recorded output remains in the possession of scattered collectors, and according to the closest family member I interviewed, the most likely location of the rest of her personal archive is “garbage.”<sup>5</sup> On top of the more common naming difficulties related to historical research about women—in this case references to her in official and public documents as Vera Raginsky (her married name, which she almost never used herself), “Miss” Guilaroff, and aliases such as Max Darewski and Vera Hardman (on alternate takes of songs released on Microphone and Domino)—issues of musical genre have complicated Guilaroff’s inclusion into existing music-historical narratives. To this day, novelty piano, that variety of flashy, fast-tempoed and thick-textured syncopated piano music from the late 1920s has kept its status as a

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<sup>3</sup> James Kidd, “RE: 2 questions,” Vera Guilaroff, *Vera Guilaroff Recording Session*, produced by James Kidd, CFCF Studio, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, June 9, 1964, audio CD. Courtesy of Jack Litchfield,

<sup>4</sup> John Gilmore, *Who’s Who of Jazz in Montreal: Ragtime to 1970* (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1989), 104.

<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Fieldman-Fraiberg, interview with author, June 6, 2017.

liminal zone in-between histories of jazz and popular music.<sup>6</sup> In *Who's Who of Jazz in Montreal: Ragtime to 1970*, the central monograph to document Montreal-based jazz performers in the first half of the twentieth century, author John Gilmore introduces Guilaroff as such:

Though Compo advertisements billed her as Canada's Premier Jazz Pianist, this was clearly hyperbole. She was not, strictly speaking, a jazz musician; rather, she was a popular entertainer who often played in a ragtime and early stride style.<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, neither included in histories of popular music in Quebec nor acknowledged as a jazz artist in the jazz who's-whos, Guilaroff's contribution to the history of syncopated music-making has greatly suffered from the lack of materials dealing with the peripheral areas between jazz and popular music, in Canada and elsewhere.

Still, the legacy of Montreal's "other" novelty-style pianist, Willie Eckstein—with whom Guilaroff shared the bill as "The Piano Ramblers" through the 1930s—has fared far better, for instance earning him (and not her, as of this writing) an induction in the Canadian Songwriters Hall of Fame. By comparison, Gilmore heralds him as "a remarkable interpreter . . . blessed with an extraordinary sense of extemporization . . . mixing his classical technique with the new jazz," and he directs the reader to Eckstein's entry in Jack Litchfield's *Canadian Jazz Discography* "for piano solos of jazz interest."<sup>8</sup> From the outset, the production of difference in the playing styles of the two pianists discords in significant ways with Guilaroff's surviving oral histories. "Billy [Eckstein] really was my inspiration," she recalled in a celebration given in Eckstein's honor in 1963:

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<sup>6</sup> For a similar argument about novelty-style pianist Zez Confrey, see James Richard Dossa, "The Novelty Piano Style of Zez Confrey," PhD thesis, Northwestern University, 1986. See also Ronald Riddle, "Novelty Piano Music," in *Ragtime: Its History, Composers, and Music*, edited by John Edward Hasse (New York: Schirmer, 1985), 286.

<sup>7</sup> Gilmore, *Who's Who*, 104.

<sup>8</sup> Obituary, *Montreal Star*, 23 September, 1963, 6. Quoted in Gilmore, *Who's Who*, 76. See Jack Litchfield, *The Canadian Jazz Discography (1916-1980)* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 268-272.

When I was twelve years old, I had the pleasure of meeting Billy's father whom I remember very distinctly. At that time, I had long fair curls. And he stroked them and he said: 'You play just like my Billy . . . It was one of the greatest joys of my life to sit across Billy. We never rehearsed, half the time he never showed up, and I had to play for the two of us.'<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, in a piano folio from 1937 that Guilaroff autographed for Eckstein, she wrote: "With lots of good wishes for you Billy – your pal, and better half of the Piano Ramblers, Vera."<sup>10</sup>

While such language points to what most likely was strategic historicism on the part of Guilaroff to be acknowledged as (at least) equal to Eckstein, the idea that she could pass, in front of audiences, connoisseurs, even Eckstein's father as being the same, and even as the both of them at times, suggests how deceptive clear-cut genre-based boundaries can be. If Guilaroff and Eckstein capitalized precisely on the idea of interchangeability in their radio show together, then the distinction between the pianist who was "not, strictly speaking, a jazz musician" and the pianist "of jazz interest" surely cannot stand as the only way to account for the kinds of sounds that they made.

What other dynamics are at play, then, when labels such as "ragtime" or "jazz" are applied or denied to artists who performed syncopated music before jazz' meanings standardized leading into the Second World War? What governs the use of labels such as "popular entertainer" or "a lady of many talents" in making sense of a figure like Vera Guilaroff? In her article "When Did Jazz Go Straight," Sherrie Tucker suggests among other things jazz' ability to function as a "straightening device," as a marker that can be used to straighten up a historical

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<sup>9</sup> Vera Guilaroff, *Tribute to Willie Eckstein*, recorded live at Her Majesty's Theatre, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, May 27, 1963, audio CD. Courtesy of Jack Litchfield,

<sup>10</sup> Jack Meakin, *Four Piano Solos by Jack Meakin, Broadcast & Featured by Vera Guilaroff*, piano folio, autographed by Vera Guilaroff to Willie Eckstein, front cover included in Jack Litchfield, *Willie Eckstein, Harry Thomas, Vera Guilaroff: Three Montreal Pianists from the Jazz Age* (Toronto: Jack Litchfield, 2015).

figure, to take him or her from the historiographical margins to the discursive center.<sup>11</sup> When sounds signify on more than one musical genre, she argues, a prestige label such as jazz can function as a powerful apparatus to draw or stack cultural capital around an individual who might otherwise be left at the margins of the historical narrative. To be clear, Gilmore does not see Eckstein as a strictly jazz musician either.<sup>12</sup> Yet tagging the j-word alongside his name functions as a straightening device: “the new jazz” and “piano solos of jazz interest” having been detected in the sounds that he made, Eckstein is brought closer to the discursive center of jazz as a category of musical genre, which in turn legitimizes Eckstein’s contribution to music-making in Montreal. At the same time, by dismissing the jazz label for being somehow in excess of Guilaroff, she is left short of the kind of straightening that the jazz label can do. This, in turn, further reinforces her ambivalent status in-between genre-based historical narratives of music-making in the early decades of the twentieth century.

This paper also lingers on the idea that the jazz label can function as an outing device. In the midst of so many attempts to discard, dilute, and battle with the word in criticism on Guilaroff, searching for it in her oral histories and sounds—and finding it—felt at times closely aligned with the process of outing her, almost as if I was attempting to expose a life that perhaps was not quite as normative as some commentators were hoping to make. Was it jazz? Was *she* jazz? Kidd’s insistence, in his initial e-mail, that the sounds of ragtime be diluted in virtually everything that could be heard or played by a very special *lady* at the time (“her repertoire included all genres”), and that her performing career be nuanced with references to her bourgeois married status (“playing piano was more of a hobby than a profession for her”), casts a distinctly

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<sup>11</sup> Sherrie Tucker, “When did Jazz go Straight? A Queer Question for Jazz Studies,” *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 4, No. 2 (2008): 1-16.

<sup>12</sup> He writes: “Though not a jazz pianist, he was a versatile and popular entertainer who improvised and played in a variety of styles, including ragtime[.]” Gilmore, *Who’s Who*, 76.

racialized and classed impression of Guilaroff. If her cultural legacy *as a lady* is to be “impressed upon us,” to borrow Kidd’s expression, then the word “ragtime,” and by extension any overt association with the j-word better be left out. In short, if the jazz label has the potential to straighten Guilaroff’s sounds and take them out of the historiographical margins, it can also queer the heteronormative alignments of her public persona.

The reactivation of Guilaroff’s cultural legacy within a jazz historical framework thus forces us to reevaluate some “straight lines in early jazz historiography,” to use Tucker’s wording. Why does the jazz label seem to queer the lady? What is at stake when current understandings of musical genre don’t work as a primary structuring device for a narrative about music-making in the early twentieth century? What are the identity politics at play in claiming or in disclaiming Guilaroff’s sounds as belonging to jazz as a category of musical genre? In order to answer these questions, I will first review media discourse on Guilaroff from the 1920s and 1930s to explore the ways in which publics and critics understood the sounds that she made in relation to contemporaneous understandings of jazz as a category of musical genre. I will then draw on two surviving oral histories where Guilaroff articulates her own narrative of music-making as an upper-class white woman in the early decades of the twentieth century. Finally, building on a recent interview with Judith Butler conducted by Tracy McMullen, I will offer a close analysis of five different takes of Guilaroff’s “Maple Leaf Rag” to map the specific ways in which identity factored into the kinds of sounds that she made when she improvised. If we can readily accept Guilaroff’s oral histories as loci for the performance of gender and identity, can we do the same with the other sounds that Guilaroff played in-between words, and which have also not found a home in jazz history?

*Was “it” jazz?*

Vera Guilaroff was born in October 26<sup>th</sup> 1902 in Islington, England. Her parents, Eugene Abraham Guilaroff and Annie Guilaroff (born Snitkin), were both Jewish immigrants from Russia (Belarus and Lithuania) who emigrated to England in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and eventually settled in Canada in 1909. Guilaroff had four siblings: two sisters, Olga and Dorothy, and two brothers, Theodore and Sydney. The Guilaroffs also travelled with a young girl born in South Africa in 1906 named Iva, whom they took to England in 1907 and who worked as the family’s domestic help. Guilaroff took piano lessons as a young child with her sister Olga, who went on to become a well-known classical pianist and piano teacher in Montreal. Guilaroff, on the other hand, started to fill in for silent movie theatre pianist Harry Thomas in 1916, and by 1919 she held a permanent position at the Regent Theatre. Guilaroff broadcasted on Montreal’s CFCF and CKAC radio starting in the early 1920s, and by 1924 she had earned the reputation of “the famous pianist of the Regent theatre” in *La Presse*.<sup>13</sup> At the Regent as well as in clubs such as the Brasserie Frontenac, Guilaroff often performed with percussionist Harry Raginsky, whom she married on June 2, 1925. Through the 1920s and 1930s, Guilaroff continued to participate in Montreal’s entertainment business, transitioning from the silent movie theatre to the recording studio in the late 1920s, and appearing as “musical interpreter” on two Gordon Sparling films: *Back in '22* (1932) and *Back in '23* (1933). She also toured the United States as a vaudeville act with Raginsky in the late 1920s, and with Teddy Foster’s Kings of Swing in the United Kingdom in the summer and fall of 1937. Until then, the “Princess of the Piano” remained a fixture of Montreal Anglophone radio broadcasting.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *La Presse*, February 15, 1924, 17. Translation mine.

<sup>14</sup> James Kidd, “Vera Guilaroff: Princess of the Piano,” *Record Research* 76 (May 1966): 5-6.



Through this entire era, Guilaroff seems to have posed a categorization challenge to her audiences and critics. Abroad, she was introduced above all as a “Canadian” pianist, with labels such as “Canada’s Radio Pianist Extraordinary” or “Canada’s Melody Girl.”<sup>15</sup> In turn, radio programming and newspapers in Canada advertised her as a “radio artist,” a “pianist-composer,” or a “pianiste-virtuose,” labels that signify on a wide range of musical genres.<sup>16</sup> When she appeared with Raginsky in “the garden that draws the best of shows,” Castlefarm Dream Garden in Cincinnati, Ohio, on August 15, 1926, they are said to have played “radio favorites.”<sup>17</sup> The *Detroit Free Press* described their act, which was broadcast on WCX from Detroit, Michigan, as such:

Many of the latest popular tunes were broadcast, Miss Guilaroff playing solos and also the accompaniments for Mr. Raginsky’s xylophone numbers. Clever four-hammer work, unusual in composition of fast time, added interest to the playing of the latter.<sup>18</sup>

These are laudatory words to be sure, yet Guilaroff is still portrayed as an accomplished oddity, and not only in her performance of “popular tunes . . . unusual in composition of fast time,” but also the gendered dynamics of Guilaroff playing the solos *and also the accompaniments* with her newlywed. In the 1930s, when Guilaroff toured with Teddy Foster’s Kings of Swing in the United Kingdom, they were advertised as playing “band music,” “acts concerned with comical matters,” and

gay music, intelligently played, with trumpet solos skillfully given by Mr. Foster, popular vocalism by Billy Scott-Coomber, an adept at this sort of thing, and some clever work by Miss Guilaroff at the

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<sup>15</sup> “Radio,” *The Scotsman*, 2 July, 1937, 16; “Radio,” *The Scotsman*, 22 July, 1937, 15; “Radio,” *The Scotsman*, 9 September, 1937, 7; *The Manchester Guardian*, September 11, 1937, 15; and “The Variety Stage,” *The Stage*, September 16, 1937, 2.

<sup>16</sup> James Kidd, “For the Record,” *The Globe and Mail*, July 2, 1997, A13; *L’Illustration Nouvelle*, 16 December, 1936, 13; *The Globe and Mail*, June 17, 1948, 14.

<sup>17</sup> *The American Israelite* (1874-2000), 19 Aug 1926, 7.

<sup>18</sup> *Detroit Free Press*, 9 September, 1926, 17.

pianoforte. There is tunefulness and a proper sense of rhythm in all their numbers, most of which are songs of the moment with their own definite appeal to audiences.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly,

Jack Payne describes his [show] “Say It With Melody” as a radio kaleidoscope, and some well-known broadcasters figure in the more or less typical variety programme that is presented under the title . . . Teddy Foster and his Kings of Swing are the instrumental combination, and hot trumpeting and lively music in the modern manner are matters that are efficiently dealt with by them, and in a way that obviously commends itself to audiences. Interpolated items by Billy Scott-Coomber, who needs no introduction as an effective singer at the microphone, and Vera Guilaroff, a pianist of unusual accomplishment, enhance the appeal of this particular band act.<sup>20</sup>

While these labels and descriptions firmly position the sounds that Guilaroff made within the 1920s and 1930s entertainment business, they all seem to tip-toe around musical genre labels. Clearly, the j-word does not appear with any kind of consistency in media discourse on Guilaroff in the interwar years.

Still, to a number of publics, marketing agents, and critics, Guilaroff was jazz. Beyond Compo’s billing of her as “Canada’s Premier Jazz Pianist,” James Kidd himself labeled her a “popular and jazz pianist” in 1997 for *The Globe and Mail*.<sup>21</sup> “Should you find a copy of one of her early records,” he commented, “listen for that left hand – not far from the Harlem greats. It seems amazing that a young girl who had never been near the U.S. could have developed a style so like the Johnsons-Wallers-Smiths.”<sup>22</sup> In 1926, Guilaroff played the piano with an ensemble called “Fanfare Jazz.” The band’s program, which was live-broadcasted from Montreal’s Brasserie Frontenac, included improvised arrangements of popular syncopated songs in English including “Birth of the Blues,” “My Mama’s in Town,” and “View of my Old Kentucky Home,”

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<sup>19</sup> “Radio,” *The Irish Times*, 22 July 1937, 4; “The Variety Stage,” *The Stage*, September 9, 1937, 3; “The Variety Stage,” *The Stage*, October 7, 1937, 3; “The Variety Stage,” *The Stage* September 16, 1937, 2.

<sup>20</sup> “The Variety Stage,” *The Stage*, September 30, 1937, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Kidd, “For the Record.”

<sup>22</sup> Kidd, “RE: 2 questions.”

rag in the novelty style like the “Maple Leaf Rag” and Zez Confrey’s “Dizzy Fingers,” Dvorak’s “Humoresque” (which Guilaroff had recorded on a piano roll that year as “Classic Rag No. 1”), as well as a solo xylophone version of “La Paloma” interpreted by Raginsky. Other pieces like “The Dancers,” interpreted jointly by the couple, would most likely have built on their travelling as a vaudeville act together.<sup>23</sup> The Fanfare Jazz also performed two popular songs in stride-style of Guilaroff’s own composition: Her first published work “If you Only Knew” (1921), a popular syncopated song in stride-style, as well as “Lonesome Rose” (1923), a popular waltz for voice and piano that she eventually recorded with French-Canadian tenor Olivier Gélinas and a small orchestra.<sup>24</sup> Guilaroff’s other recordings from that era also draw from the same repertoire, including songs in stride-style like “Who” and “A Cup of Coffee, A Sandwich and You” (distributed as far as Australia), stride-style piano arrangements of popular pieces of the day like “I’m Sitting on Top of the World,” “Sleepy Time Gal” and other sing-alongs like “O Katharina” and “My Sweetie Turned Me Down,” piano medleys of her own compositions, as well as a series of piano rolls that included “Lonesome Rose,” “Classic Rag No. 1 – Humoresque,” and three rags performed in the novelty style: Scott Joplin’s 1899 “Maple leaf Rag,” Nat Johnson’s 1914 “Calico Rag,” and Jesse Greer’s 1926 “Flapperette.”

The program of the Fanfare Jazz, as well as Guilaroff’s 1925-6 recordings, testify to the close relationship between categories of musical genre for pianists like Guilaroff who worked in Montreal’s entertainment business in this time period. Guilaroff’s ragged “Humoresque,” the popular Spanish song “La Paloma,” and her “Birth of the Blues” number all signified on jazz as a

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<sup>23</sup> Kidd recalls that the couple would switch playing drums and the piano during their performances, and that Raginsky would put on roller skates to play his twenty-feet long marimba. They placed bananas at one end, and Raginsky asked Guilaroff to “pack him a lunch” when he was about to go play at the other end, apparently interrupting his playing in order to take a bite of a banana. Kidd, “Princess of the Piano,” in Litchfield, *Willie Eckstein, Harry Thomas, Vera Guilaroff*, 84.

<sup>24</sup> *La Presse*, 21 December, 1926, 10; *La Presse*, 30 December, 1926, 23. Translation mine.

performance practice for publics and performers at the Brasserie Frontenac and CKAC audiences. Particularly in a place like Montreal where the new records of Anglophone or syncopated popular music were advertised as *musique de danse*, in opposition to *musique instrumentale* (classical music exclusively), *chant* (French song and vocal Western art music), and *musique de Noël*, the aesthetic boundary between jazz, novelty ragtime, lively Anglophone popular music, and ragged classics was quite porous.<sup>25</sup>

*Was “she” jazz?*

Such a repertoire was not only featured in the theatres and clubs where Guilaroff was hired like the other pianists who worked in Montreal’s entertainment business, but also in the private spaces where improvised popular syncopated piano music could be heard: the home parlor.<sup>26</sup> The gendered dichotomy between public and private (or semi-private) music-making is one of many discursive tools structuring the boundaries between categories of musical genre in the first decades of the century. Most of those who entertained guests at the piano in the North American home parlor, picking up and improvising on pieces that had taken up their fancy, from Beethoven sonatas to vaudeville sing-alongs, were women. The piano was a sign of respectability and it was the center of family and self-entertainment, often one of the biggest purchases that a middle-class family would consider. “Everybody I knew owned a piano,” remembers Montreal-based theatrical dance teacher Olga Spencer Foderingham.<sup>27</sup> The piano

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<sup>25</sup> See *La Lyre* 1, no. 2 (November 1922): 3-4 and *La Lyre* 1, no. 3 (December 1922): 6-7. Translation mine.

<sup>26</sup> See Edith Borroff, “An American Parlor at the Turn of the Century,” *American Music* 4, no. 3 (Autumn 1986): 302-308.

<sup>27</sup> Olga Spencer (Foderingham), *Interview with Olga [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0006 [7115], 1993-1994, VHS. See also Mary Brown, *Interview with Mary [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0004 [7111], 1993-1994, VHS.

was believed to be an important part of the cultural upbringing of young black and white girls growing up in Montreal in the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>28</sup> And for them, the boundaries between popular, ragtime, jazz, and the classical pieces which they played, strived to play, or “faked” to play was much more porous than in public spaces like the concert stage or the jazz orchestra pit, or those driven by economic imperatives tied to advertising strategies like the publishing houses and the record companies. Women in Quebec found ragtime alongside other popular syncopated music and light classical and dance music in the magazines they read, for instance in *Le Passe-Temps*, *La Lyre*, and *Le Canada qui Chante*, as well as in the department stores in which they shopped or worked as clerks.<sup>29</sup> Apparently, the practice of “ragging the classics” was also a common one in French Canada: “Enough!” wrote Louis Vuillemin in 1923:

We should prohibit confusion between the dancing and the Temple! . . . At home, the girls only sit at the piano to telescope the rhythm of the themes and of the harmonies. . . The Overture of ‘Tannhäuser’! The finale of the ‘Ninth’! . . . In public, this kind of desecration is simply evil. Their effect is to mix cocktails and whiskey-soda with Wagner and Beethoven, who without a doubt did not drink any of this themselves.<sup>30</sup>

Clearly, between the wage earners who played syncopated popular music in public spaces, and the non-wage-earners who played syncopated popular music in private spaces, the difference was not so much one of musical expertise or repertoire than one of gendered access.

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<sup>28</sup> See for instance Arlene Campbell, “Othermothering and Life Notations of Daisy Sweeney,” PhD thesis, York University, 2012; Leon, “La musique au foyer,” *La Lyre* 1, no. 2 (November 1922): 2, and Hasse, *Ragtime*, 20.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of scores in French-Canadian magazines and newspapers, see Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, as well as Peggy Roquigny, “Les plaisirs de la danse à Montréal: Transformation d’un divertissement et de ses pratiques, 1870-1940,” PhD thesis, Université du Québec à Montréal, 2012, 424-427. See also Bonnie H. Miller, “Ladies’ Companion, Ladies’ Canon?: Women Composers in American Magazines from *Godey’s* to the *Ladies’ Home Journal*,” in *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music*, edited by Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou, 156-182 (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

<sup>30</sup> Louis Vuillemin, “Le Jazz-Band,” *La Lyre* 1, no. 4 (Février 1923): 5, 31. Translation mine. This excerpt is also quoted at page 101.

Biographical narratives of white women playing ragtime and other popular syncopated music in the first decades of the twentieth century often follow the same trajectory.<sup>31</sup> Because of historians' primary focus on ragtime in its published format, pianists like May Aufderheide and Adaline Shepherd are shown to have been active musically in their late teens, twenties and sometimes in their early thirties. Yet as Carolyn A. Lindeman argues, they tended to end their publishing endeavors once they married or had children, and for this reason, few earned lasting reputations.<sup>32</sup> Almost systematically, scholars who have considered the historical significance of white women playing syncopated music at the piano articulate narratives where creativity and musical production suffer from marriage and childbearing as a result of the strong heteronormative expectations placed on white upper-class women in North America. As I discussed above, Guilaroff had a similarly booming early career that started in her early teens when she began working as a theatre pianist. She continued to participate in Montreal's entertainment business well into the first decade of her marriage, as she transitioned from the movie theatres to the recording studio in the late 1920s, to radio broadcasting in the 1930s. Guilaroff is also listed as "musical interpreter" on two films by Gordon Sparling films: *Back in*

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<sup>31</sup> For scholarship on women and ragtime, see Charles Chamberlain, "The Goodson Sisters: Women Pianists and the Function of Gender in the Jazz Age," *Jazz Archivist: A Newsletter of the William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive* 15 (2001): 1-9; David Jasen and Gene Jones, *Black Bottom Stomp: Eight Masters of Ragtime and Early Jazz* (New York: Routledge 2002), 97-98; Carolyn A. Lindeman, "May Francis Aufderheide," in *Women Composers: Music Through the Ages*, Vol. 6, edited by Martha Furman Schleifer and Sylvia Glickman (New York: G.K. Hall & Co. 1999) and *Women Composers of Ragtime: A Collection of Six Selected Rags by Women Composers* (Byrn Mawr, PA: Theodore Presser Company, 1985); Max Morath, "May Aufderheide and the Ragtime Women," in Hasse, *Ragtime*, 155; Laura Ann Pilkington, "Three Ragtime Women in Socio-Historical Context: The Lives, Times and Music of May Aufderheide, Julia Lee Niebergall, and Adaline Shepherd" (Master of Arts, University of Oregon, 2000); Jeffrey Taylor, "With Lovie and Lil: Rediscovering Two Chicago Pianists of the 1920s," in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, edited by Sherrie Tucker and Nichole T. Rustin, 48-63 (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008); Ted Tjaden, "Women Composers of Ragtime," *Classic Ragtime Piano by Ted Tjaden*, 2006, website, available at <http://www.ragtimepiano.ca/rags/women.htm>; Mary Unterbrink, *Jazz Women at the Keyboard* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1983); and Richard Zimmerman, *First Ladies of Hoosier Ragtime* (Grass Valley, CA: Richard Zimmerman, 1990).

<sup>32</sup> Lindeman, *Women Composers of Ragtime*, 5.

'22 (from 1932) and *Back in '23* (from 1933).<sup>33</sup> But on September 9<sup>th</sup> 1936, newspapers start advertising a singular, unnamed “vagabond du piano” every Wednesday, as opposed to the plural “Ramblers” which had been advertised almost every Tuesday and Thursday since January of that same year (and earlier), until “Vera Guilaroff, pianiste” is advertised on her own on September 23<sup>rd</sup>. At that time, Willie Eckstein was becoming more and more involved in Montreal’s cabaret circuit; the anecdotes of Guilaroff passing as the both of them on their radio show are often tied to narratives of Eckstein’s late working nights, and subsequent no-shows.<sup>34</sup> Guilaroff appears a few times with pianist Ramon Otero between December 1936 and February 1937, to then be advertised on her own on Wednesdays and Fridays at 10:45 PM between mid-February and March 1937. From then on, there are almost no public records of Guilaroff performing anywhere, with only a handful of press-advertised performances, a brief return to radio broadcasting between January and March 1941 in a show advertised as “Intermezzo,” and a single recording, from April 1942, of war songs with Québécois singer Lionel Parent. In other words, like the earlier generation of female pianists playing popular music, on a timeline it sure looks like her career took a drastic turn when she and Raginsky had their son, in April 1937.

It is tempting to explain away this turn in Guilaroff’s career as a direct consequence of her taking on mothering responsibilities. Yet only a few months into motherhood, Guilaroff travelled to the United Kingdom for four months, leaving her family behind. She went on tour with Teddy Foster and his Kings of Swing, broadcasted at the BBC with organist Reginald Foort, and recorded a series of high-quality medleys of Broadway hits at the Abbey Road studios in

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<sup>33</sup> See Gordon Sparling, *Back in '22*, musical interpretation by Vera Guilaroff, 1932, 2014, DVD; and Gordon Sparling, *Back in '23*, musical interpretation by Vera Guilaroff, 1933, 2014, DVD.

<sup>34</sup> James Kidd, “[No Subject],” e-mail to author, December 7, 2016.

London. Guilaroff's virtual disappearance from public records upon her return from the United Kingdom is striking. Kidd mentions that during the Second World War she "devoted five days a week to entertaining the men at the Navy House and spent winters in Nassau playing for 2000 [Royal Air Force] men and officers from the Commonwealth and broadcasting on ZNS . . . [She]treasured . . . the many letters of appreciation from the servicemen for whom she played from 1940 to '45" (see figure 4.1 below).<sup>35</sup> By 1960, Guilaroff had composed and published at least ten popular love songs in English: she travelled to London that year to negotiate her own publishing deals. She was also invited on a CBC show of *Good Evening Mr. Sinclair* that was titled *Comment Composer une Chanson* ("How to compose a song"). No other records from this period have surfaced. Still, the narrative where strong societal expectations placed on upper-class white women result in a drastic retreat from musical life when they take on a mothering role does not ring entirely true in Guilaroff's case. Surely, Guilaroff retreated from public performance with ensembles such as her vaudeville act with Raginsky, the Fanfare Jazz, and Teddy Foster's Kings of Swing. But she did not quit music-making.



Figure 4.1: Vera Guilaroff and the Navy. Courtesy of Joy Kestenbaum.

<sup>35</sup> Kidd, "Princess of the Piano," in Litchfield, *Willie Eckstein, Harry Thomas, Vera Guilaroff*, 83. The details surrounding where and when the picture was taken remain obscure.



What is the relationship between identity and narratives of musical genre in this particular case? What does gender have to do with the turn that Guilaroff's career took in the late 1930s, and how have parameters of identity impacted Guilaroff's inclusion in music-historical narratives? Guilaroff's 1963 and 1964 oral histories are particularly useful to reflect on the ways in which gender structured the relationship between cultural capital and identity at different stages of her career. When Guilaroff refers to the young age at which she began playing for the movies, or when she emphasizes that she hadn't had music lessons and played everything by ear back then on the 1963 *Tribute to Willie Eckstein* live recording, she aligns herself with narratives of boy musical prodigies like him who long capitalized on such imagery.<sup>36</sup> Guilaroff's above-cited recollection of Eckstein's father telling her that she played just like his son *while stroking her long fair curls* offers a similar reparative reading of her past, where gender is strategically foregrounded as not having impacted her ability to *be* just as good as Eckstein. Clearly, one of Guilaroff's strategies to project her music's worth is through her alignment with male piano virtuosos and critics. After playing Zez Confrey's "Dizzy Fingers" on the 1964 recording session at the CFCF Studio, she comments:

I hope you didn't get all the mistakes there you see, Jim didn't give me a chance to practice he just rushed me in here and I'd like you to know it's a very hot night in good old Montreal tonight [she pauses] and so it isn't most conducive for playing this great big [she pauses] piano concertos as it were. And I can also play 'Nola' just as fast as the other, and if you want to hear it, here's a little wee bit of it.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Virtually every biographical entry on Willie Eckstein mentions that he was a child prodigy. See for instance Litchfield, *Willie Eckstein, Harry Thomas, Vera Guilaroff*, 3. See also David A. Jasen, *Ragtime: An Encyclopedia, Discography, and Sheetography* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 67. For excellent scholarship on gender and child prodigies, see Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian eds, *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music: Performance, Authority, Authenticity* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>37</sup> Guilaroff, Vera Guilaroff Recording Session.

In this segment, Guilaroff performs the expected ritual of feminine humility at the same time as she wants her audience to know that she can indeed play these great big piano concertos “just as fast as the [O]ther.” Similarly,

I was 12 years old... And I pinned up my curls, and took off my ribbon, and did something that my father spanked me for, I put some powder on my nose, and had to go to the musicians’ union and play for them and then say I was 16 [she pauses] and I got in [she laughs].<sup>38</sup>

Guilaroff speaks here to the powerful ways in which she felt like gender norms structured her performing career during the transition between amateur and professional stages. By pinning up her curls, taking off her ribbon, and powdering her nose, Guilaroff refers to a specific passage between girlhood and adulthood that is mediated by a disapproving father figure, where “pinning up one’s curls” and “taking off one’s ribbon” can refer as much to the letting-go of girlhood as to the adoption of a more masculine version adult femininity that she saw as necessary in order to get/fit in.

Yet as Guilaroff’s career unfolded, jazz’s meanings changed as it moved in places which were increasingly contested for upper-class white women. From syncopated popular music being played in theatres, brothels, or in the home parlor, jazz and jazz meanings’ moved resolutely to the dance floor and the cabaret, and by the late 1930s, precisely when heteronormative pressures where highest in keeping Guilaroff at home with her young son, most of Montreal’s entertainment pianists had been forced by the advent of talkies into the nightclub circuit.<sup>39</sup> Willie Eckstein switched partners in the late 1930s, first with Bob Langlois and later with Charlie Summers, to perform improvised two-piano duets in cabarets and nightclubs.<sup>40</sup> In an interview I

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<sup>38</sup> Guilaroff, Tribute to Willie Eckstein.

<sup>39</sup> See Dane Lanken, *Montreal Movie Palaces: Great Theatres of the Golden Era, 1884-1938* (Waterloo, Ont: Archives of Canadian Art, 1993), 18.

<sup>40</sup> Gilmore, *Who’s Who*, 76

conducted with pianist Oliver Jones, he explains why it was unconventional for women to be involved as professional jazz musicians in 1930s and 40s Montreal: “There was this idea,” he says, “that women in clubs were on the loose side.”<sup>41</sup> Jones’ piano teacher Daisy Peterson Sweeney, who sadly passed away in the summer of 2017, also agreed. When asked whether she played jazz herself, she answered: “At that time the jazz scene was mainly for males... mostly it was the men who went... girls didn’t go. Girls didn’t go for jazz as much. Girls were not encouraged to go to jazz clubs... so it was more a male thing.”<sup>42</sup> For Guilaroff, adopting a more masculine, professional woman appearance was a strategic move that, although disapproved of by her father, she admits to have taken on willingly: she saw the adoption of a such a version adult femininity as necessary in order to “get in” Montreal’s professional music circles. But when jazz and jazz’ meanings moved to places where women were assumed to be “on the loose side,” perhaps Guilaroff found the compromise she would have to make on her identity as being too costly this time. In her oral history, she projects a type of “masculine femininity” where she aligns herself with narratives of male piano virtuosi and critics all the while negotiating a “lack.” After playing a “Birth of the Blues,” she laughs: “In New York you have Liberace, and in Montreal we have Guilarace: The only thing that’s missing is the candelabra on the piano. Hah!”<sup>43</sup> Similarly: “If you like this recording, you might take it to Ed Sullivan, and perhaps we’ll all get on his show.”<sup>44</sup> In these excerpts, we can witness Guilaroff grappling retrospectively with her “failure” in relation to male contemporaries. The lack of a “candelabra,” the ultimate lack of an invitation to the Ed Sullivan show, both seem to function as stand-ins for her lack of historical

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<sup>41</sup> Oliver Jones, interview with author, 29 September, 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Campbell, “Othermothering and Life Notations of Daisy Sweeney,” 169.

<sup>43</sup> Guilaroff, Vera Guilaroff Recording Session.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

visibility at this late stage of her career. If she could play “just as fast as the other,” why hadn’t she been invited to the Ed Sullivan show? Because she lacked “a candelabra?” More broadly, why did Kidd have to record Guilaroff in 1964 in order to document her career for the purposes of the Record Research Associates, while her other oral history, from 1963, was recorded at a tribute event organized specifically for that “other,” Willie Eckstein? Was he the “better half” of the Piano Ramblers then? And if not, how to account for the discrepancy between Eckstein and Guilaroff’s fame in 1963-1964?

Crucially, the main soundtrack, so to speak, of Guilaroff’s music-making does not appear on a timeline built on a listing of public records. Through her entire life, she entertained friends and family on a regular basis in semi-private musical gatherings, both in her house in uptown Montreal where her beautiful white grand piano resided, and in the music room in her Laurentian country house which had walls covered with pictures and ads of her shows, as well as a small stage that featured a piano, an organ, a marimba, and drums. According to James Kidd, their guest list read like “a who’s who of entertainers,” including among others Lionel Hampton and Guilaroff’s brother Sydney, best known for having been the hair stylist of Greta Garbo, Lena Horne, and Marilyn Monroe among others.<sup>45</sup> In such gatherings, Guilaroff’s niece Dorothy Fieldman-Fraiberg, an accomplished pianist herself, remembers her aunt playing pieces like “Rhapsody in Blue,” “Autumn Leaves,” and “Birth of the Blues,” with a way of improvising from memory and touching the piano that she describes as “nothing short of extraordinary.”<sup>46</sup> When James Kidd finally met her in the mid-1960s, she had indeed “long since been retired of course and played only for pleasure,” as he writes in one of his e-mails, in the sense that most of

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<sup>45</sup> Kidd, “Princess of the Piano,” in Litchfield, *Willie Eckstein, Harry Thomas, Vera Guilaroff*, 83.

<sup>46</sup> Fieldman-Fraiberg, interview with author.

her music-making had moved between public and semi-private settings and was produced and consumed primarily outside traditional economies. She was, indeed, “a very special lady,” and a “remarkable woman”—yet perhaps not more than the other women pianists who had continued to perform and improvise popular syncopated music at a professional level at home at times when heteronormative pressures were highest in keeping them outside of public spaces.

Numerous scholars have foregrounded the racial politics at play in histories of ragtime that focus primarily on the printed score against generations of black musicians who composed and interpreted ragged popular music without being able to secure access to publishing houses.<sup>47</sup> There also needs to be greater acknowledgement of the gendered dynamics at play in studying ragtime and early jazz as forms of popular syncopated music that were primarily performed in public spaces, legitimized and rewarded by wages or tips, and managed by publishing houses and record companies. Guilaroff’s negotiation of the gendered expectations on her life in the 1930s and forward kept her outside of Montreal’s cabaret circuit, which was precisely the reason why David Eng, producer of *Burgundy Jazz* online platform, chose not to include her in his historical narrative.<sup>48</sup> Such a gendered masculine spatialization of popular syncopated music and improvised practices in the early-twentieth-century will never work as a primary structuring device for narratives about those whose main musical production was centered around the home parlor.

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<sup>47</sup> See for instance Edward A. Berlin, *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); Hasse, *Ragtime*, 20; and Philippe Michel, “La complexe diversité du ragtime: Une culture musicale entre Noirs et Blancs, chanson et piano, folk, pop et ‘classique’” *Revue de Musicologie* 93, no. 2 (2007): 435-467.

<sup>48</sup> David Eng, personal communication with author, November 22, 2016.

*Performing the “Maple Leaf (in D)Rag”*

By the time that Guilaroff’s oral histories were collected, the music that she (and that Eckstein, for that matter) played then did not signify as 1960s jazz. Yet when Guilaroff recorded the “Maple Leaf Rag” between May and July 1926, it did—she played it the following winter with the Fanfare Jazz at the Brasserie Frontenac and over CKAC. In addition, one of the four takes that she recorded then appears on the 1972 LP *Black and White Ragtime*, where the self-crowned father of jazz Jelly Roll Morton, as well as other figures commonly associated with early jazz like Eubie Blake, James P. Johnson, and Fletcher Henderson also appear.<sup>49</sup> In these takes, Guilaroff reduced Joplin’s piece to a series of identifiable traits in order to free sonic space where she could improvise in-between.<sup>50</sup> She is particularly selective of moments where she diverges from the score (see appendix IV for score). Clearly, in the four 1926 takes, Guilaroff did not aim to honor Joplin’s “tempo di marcia” marking, nor his well-known insistence to “never play ragtime fast at anytime.”<sup>51</sup> Between E2379 which begins at 130 bpm to end at 136 bpm, E2381 and E2378 that both stay relatively stable within the 140-146 bpm range, and E2453 which starts at a tempo nearing 160 bpm to drop in the 145-150 bpm range, Guilaroff displays an impressive exploratory range, one which resolutely aligns her “Maple Leaf Rag” with the novelty-style trend (see Table 4.1).<sup>52</sup> By comparison, in terms of form Guilaroff does not stray

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<sup>49</sup> E2378 (test pressing) was recorded May 19, 1926; E2379 (test pressing) was recorded May 19, 1926; E2381 was recorded May 19, 1926 and issued on Biograph (1972), E2453 was recorded July 12, 1926 and issued on Pathé/Perfect, Supertone, Apex, and on a K&R cassette entitled “Canadian Keyboard Incredibles!”

<sup>50</sup> On these recordings, Guilaroff sounds like she has worked out many of these tricks in advance, either in rehearsal or over several instances of live performance. As shown in Table 4.1, her use of those tricks differ enough from one take to the other to allow us to talk about musical improvisation.

<sup>51</sup> See for instance Addison W. Reed, “Scott Joplin, Pioneer,” in Hasse, *Ragtime*, 130-131.

<sup>52</sup> Ted Tjaden suggests that “the breakneck speed at which she plays it is breathtaking and one suspects it may have been sped-up as part of the recording process.” Tjaden, “Women Composers of Ragtime.”

	A (no repeat)	B (includes repeat)	A' (no repeat)	C	D (includes repeat)	A	Summary
<b>E2378</b> Test pressing	2. added 7 <sup>th</sup> in right hand 5. 16 <sup>th</sup> notes (ps = 32 <sup>nd</sup> notes) 10-11 simplifies bass pattern 11. Tied syncopation over bar in the m 13. If does not repeated chords, stride style	17-24. Replaces stride pattern with "waltz" at the 8 <sup>th</sup> note over the bar. Different on repeat. 27. Changes Ab for Fm7 27-28. adds melodic syncopation upon repeat. TAG: 29-32. Replaces with her own tag. Includes more oom-pah-pah patterns at 16 <sup>th</sup> on 31-32. TAG (on repeat): Includes oom-pah-pah patterns at 16 <sup>th</sup> on 30-31-32.	37-38. 16 <sup>th</sup> in ps become 32 <sup>nd</sup> 45-48 = replaces repeated notes by stride ff. TAG: Longer (extra 1 bar, 482). Adds 123 at 16 <sup>th</sup> . If stride becomes walking bass to wards the end (faster harmonic pace)	51-52: adds chromatic line, more tied syncopation in rh. 55-56: adds 123 at 16 <sup>th</sup> . TAG: 59-64-2 Changes completely: Adds rh syncopation, less "classic" ragtime (like beginning and more percussive. Waltz at the 8th. Adds one bar + fermata with chromatic descent and low pedal. 59-64-2, 61-64-2 = walking bass. Repeat: 55. Waltz pattern at the 8 <sup>th</sup> on top of 123 at 16th rh. TAG (on repeat): 59-60: low pedal, chromatic descent, with 61- and resumes like earlier	-higher register in right hand -replaces ff with stride-style -adds ornamentation (chromatic descent, 123 patterns at 16 <sup>th</sup> in rh at 61-72 TAG: 76-80. Changes tag, adds walk in bass towards end, more 123 16 <sup>th</sup> rh	5-6: adds rh syncopation, high register 10. adds 123 pattern rh. 16 <sup>th</sup> + ff Final TAG: 14 bars long, syncopation, chromatic descent, rich chords, rh syncopation	-tempo: 146 > 140 -richer harmony -adds tied syncopation in right hand -syncopation not against accented beat every time -adds stride style with only left hand. -unsatisfies metrical expectations -adds her own tags, increased rhythmic complexity -repeats are not the same -repeat tags are not the same -wider range of register
<b>E2379</b> Test pressing	Similar to above 9-10. keeps repeated notes in left hand	17-19. Does not replace stride with "waltz" at the 8 <sup>th</sup> pattern. 27. Db chord instead of Fm7/Ab TAG: similar devices to E2378(C) TAG (on repeat): "waltz" at the 8 <sup>th</sup> note on 18-21	37-38. 16 <sup>th</sup> in ps become 32 <sup>nd</sup> 42: Adds a bar (42.1, 42.2), 123 at 16 <sup>th</sup> in rh.	Similar to above	Chromatic descent every time on first repeat. Second repeat: Adds 123 pattern at 16 <sup>th</sup> in rh 1 and 2 break, chromatic descent only 3 <sup>rd</sup> break + 76.	Same ending tag as above.	-tempo: 130 > 136 -enriches harmony in right and left hand -occurs rather than single bass notes -much more diverse walking basses (ex-phors thirds, makes them melodic, ex. 1D)
<b>E2381</b> Issued on biography (1972)	Variation on the above.	Same tricks but in different places.	Variation on the above. + Registrat change (comes lower 35-36)	Similar tricks, displaces (53) first accent to upbeat (7 D)		Same tag (motives), plays with harmony a bit.	-tempo: 140, 136(A) 143(C) 141(D)
<b>E2453</b> Issued on Pathé.	Variation on the above.	17-26. Every measure uses waltz at the 8 <sup>th</sup> pattern (over 2 measures, 123-123-12) TAG: Same as E 2378 first tag. TAG (on repeat): alternation between patterns. 17-18 waltz at the 8 <sup>th</sup> , 19-20 stride, 21-22 waltz, 23-24 stride. TAG (on repeat): alternation between patterns. 17-18 waltz at the 8 <sup>th</sup> , 19-20 stride, 21-22 waltz, 23-24 stride.	37-38. 16 <sup>th</sup> in ps become 32 <sup>nd</sup>		Displays more diverse tricks, more syncopation on rh, chromatic descent, adds syncopation bar 71, starts on second 16 <sup>th</sup>	Different but similar tag (same motives, plays with harmony), more ornamentation.	-tempo: 160 -speed -more 123 waltz (B)
<b>1964 recording (oral history)</b>	More staccato touch, more percussive Less syncopation (9-10 and 13-14 is particularly obvious)	*No waltz bass. Plays very on the beat, stride-style. Replaces earlier ornamentation (123 at 16 <sup>th</sup> ) with classical arpeggios tied with pedal (for ex. in TAG). On repeat of B (second entire B section): 19-22 takes on waltz at the 8 <sup>th</sup> pattern again. Changes in harmony, ex: 24-25 Final Repeat of B (final and third iteration of B): changes melodic B for chromatic descent, sounds like Broadway outro. 17-21 remain the same, but extends Bb at end, then Bb for 5 bars of improvised ending.	37-38. Replaces with percussive syncopation. 41-42. no syncopation *THEN GOES BACK TO B SECTION (skips C AND D entirely)	—	—	Followed by different final tag	-Form: A B A' B A', 4 bar tag (sounds like the end of it! Same tag she used to do to finish!) but here gets back to B once more. -sounds a lot more like classic ragtime (ps?) -changes harmony but is not unsettled by it -does not go to C or D! -different ending tag.

\*ps refers to "published score"

Numerical numbers at the start of a line refer to measure numbers according to Scott Joplin's 1899 score (see Appendix 1 for full score)

Rh refers to "right hand"

Lf refers to "left hand"

Table 4.1 Five Takes of the "Maple Leaf Rag"

very far from Joplin's published score: compared to his AABBACCDD form, with CCDD marked "Trio" without an explicit *da capo* marking, Guilaroff uses ABBACCDDA + Coda on all four takes. Her introductory A section is strikingly similar to the published score: She subtly enriches the harmony (adds a seventh on bars 2 and 4 in E2378), she delays the Cb-to-C melodic motion (bars 11 and 15 in E2378 and E2453), and she replaces the arpeggiated sixteenth-note motive (bar 5-6) by a similar one in thirty-second notes, she replaces the tied syncopation over the bar at the sixteenth-note in the right hand (9-10, 13-14) by one at the eight-note, and she replaces the notated strutting left hand by a dynamic stride-style in the left hand upon the repetition of bars 9-12 at bars 13-16. Besides these minor alterations to the published score, Guilaroff's introductory A section stays remarkably close to the published version of the classic rag.

Starting in the B section, whenever she can afford to do so without compromising thematic material, Guilaroff replaces the features that are most reminiscent of the sounds of classic ragtime with features of the novelty-style. For instance, the B section is based on an antecedent-consequent phrase structure whose basic idea is a chromatic descending melodic motive in "secondary rag" (a three-note cycle, arpeggiated upward, which often occurs in conjunction with a binary bass pattern), on top of a dominant chord. Guilaroff replaces the binary bass pattern (stride-style) in Joplin's score with a highly unsettling displaced accent pattern at the eight-note in the left hand, reminiscent of a broken waltz (1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2), that takes place over two bars.<sup>53</sup> Guilaroff also draws on a series of harmonic tricks to dynamize the recurrence of this

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<sup>53</sup> The 1926 recordings display a significant range of improvisational experimentation with this pattern: E2378 features this motive on bars 21-24 and bars 17-18 on the repeat; in E2379 on the repeat of bars 18-21; in E2381 on the repeat of bars 17-20; and impressively, through bars 17-26 on the first iteration of B, followed on the repeat by the alternation between the waltz-like pattern on bars 17-18, stride-style on bars 19-20, waltz-like on bars 21-22, and stride-style on bars 23-24 and through the entire consequent.



motive, for instance by replacing the notated the tonic chord (Ab major) in the third bar of the consequent with an expressive vi<sup>7</sup> chord in E2378, E2381, and E2453, and with a IV<sup>9</sup> on E2379. In these cases, Guilaroff marks the contrast between the antecedent and the “drive-to-the-cadence” of the consequent much more effectively.

In the following return to A, Guilaroff extends bar 42 (in E2379, E2453) or bar 46 (in E2378) by an extra bar of hemiola at the sixteenth note (three against four) with alternating left and right hands. Similarly, in the C section, while she keeps the notated opening motive of a dotted figure with an anticipated second beat on top of a left hand in stride-style, Guilaroff replaces the secondary rag figure of bars 51-52, 55-56, and 59-60 with either 1) an upward scale motive based on a semi-tone—tone pattern, a hemiola (three against four) motive at the sixteenth note with alternating left and right hands, 2) a percussive syncopated motive, 3) a chromatic descending scale on top of a low pedal, or 4) she uses the same broken waltz pattern at the eight note in the left hand that she used in the B section. Finally, in the D section, she similarly replaces the secondary rag filling of bars 68, 70, 72, and 76 with chromatic descending passagework in various registers or with hemiola motives (three against four) at the sixteenth-note with alternating left and right hands. She also dynamizes the overall section by exploring various registers, using extended chords in close voicing, as well as a forward-moving, striding left hand with octaves on each beat.

A similar aesthetic tendency emerges when Guilaroff produces her own four-to-seven bar ending tags in replacement of Jolin’s cadential ideas. In the B section, instead of the arpeggios in sixteenth-notes and syncopation at the eight that Joplin notated (bars 29-32), Guilaroff plays either 1) a wave-like chromatic motive in the higher register, 2) a hemiola (three against four) pattern in sixteenth-notes with alternating left and right hands, or 3) a percussive syncopated

motive in the right hand on top of a dynamic walking bass line. She draws on these motives liberally in all four 1926 recordings, each device being featured for one to three bars in the two iterations of the B section. In Guilaroff's ending tag for the C section, she replaces once again the Joplin-sounding figuration in the right hand on top of a strutting left hand with an improvised segment that displays more intricate figuration, increased levels of syncopation, a dynamic, forward-sounding walking-bass, as well as alternative harmonic choices and voicings. For instance, as pivot to the D section which modulates back to Ab, Guilaroff uses 1) Db<sup>7</sup>/Cb in close-handed position in E2379, 2) a single low pitch of Ab in E2381, and 3) a Db/F chord in E2453. She also extends Joplin's cadential idea by one to three bars, either to propel the repeat of the C section with a chromatic descending scale on top of a bass pedal, or to pivot to the D section. Guilaroff's ending tag for D (bars 77-80) displays a similar aesthetic tendency to replace Joplin's cadential figuration with devices more fashionable in the late 1920s.

When Guilaroff concludes these recordings with a final iteration of A, rather than stay as close to the published version as she did in her opening and mid-form statements, she includes significantly more novelty-style features, for instance by replacing Joplin's upward arpeggios in bars 5-6 with a percussive syncopated motive (E2378 and E2381), a lower register transposition of the melody (E2379), or a hemiola motive (three against four) at the sixteenth-note with alternating left and right hands (for instance at bar 10 in E2378). The Coda is entirely composed, with minor changes in ornamentation and harmony between each of the four 1926 takes, and it includes percussive syncopated motives (including in the left hand), extended chords in close-hand voicings, and chromatic descending passagework in parallel octaves in the right hand. To summarize, whenever the secondary rag motive is used as filling in Joplin's score, Guilaroff replaces it with melodic (more virtuosic passagework) or formal devices (ending tags), and when

it occurs as basic idea of a section, she unsettles it with rhythmic (increased syncopation and rhythmic figuration, “broken waltz” pattern), harmonic (extended chords, V-vi<sup>7</sup> or V-IV<sup>9</sup> motion), melodic (ornamentation, changes in register), and textural (three-against-four hemiola at the sixteenth note in alternating hands, alternative chord voicings, dynamic walking-bass or striding left hand) devices. While never compromising the identity of Scott Joplin’s piece, Guilaroff’s four 1926 takes radiate with novelty-style features.

Willie Eckstein also recorded the “Maple Leaf Rag” in 1923 and crossed Joplin’s published score with his own improvisational toolbox. The two versions are strikingly similar in terms of their approach to improvisation as much as in terms of the devices that both performers draw upon: they most likely would have heard similar recordings, perhaps even working out a two-piano arrangement at a certain point.<sup>54</sup> Yet to put it bluntly, Guilaroff’s takes “sound more classical.” Her improvised chromatic passagework, particularly the chromatic descending scales in the right hand on top of a low pedal and her upward scale motive based on a semi-tone—tone pattern in the C and D sections, as well as her chromatic descending passagework in parallel octaves in the right hand in the Coda, signify on staples of Western art music piano virtuosity. Moreover, compared to the pitch collection that Eckstein uses and which is significantly more inflected with the blues, Guilaroff’s pivot to the D section, expressive vi<sup>7</sup> chord in the B section, melodic ornamentation and extended chords in the Coda draw much more readily on harmonic devices associated with late 19<sup>th</sup> Romanticism than with early-twentieth-century African American vernacular forms. Finally, compared to Guilaroff’s bold 130-160 bpm range, Eckstein’s version stays comfortably at a tempo of 120 bpm, which keeps the latter’s rhythmic drive systematically within a danceable range. In short, both recordings are certainly “of jazz

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<sup>54</sup> Willie Eckstein, “Maple Leaf Rag,” *The Novelty Piano of Willie Eckstein*, composed by Scott Joplin, November 9, 1923, OKeh 40018, audio CD. Courtesy of Jack Litchfield.

interest,” yet the devices that fell most readily into their hands when they improvised were not the same, nor do they signify similarly on current delineations of musical genre.

A fifth Guilaroff recording of the “Maple Leaf Rag” survives, this one from the 1964 session organized by James Kidd. Being separated by nearly forty years, an analysis of the similarities and contrasting traits can tell us much about how Guilaroff’s style evolved between the two sessions. Many traits of her 1926 recordings are easily recognizable, in particular the delayed Cb-to-C motion at bars 11 and 15 in the A section, and the passing reference to the broken-waltz pattern at the eight in the B section. The first four bars of the 1964 Coda are also the same as the first four bars of her 1926 Coda. In short, we can recognize Guilaroff with certainty in the 1964 version: Some of her signature traits survived four decades of music-making. Still, she uses significantly less syncopation, which is particularly obvious at bars 9 and 13, where she eschews Joplin’s tied sixteenth-note syncopation over the bar with straight eights. Moreover, her overall playing draws significantly less on the kind of novelty-style tricks featured her 1926 recordings. Her touch is more percussive, and the tempo stays comfortably within the 125-130 bpm range. In the ending tag of the B section, she replaces the wave-like chromatic motive and the hemiola (three against four) pattern at the sixteenth-note with alternating left and right hands from 1926 with diatonic arpeggios on a sustain pedal. Moreover, her stride-style is largely uninterrupted, foregoing the walking-bass motion in parallel octaves more typical of her 1926 takes for seamless strutting transitions to cadential ideas. Strikingly, Guilaroff entirely skips the C and D sections of the rag (for an ABABBA + Coda form), instead of taking advantage, as she did in 1926, of the economy of thematic material in these two sections to improvise. In short, not only did Guilaroff’s improvisational choices already sound somewhat

more “classical” than Eckstein’s in the late 1920s, but four decades later, Guilaroff’s hands move much more readily towards devices that signify on Western art music when she improvises.

The “Maple Leaf Rag” is not just any classic rag: in Gunther Schuller’s words, it is with this piece that Scott Joplin “fixed the form and style of the piano rag for years to come.”<sup>55</sup> Because of the immense popularity that the piece enjoyed, the printed version of “Maple Leaf Rag” can be understood as a sort of a norm against which later rags articulated themselves. In this sense, Guilaroff’s “Maple Leaf Rag” recordings are not only informative of which of Guilaroff’s signature traits survived an entire life of music-making, nor are they only useful to document the stylistic orientation that she took during the four decades that followed her first recording of that piece. We readily accepted Guilaroff’s oral history as strategic self-representation as well as a hermeneutic frame and filter for the reception of her music in the 1964 recording. But can the other sounds that she played in-between words also be understood as loci for the performance of identity? In *Undoing Gender*, Butler describes gender as an “improvisation within a scene of constraint,” an analogy that Tracy McMullen encouraged her to pursue in musical terms in a recent interview.<sup>56</sup> If the condition of possibility for the production of a subject is through the doing of language, as Butler and McMullen argue, can we read Guilaroff’s improvisatory passages in the “Maple Leaf Rag” as “speech acts,” or as traceable moments of agency, in the sense that they are similarly contingent, relational, performative, and ultimately meaningful? Can we see Guilaroff emerging as gendered subject in her moments of musical improvisational agency as much as we can when she uses words?

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<sup>55</sup> Gunther Schuller, “Ragtime, the Classics, and Jazz,” in Hasse, *Ragtime*, 84.

<sup>56</sup> Tracy McMullen and Judith Butler, “Improvisation within a Scene of Constraint: An Interview with Judith Butler,” in *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, Sound, and Subjectivity*, edited by Gilliam H. Siddall and Ellen Waterman (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 21-33.

When she improvises on the piano, Guilaroff draws on a series of features of the novelty-style that function just as social codes. Between the published score and an idealized reduction of the piece that strips it down to its minimal identifiable traits, there is considerable space for “speech acts” to arise. The stride-style in parallel octaves, walking bass, drive-to-the-cadence, syncopation, hemiola patterns, minor modality, extended chords, chromatic scale effects, arpeggios and passagework, the rapidly alternating left and right hands, and a relatively liberal attitude towards breaks, ending tags, and towards the type of filling figuration typical of the classic rag are all devices that were also available to contemporary male novelty pianists, and that allow the listener to identify a mid-twenties novelty-style pianist. Yet the iterability itself of a set of codes does not automatically translate into Guilaroff sounding like any other novelty-style pianist. The hands of Guilaroff and Eckstein were not interpellated by the same musical objects and devices when they improvised, and not all of the objects and devices in the novelty-style improvisatory toolbox fell into their fingers with the same readiness. Both pianists drew on a set of available musical codes that allowed them to enter the social field through the negotiation of a sonic space around the idealized reduction of “Maple Leaf Rag” where they could simultaneously align with mid-twenties novelty pianists and arise as subjects through certain fits with musical devices. Specifically, Guilaroff’s improvisational agency is formed in moments where she negotiates a space for herself that can mean in-between an idealized reduction of Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag,” the novelty-style box of tricks as it could be accessed in late-1920s Montreal, the expectations of the recording agencies (James Kidd’s discography group, the industry expectations that led to the issue of E2453 at 160 bpm), Guilaroff’s comfort levels at the moment of recording (with regards to temperature of the room, rehearsal levels, and health), and finally, the performance tradition where most of her improvisational expertise

developed, and where the boundaries between jazz, popular, and classical music were most porous, the home parlor.

Arguably, the parameters that articulate Guilaroff's "improvisational scene of constraint" signify on a number of fields, including among others race, class, and gender.<sup>57</sup> White bourgeois urban-raised women had a facilitated access to conservatory-like musical training compared to their racialized peers, and as Guilaroff's male contemporaries, including Willie Eckstein, began transferring their improvisational skills to the nightclub circuit in the late 1920s and 1930s, their styles adapted to those particular venues and in the close proximity of other cabaret musicians.<sup>58</sup> As such, while Guilaroff's particular brand of "classical-sounding" novelty ragtime did signify on jazz as a performance practice when she recorded it in 1926, she negotiated this space of constraint and recuperated novelty-style codes with a difference that speaks, a difference that means. In those moments when Guilaroff frees sonic space, reaches for a musical device or object from the novelty-style improvisational toolbox and transforms these devices and objects into speech acts, she emerges as a gendered, racialized, and classed subject. In other words, while Guilaroff and Eckstein both draw on a set of musical codes that allow them to speak through the piece, Eckstein's improvisational agency appears unmarked when activated in a jazz historical framework, while Guilaroff "sounds [too] classical." Precisely then, Guilaroff's performance of the "Maple Leaf Rag" decenters power, if only momentarily: It forces us to reevaluate the gendered, classed, and racialized assumptions behind early-twentieth-century categories of musical genre.

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<sup>57</sup> Fieldman-Fraiberg also suggests that the slower tempo and more percussive touch of the 1964 recording could be linked to the progression of rheumatoid arthritis in Guilaroff's hands. Fieldman-Fraiberg, interview with author, June 6, 2017.

<sup>58</sup> Litchfield, *Willie Eckstein, Harry Thomas, Vera Guilaroff*, 5.

To be clear, the issue here is not whether Guilaroff's style is any more feminine than Ecsktein's or Joplins' in their own versions of the "Maple Leaf Rag." I am not arguing either that Guilaroff challenged gender norms by adopting or choosing, deliberately or not, to break open gender norms by pursuing a performing career despite the heteronormative expectations imposed on her as an upper-class married white woman. The novelty-style fits Guilaroff's hands in ways that do seem unusual for a lady at the time, but mainly because it produced a record, and because it was showcased outside of the private space of the home. It is rather in her particular combination of improvisational expertise when performing the classic rag *par excellence* all the while signifying on home-based improvisatory practices that Guilaroff's rag decenters power for contemporary audiences. Her *performance* of the "Maple Leaf Rag"—in Butler's sense—signifies on jazz as of 1926 at the same time as it reveals the gendered boundaries of musical genre by signifying on an improvised performance practice that occurred primarily in private, gendered feminine spaces.

The reactivation of Guilaroff's sounds and cultural legacy within a jazz historical framework forces us to reevaluate the ways in which the very boundaries between jazz, popular, and classical music are structured on a gendered dichotomy between "for-pleasure" and "for-wages." Delineations of musical genre were much more porous for those whose main musical production was produced and consumed outside traditional economies. Moreover, against narratives where creativity and musical production suffer from marriage and childbearing, the traces of excellence in home-based improvisatory practices that surface in Guilaroff's recordings allow us to reconsider the cultural contribution of generations of upper-class white women who continued to play syncopated piano at home at a professional level when heteronormative pressures were highest in keeping them outside of public spaces. To return one last time to my



opening e-mail from James Kidd, as readers, researchers, listeners, and music-makers, we can all be “impressed upon” that Guilaroff was not a jazz pianist, and in many ways, I think we have. Despite the unfixedness of jazz’ meanings in the early decades of the twentieth century, what counts as jazz now and then continues to be based on gendered hierarchies of value between public and private music-making where racialized-white, upper-class and gendered-feminine improvising hands fall systematically short of the kind of straightening that the jazz label can do. But the particular improvisational agency that surfaces in Guilaroff’s takes of the “Maple Leaf Rag” may also “impress upon us” the possibility that categories of musical genre are not meant to work as primary structuring devices for narratives about white, upper-class, heteronormatively-aligned women music-makers in the early-twentieth-century. Perhaps, then, it is less the jazz label which queers the lady, than the lady who queers the jazz.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Where You're Accepted, You Blossom* Beyond the “Pass”-or-Fail in Narratives of Women-in-Jazz

“So, you see, where you’re accepted, you blossom.”  
-Daisy Peterson Sweeney (1920-2017)<sup>1</sup>

In a ceremony organized upon jazz pianist Geri Allen’s passing at the 2017 Feminist Theory and Music meeting, the picture that perhaps had made the strongest impression on me back when I was an undergraduate student resurfaced, nearly a decade later, in the commemorative program: a picture taken by Mark Miller of Allen playing the piano at the Newport (JVC) Jazz Festival in 1997, a baby carrier on her back, her toddler son in it.<sup>2</sup> Focused and calm, a confident half-smile tying together the corner of her right lip and eye, her arms relaxed in spite of the shoulder straps and balancing the toddler’s weight between her slightly angulated trunk and her upper thighs resting on the lower keyboard—to me then, this picture of Allen epitomized, for lack of a better word, the *badasses* I really wanted to study (and perhaps also—don’t we all—*be*): formidable, self-reliant, and caring.

Among the statements that the organizing committee had collected in Allen’s memory, an excerpt from Al Johnson’s note read as such:

Geri seldom talked about being a woman in jazz, but continually acted upon it. First and foremost, she addressed it existentially just by being a “bad mother” (e.g. a giant, master, or heavyweight at what they do) on the piano . . . A wonderful mother indeed, Geri attained the highest levels of musical accomplishment while raising three children into adulthood. I can’t count the number of times our meetings were scheduled around their needs. Yet her accomplishments provide evidence that

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<sup>1</sup> Daisy Peterson Sweeney, *20 ans de jazz. Entrevue avec Daisy Peterson Sweeney*, interviewed by Clodine Galipeau, Amérimage Spectra, BAnQ Vieux-Montréal, P945, S1, PXX00-026 and P945, S1, PXX00-027, November 23, 1999, VHS.

<sup>2</sup> *Remembering Geri Allen (1957-2017)*, Booklet collected by Courtney Bryan, Ellie Hisama, Yoko Suzuki and Sherrie Tucker, for Feminist Theory and Music 14, San Francisco State University, 29 July 2017. Photo courtesy of Mark Miller.

motherhood is not contrary to excellence, in any field, nor contrary to parenthood for anyone willing to take it as seriously as their work.<sup>3</sup>

Without a doubt, Johnson's eulogy is a much-deserved celebration of Allen's achievements.

Still, it left me wondering why Allen would emerge, in 2017, as *welcome evidence* that excellence and motherhood are not contrary and that there are indeed some who do take jazz and motherhood just as seriously. Are mothers-in-jazz really just emerging? And who are those who don't take the jazz or the mothering quite seriously enough, making the intervention of Allen's narrative of joint excellence so welcome?

The intersections between motherhood and jazz continue to be severely undertheorized, which explains at least partly why assumptions of mutual exclusivity between the two may continue to prevail. In her recent monograph on matricentric feminism, Andrea O'Reilly suggests that motherhood has been marginalized within contemporary intersectional feminist scholarship for a number of reasons, central of which includes a wariness to essentialize womanhood to biological and reproductive functions, and its related suspicions of a conservative agenda. "It is my view," writes O'Reilly, that:

the current disappearance of motherhood in academic feminism is the result of a larger and pervasive feminist discomfort with all things maternal and more specifically as a result of confusing the institution of motherhood with the experience of mothering. Much of second-wave feminism—in particular that of liberal and radical-libertarian feminism—view motherhood as a significant, if not the determining, cause of women's oppression under patriarchy . . . Many contemporary feminists have reviled both mothers and babies. Some feminists rage at babies; others trivialize them. Very few have attempted to integrate them into the fabric of a full and equal life.<sup>4</sup>

Jazz instrumentalists often acknowledge the significant costs of motherhood on their professional careers. In this sense, feminist jazz scholars may have wanted to steer clear of

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<sup>3</sup> Al Johnson, "Her Singular Vison," In *Remembering Geri Allen*.

<sup>4</sup> Andrea O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice* (Bradford, Ontario: Demeter Press, 2016), 186, 200.

a topic that their interviewees themselves framed as making them partners in their own oppression. In her recent ethnography of jazzwomen in France for instance, sociologist Marie Buscatto points to an overwhelming majority of French professional jazzwomen who do not have children under their primary care. Moreover, she highlights that for the few who do, a six-month maternity leave had sufficed to make them disappear from their colleagues' "list of hirables."<sup>5</sup> Only the "bad" mothers—in the sense of mothers who don't mother (or perhaps don't mother properly)—seem capable of making it professionally into jazz in France nowadays. Until recently, strategic feminist positionings of women-in-jazz have tended to emphasize the ways in which women "fitted-in" a dominant narrative articulated around the gendered masculine figures of the genius, intellectual, or artist—what Sherrie Tucker has described as "one-of-the-boys" narratives.<sup>6</sup> In short, the more feminine aspects of a jazzwoman's life—among others the impact of collaboration, of teaching, of mothering, and of other forms of gendered care-giving on their artistic development—have tended to take on a secondary role while elements that can be more easily accommodated into common delineations of jazz as a masculine acoustic and discursive space—descriptions of pianist Mary Lou Williams' "masculine" performance style come to mind—have been emphasized.<sup>7</sup> If, as O'Reilly suggests, feminists have long

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<sup>5</sup> Marie Buscatto, "'Tenter, Rentrer, Rester': Les Trois Défis des Femmes Instrumentistes de Jazz," *Travail, Genre et Sociétés* 1, no. 19 (2008): 87-108. Translation mine. See also Buscatto, *Femmes du Jazz: Musicalités, Féminités, Marginalités* (Paris : CNRS, 2007); Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1989); Leslie Gourse, *Madame Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Wayne Entice and Janis Stockhouse, *Jazzwomen: Conversations with Twenty-One Musicians* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Wayne Entice, *Jazzwomen Speak*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); and Alyn Shipton, *Handful of Keys: Conversations with Thirty Jazz Pianists* (London: Equinox, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> For scholarship that works against this tendency, see in particular Kristin A McGee, *Some Liked it Hot: Jazz Women in Film and Television, 1928-1959* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2009); The Melba Liston Research Collective, *Black Music Research Journal* 34, No. 1, "Special Issue on Melba Liston," (Spring, 2014); Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: All-Girl Bands of the 1940s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Nichole T. Rustin for instance engaged the primacy of work in Melba Liston and Mary Lou Williams' narratives. She quotes Liston as such: "All the time, I don't think about being the only—Because I had my work to do, you dig?"

argued that “only by securing time away from children and creating a life outside of motherhood will women be able to maintain an autonomous identity separate from that of mother,” positioning professional jazzwomen outside the realm of reproduction has been an important and necessary step against their initial invisibility in the historical record.

While useful as a strategical entry point into dominant narratives for women-in-jazz as storytellers as well as for feminist jazz studies scholars, a central issue with one-of-the-boys narratives, as Tucker and O’Connell have argued, is that it makes notions of proper jazzwomanship rest on assumptions of gender deviance. In other words, one-of-the-boys narratives make it impossible to imagine women walking in (and out) of the historical record otherwise than according to how well they “manage” their gender.<sup>8</sup> As a result, two dominant tropes of jazzwomanhood have emerged: women who stayed on the margins of jazz narratives because they “failed” to overcome the gendered obstacles along their path, and exceptional women who “passed,” as masculine, in a space that is always-already defined as male.<sup>9</sup> This “pass”-or-fail is directly related to assumptions of mutual exclusivity between motherhood and jazz. If jazzwomen are primarily included in the narrative through their passing as one-of-the-boys, they can hardly be shown to have taken gendered activities such as care-giving “just as seriously as their work.” It is in this sense that mothers-in-jazz are rendered invisible, unimaginable even in the historical record, which is why Allen can emerge, in 2017, as such a welcome *sight*. Johnson’s celebration of Allen’s joint accomplishment may at first seem to

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I don’t ever talk about being the only female.” And in Williams’ words: “People ask me how it is to be a woman musician. I don’t think about it so much, and I guess that is because I am first of all a musician. . . If you get carried away in your work you really don’t know if you are a woman or a man.” Nichole T. Rustin, “‘Mary Lou Williams Plays Like a Man!’ Gender, Genius, and Difference in Black Music Discourse,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 104, no. 3, (2005): 448-9.

<sup>8</sup> See Sherrie Tucker and Monica Hairston O’Connell, “‘Not One To Toot Her Own Horn (?)’: Melba Liston’s Oral Histories and Classroom Presentations,” *Black Music Research Journal* 34, No. 1 (Spring, 2014): 144-5.

<sup>9</sup> Sherrie Tucker, “Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies,” *Current Musicology* 73 (2002): 375-408.

problematize the lack of stories of gendered care-giving in dominant jazz narratives, yet the figure of the exceptional mother-in-jazz functions much like the trope of the exceptional woman-in-jazz in that it predetermines its membership to only a selected few and reinforces the assumption that jazz and motherhood are, for most, an either/or. Ultimately, the gendered “pass”-or-fail in jazz historical narratives directly impedes the normalization of care-giving in the historical record.

On the other hand, a number of black feminist theorists, notably Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks, have written about African American maternal standpoints in a much different light. Rather than as an activity that women wish to disarticulate from in order to be taken seriously, Collins and hooks have described motherhood as providing a base for self-actualization, empowerment, centrality, and authority in urban black communities.<sup>10</sup> Collins foregrounds mothering as work (and therefore “motherwork”) in order to call attention to its tendency to transcend the boundaries between public and private that articulate hegemonic notions of professionalism, as well as to emphasize its social and political motivations. “In contrast to the cult of ‘true womanhood’ associated with the traditional family ideal,” writes Collins, “in which paid work is defined as being in opposition to and incompatible with motherhood, work for black women has been an important and valued dimension of motherhood.”<sup>11</sup> From an African American maternal standpoint, care-giving is understood as a valuable activity to be integrated into rather than separated from the realm of the professional. In other words, motherhood is not an activity that may or may not be taken just as seriously as work—it *is* work.

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<sup>10</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 191.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 199.

Following Collins' cues, this chapter takes issue with the figure of the "emerging mother-in-jazz" by exploring intersections in the early-twentieth-century between motherwork and jazz participation in the oral histories of jazzwomen. I focus on important figures in Montreal's jazz scene such as instrumentalists Ilene Bourne and the Spencer Sisters, piano teacher Daisy Peterson Sweeney as well as dance teachers Olga Spencer Foderingham and Ethel Bruneau to analyze how gender, race, sexuality and class intersected with motherwork and other gendered care-giving in the shaping of these women's careers and legacies. Were excellence and motherhood as mutually-exclusive in early-twentieth-century jazz scenes as they seem to appear in jazz historiography? How do women-in-jazz, and in particular the ones currently invisibilized from the historical record, negotiate the "pass"-or-fail in their autobiographical narratives? More broadly, what power dynamics are at play in maintaining motherwork and other gendered care-giving at the margins of jazz history? What kinds of narratives and structures emerge when we foreground intersections between gendered care-giving and jazz participation?

### *Exceptionalism and Female Jazz Instrumentalism: A Tempting Trap*

A number of scholars have outlined the problems that arise when women-in-jazz are framed as exceptional figures. For one, jazzwomen themselves are often uncomfortable with the label. Nichole T. Rustin recalls that when trombonist Melba Liston was "asked about being an exceptional woman, [she] dismissed the entire concept."<sup>12</sup> Second, narratives of exceptionalism assume an epistemology of individual greatness rather than seeing jazz as an interactive and collaborative practice rooted in communities and histories that include women.<sup>13</sup> Third, as I discussed above, such narratives preclude its membership to only a selected few while justifying

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<sup>12</sup> Rustin, "Mary Lou Williams Plays Like a Man," 446.

<sup>13</sup> The Melba Liston Research Collective, "Special Issue on Melba Liston."

the lack of attention that other women-in-jazz have received.<sup>14</sup> In other words, if jazzwomen only appear in the historical record as exceptional figures, the ones that are don't appear are often assumed to have been inadequate.

In contrast, narratives of exceptionalism for female jazz instrumentalists are an easy and tempting trap to fall into in doing research. My findings for women jazz instrumentalists in early-twentieth-century Montreal could be grimly summarized as such: A single female instrumentalist made a living playing jazz professionally through her entire adult life—this was pianist Ilene Bourne. Beyond Bourne's career, the city hosted less than a handful of female nightclub and theatre pianists who never produced a jazz record (Gertrude Waters, Gladys Spencer, Nina Brown), hypothetically a fair number of women who played jazz exclusively in the private space of the home (including May Peterson), a professional novelty pianist who did not “lean-in” (Vera Guilaroff, as I explored in the previous chapter), two all-girl novelty orchestras that were active for a very brief period between 1928 and 1930 (The Montreal Melody Girls Orchestra, The Vagabond Girls), and a trio of not-even-real-sisters (the Spencer Sisters Trio) who played most of their jazz overseas (well... is it really jazz if one of them played *accordion*?). As wary as I may be of exceptionalist narratives of women-in-jazz, gendered obstacles affected negatively the number of female jazz instrumentalists who became professional musicians in Montreal's jazz scene. In addition, *only in the exceptional case of Ilene Bourne* did jazz performance remain a primary source of income through her entire adult life.

In an interview that I conducted with jazz pianist Oliver Jones in 2016, he argued that women were less likely to become professional jazz musicians because of “this idea that women

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<sup>14</sup> Tucker, “Big Ears.”



in clubs were ‘on the loose side.’ Women didn’t go to clubs on their own unless accompanied by a man.”<sup>15</sup> Daisy Peterson Sweeney offered a similar explanation:

My brothers Oscar and Charles played jazz. At that time the jazz scene was mainly for males... mostly it was the men who went... girls didn’t go. Girls didn’t go for jazz as much. Girls were not encouraged to go to jazz clubs... so it was more a male thing.<sup>16</sup>

While Sweeney went on to become a teacher of classical piano, the Petersons had a home band:

Frederick [the oldest of the five children] played the trumpet. We used to play duets together very much. Frederick died at 15 years of age from tuberculosis. After that, my brother Charles... We played a lot of home music together. . . We had a house band and had fun doing that. He was in the brass band. I would play the piano and trombone by ear and Oscar would copy me. Oscar played the trumpet and the piano. I helped him learn the piano, but he was a natural. Charles played the trumpet and later played jazz in the Montreal nightclubs . . . May taught piano and later worked with Oscar doing secretarial work.<sup>17</sup>

Jones gives more details with regards to May Peterson’s music-making: “She liked to play jazz,” he said, “but her father wouldn’t allow her to play in the clubs.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in Sweeney’s words: “I liked blues,”

I didn’t play it, but I really liked it. And I remember saying to [my brother] ‘I like the blues.’ He said ‘Siss,’ he said, ‘if you went down there you wouldn’t like it’ he said, ‘la—la ré—ré do’ [she laughs], he said ‘This is a drag, [it] pulls you down!’ you know! I said, ‘Well, it’s blues!’ But I liked them . . . You see, as a female, I wasn’t allowed to [she laughs]. I wouldn’t say exactly I wasn’t allowed, because I was old enough to, but I know it wasn’t acceptable, so I didn’t.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Oliver Jones, interview with author, September 29, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Arlene Campbell, “Othermothering and Life Notations of Daisy Sweeney,” PhD thesis, York University, 2012, 69.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in *ibid*, 166.

<sup>18</sup> Oliver Jones, interview with author.

<sup>19</sup> Sweeney, *20 ans de jazz*. Sweeney explains later in that interview that she did go to jazz clubs a few of times, including at least once at Rockheads’ Paradise. She mentions that Rufus Rockhead brought in “not only, ah, jazz, or, swing, or whatever, he brought in classical acts. . . And there’s one person that I remember came here, she had a voice like a violin. Breaautiful, beautiful voice . . . That one stands out in my mind in particular, and one of my brothers, my brother Chuck, said to me, ‘Go and hear,’ cuz I didn’t go to clubs, it wasn’t proper for [laughs us] to go, but he said go and hear it, he said ‘I’ll take you there.’ . . I went if there was something special like this particular singer, I’d go to hear. Ironical that the time that I did go, the police raided the place. I wasn’t included.”

Certainly, the idea that the nightclub was not a proper place for unaccompanied upward-looking women had direct consequences on the number of those who graduated from the amateur to the professional stage. For one, Montreal-based instrumentalists did not learn to play jazz in conservatory-like institutions: “If Oscar wanted to go to McGill,” Sweeney explains, “they didn’t accept his jazz . . . McGill, I know, definitely had its nose down on jazz. It was something that they didn’t understand and that they didn’t want to understand, they figured, it was low-class music.”<sup>20</sup> Above all, musicians made their entry into hiring networks by sitting-in with a band in a nightclub. “I wanted to pursue a career in jazz,” explains Ralph Whims, the son of black woman performer Bernice Jordan, “and so therefore you start to hang around the places where some of the other musicians played.”<sup>21</sup> Sweeney expands:

We had the UNIA [Universal Negro Improvement Association]. They had a boys’ band at the UNIA. No girl’s band [she laughs]—it started way back then. We would debate, sing, do plays, and dance. I remember Alan Husbands, the leader, saying every time, ‘You have two left feet.’<sup>22</sup>

To summarize, on the one hand African American vernacular forms were not taught in conservatory-like institutions, and on the other, within the black community’s own advancement institutions as well as inside family units such as the Peterson’s, women were directed towards classical or liturgical music and song, and towards dance rather than popular musicianship even

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<sup>20</sup> Sweeney, *20 ans de jazz*. Sweeney got her diploma from the McGill Conservatory of Music in 1945 or in 1946.

<sup>21</sup> Ralph Whims, *Interview with Ralph [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0003 [7110], 1993-1994, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Ralph Whims also come from this source. Drummer Boogie Gaudet also speaks of a similar rite of passage: “If you want to play, you have to be seen and heard,” so he started to look for jam sessions. See Boogie Gaudet, *Interview with John Gilmore*, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0015, February 15, 1983, audio CD. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Boogie Gaudet also come from this source.

<sup>22</sup> The UNIA had a band called the “Colored Modernistic Band,” where musicians like Allan Wellman and Joe Sealy learned to play before transferring their skill at Rockhead’s. See Campbell, “Othermothering and Life Notations of Daisy Sweeney,” 168. According to June Bertley, there was also a boy’s band (or junior orchestra) in existence in 1926. June Bertley, “The role of the Black Community in Educating Blacks in Montreal, from 1910 to 1940. With Special Reference to Reverend Dr. Charles Humphrey,” Master of Arts thesis, Faculty of Education, McGill University, March, 1982, 114.

in cases where one had “two left feet.”<sup>23</sup> As Lucy Green documented in *How Popular Musicians Learn*, the learning paths that popular musicians take are perhaps not as institutionalized as those of classical musicians, yet they are in no way less gendered.<sup>24</sup> For upward-looking black women (and as I explored in the previous chapter for white women as well), gendered notions of respectability intersected with musical ability to keep the vast majority of capable players at the door.

Sweeney’s oral history touches upon other forms of gendered obstacles that women instrumentalists faced on their path towards the performing stage. Systematically approached as “Oscar Peterson’s sister” or as “Oliver Jones’ first piano teacher,” Sweeney has been interviewed first and foremost to document the “missing link” between Peterson and Jones’ classical training and their subsequent transition to jazz. Clodine Galipeau’s 1999 unedited video interview for a documentary that celebrated the first twenty years of the Montreal International Jazz Festival begins as such:

Clodine Galipeau: “We hear your name because, I mean, with the jazz music, like Oliver [she hesitates]  
 Daisy Peterson Sweeney: “I don’t play jazz [she laughs].”  
 CG: “How come, Mrs Sweeney, we know you in the jazz scene?”  
 DS: “I don’t teach it. No, I don’t teach it. I think I’m going to have to interrupt, because of my cough. Do you mind?”  
 [Galipeau tells Sweeney that she doesn’t quite know where to start]:  
 DS: “At the beginning.”  
 CG: “Where’s the beginning? Tell me.”  
 DS: “When he was a boy.”  
 CG: “Who?”

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<sup>23</sup> On Montreal’s black institutions such as the church and the UNIA, see Bertley, “The role of the Black Community;” See also David C. Este, “The Black Church as a Social Welfare Institution: Union United Church and the Development of Montreal’s Black Community, 1907-1940,” *Journal of Black Studies* 35, no. 1 (September, 2004): 3-22. On the Colored Women’s Club, who played an instrumental role in the development of both the NCC (Negro Community Center) and the Union United Church, see Shirley Small and Esmeralda M. A. Thornhill, “Harambee!: Quebec Black Women Pulling Together,” *Journal of Black Studies* 38, no. 3, “Blacks in Canada: Retrospects, Introspects, Prospects,” (January, 2008): 427-442. See also Dorothy Williams, *The Road to Now: A History of Blacks in Montreal* (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> See Lucy Green, *How Popular Musicians Learn: A Way Ahead for Music Education* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001) and *Music, Gender, and Education* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

DS. "Oscar. Dad made us all do piano. All five of us. My dad taught us. When he wasn't in town, my mother checked. Oscar, of course, he showed right away his interest in music and his love in music."<sup>25</sup>

Sweeney's initial interjection, "I don't play jazz," is telling of how often she had had to play her part in this ritual. In fact, later in the interview, upon being asked about the impact of racial tension in Montreal on the development of Oscar's career, she answers: "I think I was asked that question sixty years ago."<sup>26</sup> We can sense that Galipeau is looking for something specific, most likely a curtain-opening story about the Petersons' musical training ("Where's the beginning?" she asks, coyly, "Tell me."). Clearly, the interviewer is not getting what she wants: Sweeney's cough, her insistence to answer questions about Peterson by emphasizing her own point of view ("*I don't play jazz . . . I don't teach it . . . Dad made us all do piano. All five of us.*") all seem to be getting in the way of the interviewer's agenda. Throughout the interview, Sweeney is frequently "re-directed" when she discusses her own musical tastes, career, and her positionality in relation to Montreal's jazz scene. For instance, after Sweeney explains, as I quoted above, why nightclubs were not acceptable places for women to be, the interviewer questions her again on the transition between Peterson's classical training and his subsequent involvement in jazz. "You wonder where the jazz came in," interrupts Sweeney, as though she had not precisely begun answering this question:

One thing, I think, is the freedom, the acceptance [her face glows, she smiles]. They could get together. If Oscar wanted to go to McGill, they didn't accept his jazz. Even to play at the Ritz Carlton when he was with Johnny Holmes [a white dance band leader], it was a 'no-no'. So, you see, where you're accepted, you blossom. But where you're not accepted, they don't even know you.<sup>27</sup>

A similar interaction occurs after Sweeney tells of replacing Peterson at the Alberta Lounge on his night off:

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<sup>25</sup> Sweeney, *20 ans de jazz*.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. "He held his head up and therefore has held his race up."

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

As a matter of fact, I used to play there on Monday nights. Not jazz though. On Monday nights, I played, his night off, so I played, classic. But I was scared stiff. Because, first of all, I knew people that didn't know it was his night off, would be coming in, expecting to hear him. So they'd see me while they'd still expect to hear him. And [she laughs] which made it worse. But, I got used to it after a while . . . That was my only venture in replacing him.<sup>28</sup>

Once again, Galipeau re-directs Sweeney to expand on the “missing link” between Peterson’s classical training and his professional career as a jazz musician. Sweeney answers again by talking about herself:

Jazz is a very natural thing. See, when you play classic—which, if I had to do it again, I would do it differently—when you’re playing classic, first of all you got a book stuck in front of you, which is fine, but then you never leave the book, and you’re afraid to leave the book, because you’ve learned everything by the book and so on . . . When you are playing Beethoven and Mozart all this is lovely and beautiful and necessary and it’s perfect, but it’s not me! So if I want to do something, I’m afraid to, because it doesn’t sound like Mozart . . . So, you know, you live and you learn . . . The thing I like greatest about jazz is that you express yourself . . . And then you can get the full benefit of music. Because as great as the other composers are, what have you got to contribute?<sup>29</sup>

At this point in the interview, the interviewer’s impatience is palpable:

CG. *C’est toujours un peu, ehm, je [ne] sais pas comment [le] dire en anglais, délicat, ou,* because you are the sister of Oscar and I’m not here to know about your career but your brother’s career you know, and it’s like, I don’t feel very comfortable with that, I wanted to tell you.<sup>30</sup>

DS. Why?

CG. Well, because—

DS. If he deserves it, he deserves it.

CG. Yes. Well. That’s true. Maybe it’s the reason why I don’t know exactly how—

DS. How to put the questions. Well as long as you don’t ask me my age [she laughs].<sup>31</sup>

Following this exchange, Sweeney volunteers a handful of usable, documentary-friendly clips (“He put Canada on the map”), yet she remains visibly uncomfortable, particularly in the way she avoids looking straight at the camera or at the interviewer. After returning again to the important role that music can play in self-expression, Sweeney sits at the piano and starts to play

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<sup>28</sup> Sweeney, *20 ans de jazz*.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. Italics mine, to account for Sweeney’s emphasis in the original video.

<sup>30</sup> “It’s always a little bit, ehm, I don’t know how to say it in English, ‘touchy’ or . . .” My translation.

<sup>31</sup> Sweeney, *20 ans de jazz*.

Chopin's *Fantaisie Impromptue*. "Where's the envelope?" Sweeney asks, after a while. "What envelope?" asks Galipeau. "Oh. Does it have her name on it?" intervenes a man in the background, likely the cameraman. "Est-ce qu'il y a une photo de Oscar ici?" ventures Galipeau, in closing.<sup>32</sup> "Oh," answers Sweeney after seeing the one hung on her living room wall that the cameraman has started to film: "I didn't even remember it was there. That was when I got my doctorate."<sup>33</sup>

One does not require very big ears to notice Sweeney's repeated attempts to be heard in this interview. Galipeau asks Sweeney several times to get back to the missing link between Peterson's classical training and his subsequent professionalization in jazz, yet Sweeney has answered that question repeatedly. "Jazz was the big thing around the time I was going up," she said. But the fact that "girls were not encouraged to go to jazz clubs," including her father's pointed refusal that May play in jazz clubs while allowing Charles and Oscar to do so; the fact that she "knew it wasn't acceptable" as her brother's patronization of her interest in blues made clear; as well as the gendered learning paths and hiring processes she discusses were all elements that allow us to understand why Oscar could transfer his classical training to jazz, while Sweeney didn't. "Where you are accepted," she said, "you blossom."

Perhaps even more telling than the content of Sweeney's answers is her strong-footed resistance to give in to what Galipeau is after—that curtain-opening account of music-making in the Petersons' home, where Sweeney is doomed to place herself in her brother's shadow, as the one left behind, the one who failed. In other sources, Sweeney expands on another significant aspect of that "missing link," namely, her father's gendered use of the strap. "[He] used to beat

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<sup>32</sup> "Is there a picture of Oscar here?" My translation.

<sup>33</sup> Sweeney, *20 ans de jazz*. Sweeney was awarded an honorary doctorate from Sudbury's Laurentian University in 1987.

them with his belt,” explained Lillie Fraser, Oscar Peterson’s first wife, in an interview with *Maclean’s Magazine* from 1958:

His sister Daisy used to get it worse than Oscar. She told me about a time when her father was going out on the railroad and he assigned them both a very complicated concerto to learn. They knew they would have to play it without a mistake before he got back. Well, Daisy practiced for three, four hours every day, just terrified. Oscar didn’t touch the piano, lolled around and read comic books or something. The day before their dad was due home, he went over to the piano and played the whole thing through perfectly. His ear is fabulous.<sup>34</sup>

The account of Sweeney’s daughter Sylvia is slightly different: “She was terrorized by her father . . . He beat her, but not Oscar.” As a result of her father’s abuse, Sweeney developed severe performance anxiety: “That’s why she had stage fright,” Sylvia explained.<sup>35</sup>

Clearly, gendered obstacles in terms of access—to spaces, groups, learning paths, hiring networks—and in the form of gendered disparagement and abuse affected negatively the numbers of professional female jazz musicians in Montreal. Against these obstacles, several women-only spaces developed which functioned as kinds of shelters for women’s musical production. The Vagabond Girls and The Montreal Melody Girls were two orchestras composed entirely of young women that were active between 1928 and 1930.<sup>36</sup> Under the direction of Mrs. A. Ste Marie, the Montreal Melody Girls included a vocalist (Ms. M. Murphy), a banjo player, a

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<sup>34</sup> “Famous Families at Home: The Oscar Peterson’s,” *Maclean’s Magazine*, October 25, 1958, 75.

<sup>35</sup> Sweeney also gives a similar account in Campbell, “Othermothering and Life Notations of Daisy Sweeney,” 165–168: “We didn’t dare make any mistakes . . . My father taught us and there was no two ways about it.” This is also discussed as such in Gail Youngberg and Mona Holmlund, *Inspiring Women: A Celebration of Herstory* (Regina: Coteau Books, 2003), 187.

<sup>36</sup> The names “Vagabond” and “Melody Girl” were strongly associated with novelty pianist Vera Guilaroff in this time period. As I discussed in the previous chapter, her two-piano act with Willie Eckstein, which was broadcasted in the early 1930s, was called “Les Vagabonds du Piano.” In addition, she was nicknamed “Montreal’s Melody Girl” when she toured in the United Kingdom in the summer of 1937. I have been unable to ascertain whether or not she was involved in these two orchestras. See Les Vagabond Girls, performance advertisement, Château Ste-Rose (daily), *Le Petit Journal*, June 22, 1930, 30; Montreal Melody Girls Orchestra, performance advertisement, Grand Union Hotel, Salon Longpré (daily), in *The Billboard*, February 23, 1929, 28, *Le Petit Journal*, July 13, 1930, 26, August 17, 1930, 26; and Montreal Melody Girls, radio advertisement (CKAC, CFCF), “Le Radio de la Presse,” *La Presse*, January 26, 1928, August 22, 1928, and December 19, 1928.

violinist, a saxophone player, a pianist, and a cellist (Ms. E. Wynn).<sup>37</sup> They were “amongst the favorite novelties of the summer of 1928,” performing at the Grand Union Hotel in February 1929 and every night in July and August 1930 at the Salon Longpré, as well as in various resorts across the province during this period. On January 26<sup>th</sup> 1928, they broadcasted “fox-trots” to go along “une causerie féminine bilingue” under the auspices of the *Canadian Alliance for the Vote for Women in Quebec* —“and we would like to reassure the radio-lovers that they deserve the praise they receive,” *La Presse* made clear.<sup>38</sup> This CKAC broadcast was a “cabaret-like” performance that included “numerous soli at the violin, banjo, saxophone and piano” as well as pieces such as “Kiss and Make-Up,” released the year before by Vincent Lopez’ Orchestra, as well as “Dolly Dimples” and “Among my Souvenirs,” two songs which were popularized by the Paul Whiteman Orchestra in 1927 and 1928. “Amateurs will realize that the female element is also able to give a program of ‘jazz’ more than excellent,” writes the advertising note of their CKAC broadcast of August 22<sup>nd</sup> 1928. Clearly, women have long carried out the burden of proving that “the female element” is not contrary to excellence in jazz.

The scare quotes around the word “jazz” and the advertising of these ensembles as “novelties” may have led historians not to take these two bands seriously. In addition, if the intersecting politics of gender, race, sexuality and class at the root of the discourse of the nightclub women as ‘loose’ contributed to the production of jazzmanship as always-already male, sheltered spaces such as the all-girl band also suffered from the “separate-but-just-as-good” economy in which their jazz blossomed. Sherrie Tucker and Kristin McGee have written

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<sup>37</sup> Montreal Melody Girls, performance advertisement, *The Billboard*, Cincinnati, February 23, 1929, 28. Translation mine.

<sup>38</sup> Montreal Melody Girls, “Le Radio de la Presse,” *La Presse*, Montreal, January 26, 1928. Translation mine.



extensively about how the advertisement of all-women ensembles as novelties decreased their credibility as jazz artists, even in cases when what they played sounded similar to what men played. While the term novelty itself, as McGee explains, did not imply musical amateurism (the very point of a specialty number was to emphasize a particular skill), the insistence on the performative in so-called novelty acts made all-girl groups appear superficial or inauthentic. “Female novelties were often conceived of as innovative and adventurous short acts that consisted of female performers exhibiting skills not often associated with femininity,” McGee summarizes.<sup>39</sup> “Novelty” thus becomes a particularly discriminating label in cases where it stands for “women-only act,” playing as it did on the perceived lack of correspondence between the performers’ persona and their assumed biological sex. How can jazzwomen be viewed as authentic when, under the novelty tag, they are expected to riff precisely on the assumption that they aren’t supposed to be doing what they do?

### *The Spencer Sisters*

The Spencer Sisters Trio was another group of all-women instrumentalists, one which included Olga Spencer on the accordion, her sister Thelma Spencer on the guitar, and her niece Natalie Ramirez on the trumpet. “We went as sisters,” explains Ramirez, “and this way it eliminated a lot of, ah, explaining.”<sup>40</sup> The three of them started playing together in the protected space of their mother’s home, along with Thelma and Olga’s (actual) older sister Gladys, who

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<sup>39</sup> McGee, *Some Liked it Hot*, 41.

<sup>40</sup> Natalie Ramirez, *Interview with Natalie [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0007 [7116], 1993-1994, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Natalie Ramirez also come from this source.

worked as theatre pianist and “could play almost any type of music.”<sup>41</sup> Already in December 1935, when they performed with the Johnny Jones orchestra at the Imperial theatre with Lou Hooper as emcee, the Spencer Sisters are advertised as “remarkable dancers who need no introduction anymore to Canadian and American publics.”<sup>42</sup> By the early 1940s, they had put together “just an ordinary nightclub act, twenty, twenty-five minutes, yeah,” where they played popular pieces, sang, and did tap and jazz routines in East-end clubs such as the Pagoda, the Café Louis, the Val d’Or, as well as in clubs in Ottawa and in Quebec City, including as an act of “*musiciennes excentriques*” in a 1942 variety show that was presented at a military camp in Saint-Jerome in the Quebec Laurentians.<sup>43</sup> The Spencer Sisters were also featured on CKAC.<sup>44</sup>

While in Ottawa for a show, Olga Spencer was asked by the United Service Organizations (USO) if she would be interested in going overseas to play music for the American troops. “And I said ‘Yes I would, definitely, and I think my sister and niece would be too!’” The Spencer Sisters’ stories of travelling and performing overseas provide an important record of some alternative paths that female jazz instrumentalists took. Is telling that the three women found more work as instrumentalists abroad than in their home city, where they worked primarily as dancers. As Ramirez explains, she learned to dance long after having learned to play the trumpet:

I didn’t start dancing before I was in my teens, because the whole family was musicians, and ah, my aunt [Olga Spencer] was a dancer, and then when we started show business we had to put a dance act in so,

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<sup>41</sup> Olga Spencer (Foderingham), *Interview with Olga [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0006 [7115], 1993-1994, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Olga Spencer also come from this source.

<sup>42</sup> “Le théâtre Impérial présente les ‘Patterson Minstrels’ aujourd’hui,” *Le Nouvelliste*, December 6, 1935, 7. Translation mine.

<sup>43</sup> See “Le club Kiwanis de Montréal au camp de S.-Jérôme récemment,” *La Presse*, January 17, 1942, 37 ; and “Les Sœurs Spencer au Café Louis,” *L’Illustration Nouvelle*, June 22, 1940. Translation mine.

<sup>44</sup> “‘Jive Units Back from USO Shows Tour,” *The Chicago Defender* March 23, 1946, 17.

that's when I started dancing, to dance with her and ah, I, I must have been about fifteen, sixteen when I started really dancing, being interested in dancing, yeah.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the fact that they were performing with musicians commonly positioned at the core of Montreal jazz such as Lou Hooper Jr. and that Ramirez had learned to play the trumpet long before she learned to dance, the Spencer Sisters were confronted at home with a novelty tag that made them register as entertainers rather than as potentially hireable members of a nightclub orchestra.

Clearly, the changing landscape of gendered labor during the Second World War, where more women were encouraged to occupy positions traditionally occupied by men, had an impact on the Spencer Sisters' career prospects.<sup>46</sup> "They were looking for musicians, because they don't have pianos and things at the front lines," explains Spencer, "so they wanted people who played instruments that they can carry!" The trio auditioned "in front of hundreds of GIs in New Jersey," rehearsed for five weeks in New York City, performed "a thrilling two-hour musical show that was really an eye-brow raiser" with Eubie Blake at the 124<sup>th</sup> Street Servicemen's, and then from San Francisco they were sent overseas.<sup>47</sup> Introduced as the "Lucky Seven," the all-black group included torch singer and dancer Lora Pierre, comedy team Freddy and Flo Robinson, as well as Kansas City jazz pianist Lawrence "88" Keyes ("the versatile star sings, dances and arranges for voices and orchestras in addition to playing a hot piano").<sup>48</sup> It took them

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<sup>45</sup> Baines' and Ramirez' children were also taught by Olga Spencer.

<sup>46</sup> Daisy Peterson Sweeney for instance worked in an aircraft industry during the Second World War, and because she worked really fast, she was called "Rosie the Riveter" at work. See Campbell, "Othermothering and Life Notations of Daisy Sweeney," 184.

<sup>47</sup> "Dick Campbell's USO Troupe Wows GIs at Service Club," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, January 20, 1945, 20.

<sup>48</sup> Photo Standalone, *New Journal and Guide*, August 18, 1945, A14. Lora Pierre is also sometimes spelled Laura, for example in "Five New USO Shows Alerted for Travel," *The Afro American*, May 26, 1945, 6. Freddy and Flo were advertized in Montreal in 1942 at the Café St-Michel. See Freddy and Flo performance advertizement, at the café St-Michel, *The Standard*, October 3, 1942.

five weeks to reach Hawaii by boat, during which: “Trying to sing, [we] would get seasick . . . we were there singing with our eyes closed because of the boat going up and down [Ramirez laughs].” “And when we got off the boat,” she remembers,

They hadn’t seen a woman in years. And when we got off the boat, they just wanted to touch us. But the army had people with guns standing in front of them . . . All they wanted to do was just touching you, you know, because they hadn’t seen a woman in so long, yeah. . . When we did our shows there was always guards on the end with guns standing there because the audience, you know, would go crazy. Yeah.

They toured for six months in the South Pacific between the early summer of 1945 and January 1946 under the sponsorship of USO-Camp shows.<sup>49</sup> The *Chicago Defender* introduces them as an “all-star cast of musicians and dancers,” one of “three sensationally successful musical units, featuring artists of jive and swing. . . [who] swung their way around bases in the Philippines, Okinawa, Japan and the Dutch East Indies, bringing joy to the hearts of lonely GI hep-cats.”<sup>50</sup> The group spent almost eight weeks in Japan, which took them “from the southernmost island of Kyushu to the northernmost, Hokkaido,” including “half a dozen performances . . . in the Octagon Theater which stands alone in a bombed-out Yokohama block.” The group transformed the Kyoto theatre and the Sixth Army Recreation Center into the “Street of Swing,” and 88 Keyes “made ancient Japanese pianos do things oriental pianos never did before.”<sup>51</sup> By December 1945, *Afro-American* foreign correspondent Vincent Tubbs reported that more than 500 000 GIs had seen their show, and that Flo Robinson had become “the first colored

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<sup>49</sup> On travelling black women performers during the Second World War, see Jayna Brown, “Translocations: Florence Mills, Josephine baker, and Valaida Snow,” in *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*, 238-279 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>50</sup> “GIs Laud ‘Freddy and Flo: Unit Quits Japan for European Theatre,” *The Chicago Defender*, January 12, 1946, 14.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

American woman to shop along the remains of Tokyo's Fifth Avenue, the Ginza."<sup>52</sup> Spencer also remembers playing in Hawaii and Phillip Island in Australia.

Abroad, the Lucky Seven presented sometimes as much as three shows a day. According to Ramirez, they played:

mostly all the current things that was on that you'd hear on the radio . . . the music that the people in the army liked, you know, the ones that they were used to . . . Sometimes operettas, Thelma sang that . . . We did a little bit of everything, you know? The classical, and ahm . . . the modern. Mostly modern. Whatever was the going song at the time, that's what we would learn. Because we did a lot of rehearsing, so ah, we had ehm, we kept up.

They danced Latin dances, Afro-Cuban dances, Italian dances, or Irish jigs depending on the act they wanted to put together. For the finale, Olga Spencer "improvised something for the seven of us together, one of the popular songs," for instance "(We) may be Wrong but (We) think You're Wonderful," a song composed by Henry Sullivan with lyrics by Harry Ruskin, originally published in 1929 but which made a come-back in the mid-forties after Judy Garland aired a version of the song in 1944 on the Armed Forces Radio Network (AFRS). The Spencer Sisters played with 88 Keys behind the other acts, and they danced, sang, and played acts in between. "Sometimes it was so hot, we had to practice under the wings of the planes!" remembers Spencer. In Wajaboela, Indonesia, "the unit was playing just back of the front lines and often had shows interrupted by the air-warning sirens."<sup>53</sup> They ate "spam and baloney and powdered eggs every day," though sometimes the navy brought them fresh eggs. In the Philippines, a big dragonfly flew inside Ramirez' dress during the performance, and Thelma Spencer's dress strap broke during a dance routine. Refusing to wear her army boots and preferring sandals, Ramirez was bit by a centipede: "I still had to work! My foot was swollen up and I had to dance with this

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<sup>52</sup> Vincent Tubbs, "Flo Robinso Shops on Tokyo's Fifth Avenue: Prefers Sidewalk Shopping Tour in Rickshaw to Visiting Palace," *The Afro-American*, December 22, 1945, 8.

<sup>53</sup> "Jive Units Back from USO Shows Tour."

swollen foot and everything. But I kept my boots on from then after, I didn't take a chance! [she laughs]." The group "marveled at the way the Philippine people took the constant rain," writes a correspondent for the *Afro-American*: "Tell the folks back home we are in Manila, a city in which there is hardly a building undamaged," commented Freddie Robinson.<sup>54</sup> The Spencer Sisters received marriage proposals and love letters from people in the army. According to the memories of Ramirez, they also had a code-word, "Spencer Tackle," for when:

one of the guys were getting fresh. We would leave our companions and we would go help them out. One time, Olga called it, we went over and we beat the heck out of the guy [she laughs]. I don't know to this day what happened, but I'd know when she hollered [that] she needed help . . . the other girls would come to the rescue of whoever had gotten into a scramble.

"[My sisters] locked the doors," recalls Ramirez, "I didn't. I was always getting into trouble."

As the Spencers' stories move seamlessly between only-funny-after-the-fact anecdotes, common tropes of travelogue exotica, and tales of resistance to the daily threats of abuse they encountered, missing from this archive is the opportunity to listen critically to the sounds that they made in relation to those that other men made in similar USO-camps and elsewhere. On pictures aimed for advertisement and marketing, as well as on the few pictures that remain from their shows overseas, the Spencer Sisters look fabulous, appearing in glamorous gowns, wearing fluffy suits or peau-de-soie shirts and skirts, with prominent jewelry adorning their bodies as well as flowers and pearls in their hair. Clearly, the novelty tag functioned as a successful marketing strategy for the Spencer Sisters. But they were also formidable performers who "kept up" with the repertoire that servicemen and women enjoyed, excelled as singers, dancers, choreographers, and instrumentalists in the face of such difficult work conditions as seasickness, injury, extreme weather, slippery stages, and wartime politics. In other words, the contested

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<sup>54</sup> "USO Unit passes Manila," *The Afro-American*, August 25, 1945.

status within jazz historical narratives of the so-called “novelty” sounds they made has little to do with their skill.

The Lucky Seven returned to North America in January or February 1946.<sup>55</sup> Thelma Spencer and Ramirez moved to New York City and continued to work in nightclubs, from time to time along with 88 Keys. “It went quite well,” remembers Ramirez,

except that by then, you had to start from like the bottom, you know, work the nightclubs that, in New York, that, eh, were like little holes in the wall to get you started and we worked a lot of those [she hesitates] nightclubs, and gradually worked our way up to a couple of the big ones . . . it didn’t last too long, about two years we did it.

When asked specifically if she continued playing the trumpet in New York, Ramirez answered that she just sang and danced. “I play my trumpet occasionally for my own benefit,” she commented. On the contrary, Spencer decided to stay in Montreal:

Thelma and Nathalie [Ramirez] . . . decided they wanted to go back to the States. And I did too, but since I had gotten married, I didn’t want to leave my husband that soon! I’d only been married three or four weeks to a month when they decided they wanted to go back to the States. So I did go back with them, but it didn’t work out. We were thinking of building a home and, ah, so, I left them there and I came back to Montreal . . . After being married, I’d say two or three years, we got settled into our new home, and al, I felt lost! I wasn’t dancing, I wasn’t singing, I had to have something to do, so I decided on starting a group for the GIs and the camps here, that were still here. In about six months I had a show together, and we called it the ‘Rainbow Revue.’ And we started entertaining in camps and places like that.

Spencer’s show included twenty-seven musicians, dancers and singers, including both black and white performers, “aged four to seventy years.” Between 1946 and 1949, the group performed for disabled war veterans and to aid charitable cause, and they financed their activities without external sponsorship.<sup>56</sup> Spencer’s story doesn’t quite end here, but her career as a performer did. Spencer participated as a “jam session dancer” with Louis Metcalf’s orchestra at La Tour on

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<sup>55</sup> “Billy Rowe’s Notebook,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 9, 1946, 18.

<sup>56</sup> “Montreal’s Rainbow Revue a Democratic Arts Group,” *The Afro-American*, November 19, 1949.

May 14<sup>th</sup> 1949, and her appearance in 1949 on Canada Day (July 1<sup>st</sup>) in a variety show in the city of Sutton sponsored by the Canadian Legion is the last public record where she appeared as a performer.<sup>57</sup> Sherrie Tucker points to the several challenges that all-women bands who had worked in USO-camps faced when they came back from overseas, among others the desire expressed by some members to start a family or to “move on,” and the sudden lack of job opportunities for women as men were claiming back their pre-war positions.<sup>58</sup> In Spencer’s case, even though she continued to perform after the war, she did so in spaces that maintained political economies of wartime entertainment, where women performers functioned as powerful symbols of heterosexual romance in largely homosocial male spaces, and where they were offered as rewards, so to speak, to those who fought the war. This isn’t to undermine the importance for Spencer of participating in the war effort. As Al Monroe argued in *The Chicago Defender* on May 12, 1945 upon the imminent departure overseas of the Spencer Sisters as well as the Sweethearts of Rhythm and Count Basie, USO-camps were important in allowing “Negro performers [to] gain[] inroads to the affection of all nations . . . In many instances GIs who had never before witnessed a performance by Negroes are singing the praises of our stars now.”<sup>59</sup> Billy Rowe similarly noted on August 11<sup>th</sup> 1942 in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, upon addressing the safe arrival of the Lucky Seven in the Philippines after their stopover in Hawaii, that “in line with the Army’s decision to give campaign ribbons to those performers who have braved the rigors of combat zones to bring a bit of cheer into the lives of our fighting men, many a colored performer will also have earned the right to wear the gaily colored bits of ribbon.”<sup>60</sup> Spencer’s

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<sup>57</sup> Louis Metcalf Ad, *Le Soleil*, May 14, 1949, 14.

<sup>58</sup> Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: All-Girl Bands of the 1940s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>59</sup> Al Monroe, “Stage Stars Active in War, To Continue Entertainment For GIs,” *The Chicago Defender*, May 12, 1945.

<sup>60</sup> Billy Rowe’s Notebook: “Show Folks Fight Prejudices Too!”, *Pittsburgh Courier*, Aug 11, 1945, pp 20.



long-lasting engagement with servicemen and women is most likely telling of the importance for her to play her part, in Monroe's words, in this "grand time in the various war theatres to help celebrate the end of tank and anti-craft noises."<sup>61</sup> Still, primarily understood as an entertainer for her entire career despite her versatility and musicianship, or perhaps *because* of the versatility of her musicianship, Spencer's jazz, like that of the Vagabond Girls and of the Montreal Melody Girls' Orchestra, blossomed where it was accepted: in the segregated space of the all-girl ensemble, within the performative framework of the novelty act.<sup>62</sup>

### *Back to Bourne*

Arguably, all of these obstacles were also in place for pianist Ilene Bourne. Born in Montreal on November 28<sup>th</sup> 1914, the first of six children from parents who had emigrated from Barbados in 1909, Bourne worked as a nightclub pianist and church organist through her entire adult life. Beginning in the early thirties and until her sudden death on April 1<sup>st</sup> 1970, she played in nightclubs and for social dances, in places like Rockhead's Paradise, the Café St-Michel, the Montmartre, the Café de l'Est, the Savoy, with musicians such as Chuck Peterson, Allan Wellman, Arnold Butterfield, Herb Johnson, Butch Watanabe, Dennis Brown and Steep Wade (before he switched to piano). She also toured in rural Quebec as well as in the United States. In the second half of the 1930s, she led her own band at the Monte Carlo (before it was named the Café St-Michel), a band that included Lou Hooper Jr. on the trumpet, Hugh Sealey at the saxophone, and Frank Johnson on the trombone.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Monroe, "Stage Stars Active in War."

<sup>62</sup> Sherrie Tucker makes a similar argument in *Swing Shift*, 229.

<sup>63</sup> Maurice Bourne, "Questionnaire from John Gilmore on Ilene Bourne," in "Ilene Bourne File," Concordia Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P004/A1 1-027; John Gilmore, transcription of interview with Maurice Bourne about his sister Ilene Bourne, August 31 1982, in "Ilene Bourne File," Concordia Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P004/A1 1-027.

Three themes recur in the oral histories of Bourne's peers when they discuss her musical contributions. First, to her peers Bourne emulated the sound as well as aspects of Mary Lou Williams' public persona. In Mark Miller's interview notes with Oliver Jones as well as the interview that I conducted Jones myself, Jones made the overt connection between Williams and Bourne. "[Style?] Mary Lou Williams. [consciously?] I think so," read Miller's notes.<sup>64</sup> In John Gilmore's interviews with trombone player Herb Johnson and with drummer Dennis Brown, Bourne's sound and persona are similarly described as "masculine." "She had the most powerful left hand you ever heard in your life, you didn't need a bass player with her!" commented Johnson.<sup>65</sup> "A very controlled pianist," suggests Jones, in opposition to common tropes of emotionalism and daintiness in the playing of female pianists. Second, Bourne's righteousness is often emphasized: "People held her in high regard," remembers Jones.<sup>66</sup> "[A]lthough she was in the clubs all the time, [she] held herself very well. Everyone had a lot of respect for her. . . Well-known, respected by everyone."<sup>67</sup> When Jones introduces pianist Gertrude Waters, a good friend of Bourne, and discusses the fact that Waters worked "in strip shows," he says: "The gigs Ilene didn't want, she gave Gerdy."<sup>68</sup> Subtly, Bourne's exceptional righteousness is reinforced against the morals of another unaccompanied nightclub woman.

A third theme emerges when Bourne's peers are asked to comment specifically on her soloing. Dennis Brown answers:

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<sup>64</sup> Mark Miller, "Interview Notes on Ilene Bourne with Oliver Jones," November 21, 1996, personal communication with author, July 8, 2016. I would like to thank Mark Miller for sharing these notes with me.

<sup>65</sup> Herb Johnson, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0026, February 8, 1981, audio CD. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Herb Johnson also come from this source.

<sup>66</sup> Jones, "Interview with author."

<sup>67</sup> Miller, "Interview Notes on Ilene Bourne with Oliver Jones."

<sup>68</sup> Jones, "Interview with author." Waters was president of local 11 of the Canadian Federation of Musicians in 1939. John Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise: The Story of Jazz in Montréal* (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1988), 285.

Well, she was better comping. Since we had no bass... She was a good compensating... eh... straight-ahead... eh... ten-fingers piano. Which is what we needed. We struggled to get a bass, but, that was more money to the management... it wasn't that big a club.<sup>69</sup>

Similarly, Mark Miller's interview notes with Oliver Jones read as such:

Her solos were very exact. She was one of those pianists who didn't have tremendous technique but always played right, always played meaningful solos. She knew what she was doing. Like a classical player who would make that transition and knew exactly what she wanted to play.<sup>70</sup>

In the interview I conducted with Jones, he reiterated that Bourne "didn't improvise very much."<sup>71</sup> All three interviewees go on to emphasize that she was, rather, a very sought-after accompanist: "She was one of the few black pianists that played with all the acts," explains Jones, "the French, all the acts coming in. When they needed someone for shows, she was always on call. So she kept herself very busy."<sup>72</sup> Herb Johnson remembers his band with her in those terms:

It was a good dance band, but also, we played fine shows. We played the shows very very well . . . I had a very fine pianist, who played jazz chords for us at the Savoy club . . . The performers that we played for very often played the Café de l'Est and remarked about how well we played . . . we had such a great reputation that Rex Stewart came up to see us.

Bourne's brother Maurice told a related story in an interview with John Gilmore: "While working at a club in Montreal, [a] U.S. singer came in as part of the show. He liked her accompaniment so much [that he] took her on tour through the USA."<sup>73</sup> And when Johnson,

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<sup>69</sup> Dennis Brown, Interview with John Gilmore, Concordia University Records and Archives, John Gilmore Fonds, P0004-11-0010, April 15, 1983, audio CD. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Dennis Brown also come from this source.

<sup>70</sup> Miller, "Interview Notes on Ilene Bourne with Oliver Jones."

<sup>71</sup> Jones, "Interview with author."

<sup>72</sup> Miller, "Interview Notes on Ilene Bourne with Oliver Jones."

<sup>73</sup> Maurice Bourne, "Questionnaire from John Gilmore on Ilene Bourne." The *Detroit Free Press* advertises a pianist named Ilene Moore and Ilene Morey with Max Fidler and his Orchestra at the Powatan in Detroit between March and May 1935. The writer seems to have had difficulty with names, as he advertises Max Fidler's previous pianist as both Kay and Kate, Ilene as both Moore and Morey, and at times Fiddler rather than Fidler. Max Fidler's orchestra

Brown and Jones explain why she was such a skilled accompanist, they do so by portraying her as a kind of “musical savant” rather than emphasizing more traditionally feminine skills such as listening, collaborating, not drawing attention to oneself, or providing support to a lead singer or soloist. “Ilene Bourne,” says Johnson, “now she was somethin’ else again! If you could call a tune that she couldn’t play, she was ready to pay off.” “She must have known every standard tune that was ever written,” comments Brown. Similarly, Jones explains: “She had the finest phenomenal memory. She knew the lyrics, the verses, she had a visual memory.”<sup>74</sup> “Anytime anyone wanted to know the verse to a tune, these obscure tunes,” he adds, “‘Get in touch with Ilene.’ . . . a very wonderful accompanist.”<sup>75</sup>

In Jeffrey Taylor’s article on pianists Lovie Austin and Lilian Hardin Armstrong, as well as in the work of the Melba Liston Research Collective, scholars have called for the need to find alternative theoretical frameworks to appreciate the contributions of those who were, in Monica Hairston O’Connell and Sherrie Tucker’s words, “not the solo-type.” In Taylor’s account of Austin and Hardin’s artistry as accompanists, he highlights this particular relationship to soloing as being at the crux of their relative obscurity, and he calls for a different kind of listening, “one in which the ear is directed to musical events that, by their very definitions, are meant not to

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was a white band who played sweet jazz in a relatively upscale club, and which occasionally welcomed black acts as well as entertainers from Montreal. Between August 1934 and June 1935, Max Fidler hired at least four different pianists, including Henrietta Young, Kay or Kate Graham, Ilene Moore or Morey, followed by Bill Lankin. I was unable to ascertain whether the Ilene Moore/Morey who played with the band and “played request numbers” on March 18, 22, 29, April 5, and May 17, 24, and 31 was the same that was based in Montreal. As David Eng exposes on the web platform *Burgundy Jazz*, Ilene Bourne’s name was often misspelled, pointing to ‘Eileen,’ ‘Borne,’ and even ‘Moore.’ This is the only reference to an Ilene/Eileen Moore/Bourne/Borne/Morey that I was able to find. Moray also appears on WEXL radio as “pianist” between June and October 1934 on the midmorning or mid-afternoon program. See Ilene Moore/Morey, pianist, listed at the Powatan Club. *Detroit Free Press*, March 1, 8, 22, 29; April 5; May 17, 24, 31, 1935

<sup>74</sup> Jones, “Interview with author.”

<sup>75</sup> Miller, “Interview Notes on Ilene Bourne with Oliver Jones.”

draw attention to themselves.”<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Hairston and Tucker take Melba Liston’s “immodest refusal to type herself as a soloist” as a point of departure to criticize the gendered sociality of mainstream jazz narratives which “fetishize the ‘aggressively self-confident and self-interested subject position of (instrumental) soloist, particular modes of virtuosity, and other social and musical categories [that are] masculine.”<sup>77</sup> Most importantly, Liston’s insistence to write herself in jazz history as “not the solo-type” draws Tucker and Hairston to listen in-between the lines of Liston’s oral histories and to analyze the particular socialities that are articulated between interviewers and interviewee in moments when Liston writes herself into the jazz narrative. “Oral history,” they write, “like jazz, is a dynamic interaction, and it, too, is celebrated as democratic while also listened to only for the solos.”<sup>78</sup> In all of the above cases, breaking away from the emphasis on instrumental soloists is seen as crucial to the articulation of jazz narratives that are more inclusive of the role that women played, and of the particular subject positions which they occupied as musicians and as storytellers.

In the case of Bourne, the triangular sociality that emerges in my, Gilmore, and Miller’s interviews with Jones, Johnson, Brown, and Maurice Bourne *about* Bourne is built against her persisting silence. Not a single recording of hers has emerged to testify to her skills as an accompanist. Unmarried, without descendants, and nurtured in a family that had mixed feelings about her pursuing of a career in jazz, her personal and professional archive has yet to emerge.<sup>79</sup> As is the case for other black women, including Gertrude Waters, Gladys Spencer, Nina Brown

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<sup>76</sup> Jeffrey Taylor, “With Lovie and Lil: Rediscovering Two Chicago Pianists of the 1920s,” in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, edited by Sherrie Tucker and Nichole T. Rustin, 48-63 (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 57.

<sup>77</sup> Sherrie Tucker and Monica Hairston O’Connell, “‘Not One To Toot Her Own Horn (?)’: Melba Liston’s Oral Histories and Classroom Presentations,” *Black Music Research Journal* 34, No. 1 (Spring 2014), 121.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>79</sup> An excerpt from John Gilmore’s transcription of his interview with Maurice Bourne reads as such: “parents opposed to her pursuing career in music.” Bourne’s brother Maurice is the current holder of her materials.

and the Spencer Sisters Trio whom I introduced earlier, no recordings have surfaced to testify to the sounds that black women instrumentalists made in early-twentieth-century Montreal.<sup>80</sup> Herb Johnson shares the following memories of Nina Brown:

One particular girl, woman, that used to play in between the band, I'll always remember, her music for the simple reason, she may have played beautiful piano, but she used to play in the dark, she was so ugly, she looked like a skeleton. About six-foot-tall and she couldn't have weighted more than a hundred pounds. Colored girl . . . Nina, that's the only name we knew about, she could play some beautiful stuff . . . She played a tune called 'The One Strong Melody,' it was all, the whole tune was based around one note. And it was beautiful.

On being asked "What difficulties did she encounter as a woman in jazz?" on Gilmore's pre-interview written questionnaire, Bourne's brother scribbled, quite matter-of-factly: "She must have had some, both as a woman, and as a black."<sup>81</sup> Those difficulties will continue to remain unspecific until the rest of her archive surfaces. Yet the profound implications they have had on archive building, historiography, and the potential for research on black female pianists are already obvious. The larger context in which Bourne surfaces in Dennis Brown's interview with Gilmore is transcribed at length below:

JG—Did the drummer have music?

DB—Oh sometimes, sometimes not. A lot of times we had to guess it. Many a time, they'd be coming with no music . . . they would automatically like create arrangements on the spot and riff . . . And we'd remember them, and it was sort of the standard thing to do, in this environment. This didn't happen in the white scene. This happened in this scene. Allan Wellman, the Sealy brothers, [at] Rockhead's, they did the same thing. They would just, right away, look at each other and bam. It was there. It was just beautiful! . . . And the next show they did the same riff, you know It was just unbelievable that they would do this . . . half the guys couldn't read, so we were riffing behind the solos . . . So many tunes they knew by heart, they didn't need, you know? It was just it was expected . . . Most musicians of the old school, piano players especially, they knew . . . hundreds and hundreds. Ilene Bourne for instance, she must have known every standard tune that was ever written!

JG—Did she do solos?

DB—Well, she was better comping. Since we had no bass. She was a good compensating, eh, straight-ahead, eh, ten-fingers piano. Which is what we needed. We struggled to get a bass, but, that was more money to the management. It wasn't that big a club.

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<sup>80</sup> Jones, "Interview with author."

<sup>81</sup> Maurice Bourne, "Questionnaire from John Gilmore on Ilene Bourne."

Brown described Bourne as being exactly right for the job. By comparison, her biographical entry on the online platform *Burgundy Jazz* concludes as such: “Her playing was much loved for her beautiful sound. Her name was often misspelled, including ‘Eileen,’ ‘Borne,’ and even ‘Moore.’”<sup>82</sup> The production of Bourne’s “not-the-solo-type” status *as lack* has taken precedence over the celebratory tone with which Bourne’s peers described her. Clearly, an important gap persists between Bourne’s musical contribution and contemporary knowledge production on her.

### *Beyond the “Pass”-or-Fail*

Bourne’s status as “the only” female pianist who made a living playing jazz through her entire adult life, coupled with the narratives that emerge in interviews about Bourne, make it all too tempting to wrap her in an discourse of exceptionalism. “The finest phenomenal memory,” said Jones; “the most powerful left hand you ever heard in your life,” commented Johnson—Ilene Bourne did not just remind her peers of Mary Lou Williams, but she is written-in by her peers as her historiographical homologue. Where others failed, she “passed.” It is a curious paradox indeed, that adding-in more exceptional figures into an exceptionalist narrative never seems to suffice to normalize jazzwomanhood.

Still, what would Bourne have said upon being asked, like Liston and Williams, to write herself into the jazz narrative as “the one who passed”? More broadly, how did other Montreal-based jazzwomen negotiate the “pass”-or-fail in their own oral histories? When Sweeney and Spencer discuss the point at which, or the reasons why, they forwent careers as jazz performers, they do not position themselves as failures nor as victims despite the fact that, as Sweeney’s 1999 video interview with Galipeau demonstrates, they clearly understood the gendered and

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<sup>82</sup> David Eng, *Burgundy Jazz: Life and Music in Little Burgundy*, CBC Music, available at <http://jazzpetitebourgognedoc.radio-canada.ca/en/musicians/9>

racialized obstacles that stood on their way. In their oral histories, Sweeney's and Spencer's turn away from jazz performance is articulated not against the obstacles they encountered "both as a woman, and as a black" but according to a care ethics rationale: they wanted to care for children, and *for this reason* (rather than as a consequence of sexism and racism) they looked for alternative ways to participate in Montreal's jazz scene. In this case, they both turned to teaching.

When Spencer discusses her work with the Rainbow Revue after she returned from the USO-camps, got married, and settled into her new home, she expresses her continued dissatisfaction in the following words:

I still didn't feel that I [she hesitates] I still didn't want to sit home and do nothing and [she hesitates] the Negro Community Center became known, and [she hesitates] I got to know about it and [she hesitates] I went to a couple of meetings, and [they] said 'I understand you're a dance teacher' and I says 'Well I have been,' and they said, 'Well how would you like to give lessons here.' And I said 'Oh I think I'd love it,' they said 'We have a lot of young members,' and I was actually crazy about children and ah [she hesitates] 'We'd love if you would teach the children here.' So, after a few months I got together with them and I opened my classes down there and I stayed and taught there for about eighteen years! Children of, mostly children between five years old and fifteen or sixteen. Mostly people who were in school.

Spencer's story of how she came to teach at the NCC flows seamlessly from the above-quoted reminiscences of feeling lost upon her return from the USO-camps. "I wasn't dancing, I wasn't singing, I had to have something to do," she said, to quote her once more. But the Rainbow Revue, with all its singing and dancing, didn't seem to fill the void that she was experiencing. "I didn't feel *that*," she begins, and hesitates before she continues to "I still didn't want to sit home and do nothing *and*" and hesitates again before moving on to the first meeting at the NCC, approached from an external, passive storytelling strategy: "The Negro Community Center became known."

Spencer's repeated hesitations here as she weaves together her narrative makes visible the process of navigation that she is going through between what she seems willing to discuss with



her interviewer, and the other unvoiced thoughts that interrupt the pace of her story. Spencer never talks about personal feelings with more intensity than when she moves from this sense of feeling lost at home to how “crazy about children” she felt. In general, her storytelling does not rely on techniques such as exaggeration and spectacularism. In comparison to tap dancer Ethel Bruneau for instance, who sews together collections of anecdotes that generate strong reactions from her audience (laughter, endearment, outrage, admiration, etc.), Spencer’s storytelling is rather matter-of-fact, descriptive, cheerful but overall demure. In her autobiographical narrative, it is her involvement with the children at the Negro Community Center that comes in as the element that managed to fill that void:

[My husband] said [to my students]: ‘We don’t call seniors by their first names! If you want to say Olga you gotta say Auntie Olga’ . . . All the children started calling me Auntie Olga. And their parents too. Even the grandparents started calling me Auntie Olga. That’s how I got the name.

Clearly, teaching comes in as the answer to her overwhelming sense of feeling lost at home, after having married, settled, sung and danced, yet still “with nothing to do.” Her appellation “Auntie” stands as a clear reminder of the sense of kinship that she felt towards those she fostered through her teaching at the NCC.

Daisy Peterson Sweeney went on to become a similar kind of celebrated figure in Montreal’s Black community, as the piano teacher who taught several generations of children between 1928 and 1988, including a number who went on to have successful international careers.<sup>83</sup> In comparison to Galipeau’s 1999 interview, Arlene Campbell’s recent interview with Sweeney in the context of her doctoral dissertation in education at York University feature a much more comfortable interviewee. The daughter of a good friend of Sweeney’s and once a

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<sup>83</sup> Campbell, “Othermothering and Life Notations of Daisy Sweeney,” 17, 22.

piano student of hers, Campbell interviewed Sweeney at her nursing home, regularly over the summer months as well as periodically throughout the following year. As Sweeney faces less resistance to be heard, she is also less resistant—or, perhaps, appears less “resisted”—to discuss personal feelings, difficult times, to voice her own opinions.<sup>84</sup> We can sense a similar intensity to that of Spencer when Sweeney discusses the place of children and child care in her life:

I must say –you have to have a purpose in life. And I loved children. I love children. What’s a home without children? The best mothering experience was everything. A house full of children is like a garden with flowers . . . I wasn’t sure I was going to have children because I lost one. My husband said, ‘No children.’ I didn’t pay attention. That was no problem. My husband said that. I said if he left me alone –I couldn’t have them on my own [she laughs]. I couldn’t see my home without children. There are many problems when they’re small, but if I could have children I wanted to. A garden without flowers, not natural to me. So, my husband at first, he didn’t want to, but I went ahead. Not by myself [she laughs], but he liked them. When he brought for one, he brought for all. I think sometimes people are influenced by other people. I am influenced by myself.<sup>85</sup>

Sweeney’s house would indeed grow full of children. In addition to those she gave birth to, Sweeney also adopted and fostered several children. She also taught private classes every day of the week in her home, as well as at the Negro Community Center on Saturdays, and at church for Sunday school:

I woke up every Saturday morning at 5:30 to go to the Center and taught piano classes all day until 5:30 p.m. The pupils came from the community and the suburbs too . . . I was also a private music teacher –Monday to Friday, except for the classes on Saturday at the Negro Community Center where I charged 2 cents per lesson. We had large classes. There was about 30 something students each week. . . Busy, busy time. Busy Saturdays; it was an interesting time. . . I didn’t have any trouble finding work. I worked very hard. People would hear the piano playing as they walked by the house and ask me to teach their children. . . I taught male and female Black children. They were mixed – all ages. It was more or less through the Center. I taught most of the children in the community. It was my training – my childhood, classical music.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> I would like to thank Sherrie Tucker for sharing this observation with me.

<sup>85</sup> Campbell, “Othermothering and Life Notations of Daisy Sweeney,” 175-176. In addition to another early infancy loss, Sweeney adopted three children and raised two biological daughters. Sweeney miscarried her first baby when she was five months pregnant, and Heather, the twin sister of Judith Sweeney, died in infancy of crib death. Sweeney Adopted Joan and her brother Kenneth, and she took her husband’s sons Essley and Joseph into her home for a while. She would later adopt Tina.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 169-171. Sweeney also continued to perform regularly, accompanying recitals, particularly for church-related events.

As this segment makes clear, Sweeney's home transcended boundaries between private and public through the sounds that she and that her students made on the piano. Sweeney's daughter Sylvia explains what it was like to grow up with her mother's students in their home every day:

She was kind of like a surrogate mother. She would tell a kid not to come back if not clean, and by the end of the year the kid got a scholarship [for private lessons] . . . Daisy thought all children should have music in their lives. She was a teacher, a social worker of music. Kids turned around their lives on her piano bench. She kept kids off the streets. I saw stories one after the other.

The themes of teaching as mother surrogacy, and of social work through music, are crucial to Sweeney's storytelling and to her legacy. When she discusses her pedagogy, Sweeney often blurs the assumed boundaries between teaching and motherwork: "I taught music from eight years old onwards," Sweeney said, "I played a major role in raising my younger siblings and teaching them piano."<sup>87</sup> Similarly, when Sweeney discusses her work with her private students:

I demanded perfection for the recitals and discipline. So that made them sit properly, walk properly, dress properly and when you tell this to a child they become very stiff, but I wanted them to realize that they had to have discipline, dress properly, act properly.<sup>88</sup>

Another time during Campbell's interviews, Sweeney starts singing the 1873 hymn 'Dare to be a Daniel,' composed by Philip P. Bliss for his own Sunday School class:

*'Dare to be a Daniel. Dare to stand alone. Dare to have a purpose. Dare to make it known.'* And I used to teach the children. I always tried to include hymns, to have something to stand by and they—*'Dare to be a Daniel. Dare to stand alone. Dare to have a purpose. Dare to make it known.'* There was a time when all the hymns and scriptures were the best way I could teach, and most of the time they got the message.<sup>89</sup>

The hymn, a four-part homorhythmic setting of Daniel 1:8 "Daniel resolved not to defile himself," describes the years of Jewish exile in Babylon, and more specifically the importance of

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<sup>87</sup> Campbell, "Othermothering and Life Notations of Daisy Sweeney," 165-166.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 179.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 178.

“standing by a purpose true,” a recurrent theme in Sweeney’s oral history. It occurred earlier in relation to the centrality of child-caring in her life (“I must say –you have to have a purpose in life. And I loved children. I love children”), and it occurs once more when Sweeney discusses her relationship to her students:

[In private lessons,] you have a chance to know the child better. They’d tell me their problems. . . Sometimes I can talk to the parents. . . You can’t expect everything to be perfect, but you do the best you can and that’s what makes it perfect. You also want the best for people, from each child. The only time you have difficulties is with the parents, some parents, because they want special treatments and that didn’t work with me . . . you have to get the best out of everybody if you can, but you do the best you can and you get the best from everybody. One young girl came to me and she said ‘I didn’t realize what it was all about—life— how you made it meaningful.’ And she said ‘you helped make your future’ and I was shocked when she said that. Because you know women talk, talk, talk, and half the time you don’t know what to say, so I encourage, really encourage. So, to always improve, improve, improve. You learn to meet different kinds of people and each has their own agenda, but *you have to have a firm purpose*.<sup>90</sup>

At the risk of stating the obvious, Sweeney’s teaching also involved musicianship. Oliver Jones spoke on numerous occasions of how much Sweeney’s teaching had had an impact on his playing. He saw the discipline and the hand independence she taught him as necessary to “reach that level, for jazz pianists to reach a certain level. . . Daisy used to say that Oscar and I were her only two students who had ‘that attack’.”<sup>91</sup> But she also introduced her students to the importance of having a sense of purpose, to notions of self-care, and more broadly she introduced hundreds of children to respectability politics. In Jones’ habile wording: “She had an ear for what you needed to do to elevate your condition.”<sup>92</sup> In addition, as the above-quoted excerpts from Campbell’s interviews make clear, Sweeney also provided her students with an opportunity to talk, to make mistakes, and to set realistic expectations for themselves. As such, musicianship seems to have been only one element amongst a broader understanding of

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<sup>90</sup> Campbell, “Othermothering and Life Notations of Daisy Sweeney,” 182-183. Italics mine.

<sup>91</sup> Jones, “Interview with author.”

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

politically and socially motivated child-care, one which, to draw on Sweeney's daughter Sylvia, positioned Sweeney as a maternal figure in Montreal's black community. Sweeney taught her students the tools required to become wage-earning musicians and attain the economic self-reliance and independence essential for survival in a discriminating society, and she introduced respectability politics as a way to resist pervasive racial stereotypes in a system that did, and that would continue to oppress them. She also helped some of the most vulnerable members of her community to develop internal survival mechanisms. The nurturing of creativity, artistic self-expression, and the development of one's own sense of purpose and value provided tools to the children she cared for to face chronic external harm they encountered and would encounter in a racially-tense society without leaving their own self-esteem eroded each time. For Sweeney, music was at the center of a multifaceted pedagogy of survival, a politically and socially motivated kind of mother-surrogacy, and a form of social work whose central practice was music-making.

Hill Collins has written about the blurriness between mothering's one children and mothering the community's children in early-twentieth-century urban Black communities as such:

In many African American communities, fluid and changing boundaries often distinguish biological mothers from other women who care for children. Biological mothers, or bloodmothers, are expected to care for their children. But African and African American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, *othermothers*—women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities—traditionally have been central to the institution of black motherhood.<sup>93</sup>

Hill Collins foregrounds the importance of othermothers in African American urban communities as catalysts for social activism:

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<sup>93</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 192.

Community othermothers have made important contributions in building a different type of community in often hostile political and economic surroundings. Community othermothers' participation in activist mothering demonstrates a clear rejection of separateness and individual interest as the basis for either community organization or individual self-actualization. Instead, the connectedness with others and common interest expressed by community othermothers model a very different value system, one whereby ethics of caring and personal accountability move communities forward.<sup>94</sup>

To return to points I made at the outset, I understand Sweeney and Spencer's turn to teaching as occurring at the nexus between jazz participation, motherwork, and othermothering. First, the lack of clear boundaries between the ways in which Sweeney cared for her biological, adopted, fostered children and for her music students, as well as the ways in which teaching for Spencer came to stand in for her will to mother, challenges hegemonic views of mothering as a private, nurturing occupation reserved for biological mothers. In Spencer and Sweeney's autobiographical narratives, the will to care through teaching and the will to care through mothering are closely linked: the turn to teaching comes off as a willful orientation *towards* gendered care-giving practices, rather than away from jazz performance. As Campbell argues, "as a piano teacher, [Sweeney] could provide the family with her constant presence and child rearing and also supplement the family income."<sup>95</sup> The theme of mother surrogacy in the case of Sweeney, and of "auntying" in the case of Spencer, remain the primary way in which members of Montreal's black community account for these women's roles and impact, at once problematizing hegemonic understandings of mothering as belonging exclusively to the realm of reproduction while allowing for alternative mother-like relationships to articulate a sense of kinship. Ralph Whims speaks of the importance of Sweeney and Spencer in Montreal's black community as such:

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<sup>94</sup> Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 205-207.

<sup>95</sup> Campbell, "Othermothering and Life Notations of Daisy Sweeney," 92.

Tap dancing was a prerequisite for practically every black child who grew up in the black community. We were all, I was taught by Olga Spencer, my piano lessons I, was taught to me by Oscar Peterson's sister Daisy Peterson, and we all had to take it at the Negro Community Centre: tap, ballet, and piano. It was sort of like an understood thing, like a, a heritage that we had to follow. . . We grew up having to get rhythm I guess! . . . We all had to have rhythm. As part of our training. . . Music was a way out for us. Sports hadn't arrived in Canada as being an outlet for ah, a lot of us. At that time, music was it. Forties, fifties, sixties. It was music. To be a musician was one of the really constructive ambitions that a lot of us in the community wanted to adhere to, and hopefully follow.<sup>96</sup>

Like a number of his peers, Whims made his first wages as part of a group called the King Cole Trio Junior. Clearly, as Hill Collins has argued, othermothers played a crucial role in the fostering of black children towards economic self-reliance in underprivileged urban neighborhoods.<sup>97</sup>

Crucially, Sweeney and Spencer's turn to teaching cannot be discarded simply as a result of overwhelming gendered and racialized obstacles on their paths. Spencer and Sweeney did not steer away from careers in jazz performance because they failed to manage their gender, failed to play well enough, failed to "pass" as one of the boys. Rather, a willful orientation towards gendered care-giving is the central element that precipitated their turn to teaching. The particular value that they placed on care-giving, surely a "feminine" trait though one which spreads more evenly on the field of gender than jazz professionalization in the early-twentieth-century, played a significant role in these women's turn to teaching. In other words, while parameters that articulate gender and race remained fixed, at the particular moment when Sweeney and Spencer transitioned to adulthood, and more broadly when the will to care gained particular salience in their worldviews, these women's social identities in relation to Montreal's jazz scene changed.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ralph Whims, *Interview with Ralph [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0003 [7110], 1993-1994, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Ralph Whims also come from this source.

<sup>97</sup> As she argues, middle-class families, with larger houses who lived in retreat from the community, made it harder to maintain those links. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 205-207

<sup>98</sup> It is by no means my intention to suggest that jazzwomen who chose not to articulate their lives around care-giving are deviant, and in particular not to shame Bourne for not having chosen this path. Bourne also taught

*Broadening the lens: Other Montreal-based (other)mothers-in-jazz*

As I documented in the first three chapters of this dissertation, in a place like Montreal where instrumentalists, dancers and singers shared the same performance spaces, they belonged to the same imagined community and as such, the relationship between care-giving and jazz participation for black women performers can tell us much about the horizon of possibility for female jazz instrumentalists as well. Ethel Bruneau for instance, who went on to become Montreal's most celebrated tap dance teacher, explains her turn away from performance in a way that is closely related to Spencer and Sweeney's autobiographical narratives:

I left show business to go back to McGill and get a degree! So, I went back to McGill and got my nursery school degree, and I've been teaching nursery school for almost 30 years. So, I'm doing things that I really love to do, you know? . . . Plus, the wonderful thing about me being teaching, is that I, I feel really lucky, God's really blessed me, because I'm giving this to other generations! I'm teaching second and third generations now!<sup>99</sup>

Bernice Jordan also taught the younger generation of girls who wanted to become part of a chorus line. "[They] had to break in at Starland to know if they could dance in a nightclub or dance for nightclub audience," she explains:

Little Oscar Peterson used to play down at our church basement for all our little concerts. We'd take him out of his mother's kitchen to play for us girls when we used to rehearse in the UNIA hall for the [she interrupts herself]. It was before the war. We were learning a lot of routines for concerts, and he'd come and rehearse, just a little kid, playing chords. He got [jazz pianist] Steep Wade's style right off the bat. Harold Wade, you know? He played exactly like Harold. Harold Wade would have been

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privately and was an important mentor of Oliver Jones. Rather, I am critical of historical narratives that value jazz figures *through* the marginalization of those who placed care-giving at the center of their value system.

<sup>99</sup> Ethel Bruneau, *Interview with Mrs. Swing [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0005 [7112], 1993-1994, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Ethel Bruneau also come from this source.



famous had he had lived [she laughs]. Oscar Peterson played for all of our youngsters before he became famous.<sup>100</sup>

Other black women performers' oral histories in this regard are useful as stories of apprenticeship. Much like female instrumentalists, singers and dancers followed gendered learning paths that were not institutionalized. Bernice Jordan and Tina Baines in fact both learned to dance in their home kitchen, by putting their hands on their mother's hips. Jordan remembers:

I was the first to do what my mother taught me, good ol' West Indian dancing. . . my mother taught me those routines from a record she owned of good ol' 'West Indian Blues.' And I learned to dance from that. My mother could dance! . . . Nobody understood what it was. She was a good ol' shaker. My mother taught me the first steps, how to move around, in the kitchen. She used the chairs for public, and I'm back there and she went: 'Always flash, smile, and be happy even if you feel sick.'

Once again, it is striking to hear how many lessons seem embedded into one here: As Jordan's mother teaches her daughter to shake dance, she also advises her on how to survive in a system that will oppress her, and to remain economically viable and safe as a black citizen living in a racially-tense society. Mary Brown similarly explains that she started to dance "Just about as soon as I could walk [she laughs]:"

My aunt was a dancer and we always used to have dancing and all that in the house . . . [she] was a professional dancer and she used to come around and show us different dances . . . Because my grandmother sang, so, we always had singing and dancing in the house, yeah. . . Dancing was something that I always liked to do.<sup>101</sup>

The home was therefore an important space for gendered forms of jazz apprenticeship like the learning of skills related to black woman performance. Moreover, the boundary between

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<sup>100</sup> Bernice Jordan (Whims), *Interview with Bernice [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0002 [7109], 1993-1994, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Bernice Jordan also come from this source.

<sup>101</sup> Mary Brown, *Interview with Mary [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam, Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0004 [7111], 1993-1994, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Mary Brown also come from this source.

teaching and motherwork in accounts from black teachers and learners seems blurry at best: music and dance are both embedded in larger pedagogies of survival transmitted by mothers and othermothers to the community's children. African American vernacular forms appear as having been heavily dependent on extended networks of women with at their core maternal figures like Sweeney, Spencer, Bruneau, Jordan, as well as Jordan's and Brown's own mothers.

But not all Montreal-based jazzwomen reconciled a willful desire to engage in gendered care-giving through teaching. Notably, the vast majority of black women performers became mothers in the course of their professional lives, and they negotiated child-care and jazz performance in ways that greatly problematize the public vs private dichotomy imposed on jazz participation and gendered care-giving in jazz historiography. The seamlessness with which exotic dancer Mary Brown and tap dancer Ethel Bruneau discuss jazz performance and motherwork is striking: "I danced with an umbrella, with a cane sometimes," begins Brown upon answering a question about whether she used props on stage:

I danced also with a tambourine. I danced with maracas and, ah, finger cymbals, you know when I did the oriental dance. I have the castanets here, on the wall. There's my ehm, maracas, I can still play them. I let the kids play with them until they make too much noise, and then I put them up there because they like it too much, you know? [she laughs] It used to be a rattle with my grandchild. A hat, big skirts in the back, and you know when you have skirts like that, you can do less dancing and look like you're doing a lot, you know? When I did oriental dancing I used veils, you know, in all forms. When I took my skirt off, that was the end, and I put it off like this and I'd walk off the stage.<sup>102</sup>

Similarly, when Bruneau describes one cycle of twenty-four hours, it's not clear where the professional begins and when it ends:

I did three shows a night. The first show would be like, go on around 10:30. The second show would go on around 1:30, and the third show [would be] going around 2:30. So, and, I worked, you know, the three shows, come home, of course, when I got married I had my daughter, and a, I would get up at seven in the morning and, I'd have to take care of her, do the house work, clean, wash. I didn't have

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<sup>102</sup> Note that this excerpt is unedited to reflect Brown's actual stream of consciousness.

a washing machine, so I'd take the clothes to the laundry mat, ah, cooked dinner, get my husband ready for work, get ready for work and go back to work! Some of the clubs I worked in had nice dressing rooms, that were comfortable. Other clubs that I worked in they just gave you the basement where the beer bottles was [sic] and told you to get dressed down there! Ahm, some of the places were very damp and, they didn't clean the dressing rooms, ah, very clean, ahm, some dressing rooms when I went in, I used to go with my broom and my mop and my bucket, and [I would] clean it up before I could get in there.<sup>103</sup>

As the above excerpts make clear, motherwork has long been a part of jazz participation for black women performers, and mothers developed numerous and diverse strategies to negotiate child care and jazz participation. Biological children actually often occur as the impetus to continue performing for numerous black women performers. Mary Brown states it bluntly:

You knew that you had, more or less, to manage your own life, you know? They call it today, 'liberated women'? We were liberated, but I don't think we really wanted to be that liberated. You know? We just had to be liberated because you know, we had to feed our children! It was not, uh, something to be proud of, and I guess after all the other women saw you working and making money they figured it was something good to do! But I mean back then, it was not a good thing for women, to be, ah, working. And, and especially dancing on the stage, you know? Uh, pff, for me, I mean, I don't see why it was such a big thing, I mean, I hear them now 'I work,' a lot of women tell me 'I work,' I say 'How many years you work?,' you know? 'Five, six, six, seven, eight, ten?' I mean, try forty-five, you know what I mean? And then you can say you work . . . Try forty-five with children!

Bruneau and Brown similarly legitimize their career as dancers through the fact that they made good wages, which in turn made it possible to offer various kinds of middle-class activities to their children, including attending university, "figure skating, violin lessons, dance lessons, day camp every summer . . . gymnastics . . . hockey, McGill guitar lessons. This is what you had to do!" explains Bruneau. When asked whether she was given any gifts from audience members, Brown similarly places her children at the core of her value system:

I think in a way I was a little bit too cocky [she laughs] you know? Otherwise I know I wouldn't be so poor today. Some of my friends they got mansions all over the place. And they couldn't dance a lick

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<sup>103</sup> Note that this excerpt is unedited to reflect Bruneau's actual stream of consciousness.

[she laughs] you know what I mean? But I mean being so, so... [she makes a you-know-what-I-mean kind of face, then she laughs] I wound up with nothing! You know? Especially when I got sick. They would have cars and everything, you know what I mean? Now, that was not my way, I had children.

Bruneau and Brown also discuss how difficult it was at times to reconcile child care and a performance career. "I didn't think I could have children," Brown begins:

It was pretty tough. You had maybe two hours of sleep! When you were working in town, you finished around three o'clock, by about four, four-thirty, you were home, you had to lay out their clothes, prepare their meals, and you'd be up to send them to school, and the time you had a babysitter was when you were working. My children went to bed when they saw me leave. . . You never mentioned in your neighborhood that you were a dancer, you know, because different people take offense to that. So, I used to come with dark glasses, so I'd go to [my daughter's] things, all of her stuff, and all of my son's stuff, you know, you had to go! . . . Anytime they had something special at school I went. [I would] bake cookies and cakes. Like the other parents.

Her favorite to place to work at was a country club in Pointe-Claire that was called the Edgewater:

I worked on and off there for twenty-five years. I could bring my children there in the summer, or the winter, you know, especially for the week-end, they had a place upstairs with a TV and all that, and they learned how to set tables and everything.

Similarly, as Bruneau explains:

[I would] come home, get a few hours [of] sleep, get up at seven, get my children ready for, get them their breakfast, get them washed, get them ready for school, ahm, I lived in Rosemont, and I used to have to walk [my daughter] to school, ten blocks up and ten blocks back because there was no school buses . . . I'd come back, make the beds, do my vacuum, have a coffee, go back, pick her up for lunch, then walk back at two o'clock, bring her home, then take her out to the park, do what I had to do, play, come back, give her homework, give her bath, get her ready for bed, and then I had a baby sitter, a wonderful babysitter, Aunty Agnes, Madame Laforte [sp?], she was a Scottish lady, she loved her like it was her granddaughter. So when I would leave, because Red [my first husband, who was a bartender] was gone by eight o'clock, when I would leave, I'd leave home around nine, and Aunty Agnes would stay until I came back . . . You just have to be organized, [to] organize yourself to do these things. I'd rest when I could rest.

And later in the interview:

I used to bring [my kids] with me when I went out of town. I used to bring the diapers, the bottles, the playpen, and everything in the car. And when I was going to teach dancing, the play pen was in the corner, and I taught my classes. I took them everywhere with me . . . I did what I had to do! It was hard! . . . I wouldn't go to places where I knew I couldn't be with my kids. I remember going to Val d'Or and I got worried whether [my daughter] was alright or not, and I took a bus and came home. I

told the boss, 'Tonight I'm not doing the show, I'm going home.' And I brought her back . . . Every time I took gigs at a hotel I would put furniture in front of the door to make sure I was safe . . . [Once,] The boss didn't know that I had the kids so he, he had a pass key and he came through the door, and I took the baby bottle and knocked him in his head.

Bernice Jordan also speaks evocatively of the strategies that she developed to negotiate jazz performance and motherwork. She took time out from the St-Michel to have her son: "I tried to work as long as I could. When the costumes wouldn't fit, I'd just sing in the bandstand." Her son often accompanied her when he was young, sometimes bringing her lunch on Sundays, other times staying backstage with her and the other women, helping her find her lipstick, advising her on her singing, discovering that he couldn't quite even stand on his mother's "two-inches in the front, seven-inches in the back" high heels. In short, Whims became "a jack-of-all-traits," and he did "what you had to do to help mom and her job. . . My grandmother and aunt replaced my mother," he explains, "up until five or six years old. I understood. She was out there, for the family. I never suffered."

Children do not only occur in black women performers' oral histories as the impetus to continue performing. When Jordan had her daughter Julia several years later, she explains: "I wanted to be home, to raise her at home. I still went around singing in churches, but the glamour went out the window . . . It wasn't jazz. I was getting to do what I like to do. Nice gospel numbers, nice hymns, Christmas carols, things like that." When black women performers quit performance, they often explain wanting to be at the core of their children's care network. Tina Baines felt at some point like she "had to stop. I brought my kids up myself, so I had to stop."<sup>104</sup> Nathalie too had her family, but only "after." And so did Marie-Claire Germain. "It was a young teenager dream that she had to

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<sup>104</sup> Tina Baines Brereton, *Interview with Tina [moving images]*, interviewed by Meilan Lam Concordia University Library, Special Collections, Meilan Lam Fonds, P0135-09-0001 [7108], December 2, 1993, VHS. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes below from Tina Baines also come from this source.

become a dancer,” her daughters confided: “she loved dancing.” Germain danced until the mid-fifties: She worked as a dancer “for economic reasons,” according to her daughters, and also because “she really liked all the glamour (she always liked make-up, nice clothes, pearls, etc.).” She quit dancing when she met her second husband, René Maurice, before her two daughters Michelle and Danielle were born. “There didn’t seem to be any nostalgia associated with her time in the entertainment business,” her daughters added.<sup>105</sup> Crucially, black women who, in modern-day parlance, “did not lean in” do not express regrets about leaving their professional careers as performers—neither to the archive, nor, in the case of Bernice Jordan and Marie-Claire Germain, to their children. They do not describe motherhood as making them partners in their own gendered and racialized oppression either. It changed their worldviews, the ways in which they engaged with the field, as well as their subject positions in relation to their peers. But it did not preclude them from taking their careers seriously.

### *Motherships*

As can be gathered from the above narratives, mothers-in-jazz are far from just emerging. For many, teaching was seen as an extension of motherwork, an activity that black women valued as an empowering one. The musical othermothers of Montreal’s black community, including Olga Spencer and Daisy Sweeney, sustained forms of jazz apprenticeship without which jazz would not have blossomed in a place like Montreal. Mothers-in-jazz such as Bernice Jordan, Mary Brown, and Ethel Bruneau provided evidence a very long time ago that excellence and motherhood were not contrary. And yet

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<sup>105</sup> Michelle Maurice and Danielle Maurice, interview with author, September 17, 2016.

activities like motherwork, othermothering, and teaching have yet to make a significant dent in dominant historical narratives of jazz: forms of gendered care-giving within jazz scenes are still, from a historical standpoint, just emerging. Clearly, it's not jazzwomen who haven't been taking them both as seriously. In this chapter, I showed that women who quit performance altogether articulated this turn less in terms of the gendered difficulties they encountered on their path than as a conscious and deliberate desire to position themselves at the center of their children's care-giving network. Those who maintained careers while raising their children cared in ways that problematize gendered narratives of music and professionalism, in particular assumptions between public and private in jazz narratives, as well as hegemonic understandings of the value of nuclear families. Finally, significant numbers of women willfully turned towards teaching (rather than away from performance) in order to articulate their lives around care-giving. The oral histories of community othermothers such as Sweeney and Spencer continue to this day to challenge hegemonic views of motherwork as being an apolitical activity, one that belongs exclusively to the reproductive sphere. Crucially, all of the women I documented above, all the invisibles and "ephemera" of Montreal jazz history, those who "failed" from a historiographical standpoint, were those who articulated their lives along an ethic of care, and whose autobiographical narratives are structured above all around issues of care.

"*So, you see,*" said Sweeney, "where you're accepted, you blossom. But where you're not accepted, they don't even know you." Focusing on care-giving within jazz scenes can provide a welcome alternative to the series of competitive male soloists that articulate the timelines of jazz history textbooks. Not only would this allow for enough women into the narrative to effectively break open the invisibility-exceptionalism

paradigm, but it would also allow greater space for masculinities that are less concerned with jazz as an art standing apart from economic and family concerns than with the music that fathers chose to play in order to provide—care—for their children and families. By foregrounding care-giving in jazz scenes, we may write histories that emphasize relatedness in opposition to egoism, connection rather than competition, and relations that are maintained across long periods of time in opposition to narratives of victory of the fittest. Jazz apprenticeship and participation were sustained by extended networks of mothers and othermothers, women who taught the most vulnerable members of their community to grow into self-reliant, formidable, caring adults. It is my hope that focussing on care ethics in jazz historical research may uncover hundreds—thousands—of such hidden motherships across the jazz diaspora.



## CONCLUSION

During the course of this research project, I have encountered more women than I could thoroughly document. Initially, I followed the leads of black women performers Tina Baines Brereton, Bernice Jordan Whims, Olga Spencer Foderingham, Natalie Ramirez, Mary Brown and Ethel Bruneau. Through their oral histories, I could document several aspects of their professional lives as well as those other Montreal-based black women performers, including Thelma Spencer, Marie-Claire Germain, and Lucille Wade. I found traces of an overwhelming number of travelling entertainers who came to Montreal, including Flash Gordon, Chinky Grimes, Sonya Millburn, Bea Morton, and—yes—Josephine Baker. I followed through with the musicians that black women performers remembered performing with, and as I listened to the interviews of musicians who were active on the black variety stage, I also came across pianist Ilene Bourne. Beyond these, there are a number of women—Evelyn Campbell, who sang and danced with Mynie Sutton’s ambassadors; Kay Lucas, another black woman performer from that era; ragtime and two-step composers Donalda Rouillard, Jeanne Cormier, Jeanne Delman, Grace Haanel Bowles, Louise Joly, Mollie King; jazz pianists Gladys Spencer, Gertrude Waters, Nina Brown; as well as so many advertised stage names of black women performers whose archive has yet to surface.

It was never the goal that asking “where are the women?” in Montreal’s jazz scene would lead to finding and documenting them all. I have not documented the white women who sang with the Johnny Holmes’ big band and others through the 1940s and early 1950s, women like Arlene Smith and Rita Gail whose names will be as good a point of departure as any for anyone wishing to take on this project. I have yet to locate or to generate an archive that would allow us to consider questions of agency when the *québécoise* engaged the dancefloor: journals, oral

histories, or other criticism on the topic authored by French-Canadian women. What did jazz feel like for the *québécoise de souche* entering a jazz space? How did blackness figure for them when it was made invisible on the dance floors of the uptown hotels? What did social dancers think of Oscar Peterson's feature with Johnny Holmes' all-white jazz ensemble? Lastly, this project would benefit from the analysis of scores that were meant to accompany Bruneau's and Brown's routines (if they can be accessed), as well as from a detailed musichoreographical analyses of video footage where black theatrical dancers perform with jazz musicians. Oral histories allow us to document the creative collaborative relationships between entertainers and show musicians, but putting oral histories in dialogue with film footage of variety stage performances such as Oscar Micheaux' *Ten Minutes to Live* would allow us to map the dance-music vocabularies they shared.

Standing in the shoes of women-in-jazz took me from women's particular subject positions and worldviews to broader questions relating to jazz discourses, historiography, and processes of cultural legitimization in early-twentieth-century Montreal and beyond. Jazz functions as an apparatus of power: Women's bodies, sounds, and contributions, in and through Montreal's jazz scene, have been marginalized from dominant narratives for reasons that have little to do with women's skill or worth as music-makers and as community builders. I traced the way in which historiography and notions of musical genre are infused with aesthetic judgements that are structured on parameters of gender, race, class and nation (to name only a few) and on the ways in which feminine spaces, sounds, and subject positions in jazz are marginalized from the historical record. Jazz dancers and other unruly bodies were central to the articulation, development, and sustainability of a scene for jazz in Montreal, and the entertainment world in which jazz emerged can only be excised from the historical record through the process of erasing

from the archive an overpowering majority of women. Guilaroff's classical-sounding novelty sounds at the piano registered as much as jazz as other kinds of syncopated popular Anglophone music in the 1920s and 1930s. I traced the ways in which Bourne's "not-the-solo-type" status registered as lack in contemporary criticism despite the fact that the musicians who worked with her celebrated her skills in the performance context in which she was hired to play. The jazz that all-girl ensembles such as the Spencer Sisters Trio, the Montreal Melody Girls, and the Vagabond Girls played blossomed where it was accepted: as novelty, abroad, in military camps. Skilled instrumentalists such as Olga Spencer Foderingham and Daisy Peterson Sweeney took on the role of othermothers in Montreal's black community rather than pursue careers in music performance, and their importance in fostering jazz in Montreal is certainly more contested in the current historical record as it is in the archive. Mothers have longed cared for children—theirs, others'—while continuing to participate in jazz. At least four generations of women in Montreal have been proving that "the female element" is not contrary to excellence in jazz.

It is my hope that this material can reach far and wide so that the next generation of jazzmen and women, in Montreal and elsewhere, doesn't have to ask "where are the women?" quite so much, or so often, anymore. Standing among a long line of well-documented formidable foremothers, perhaps we can then move forward and ask the archive to answer other, newer, perhaps even better questions.

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**Appendix I: "Miss Canada," J.H. Metcalf, score**

J. H Metcalf, "Miss Canada: Fox trot Souvenir du Carnaval de 1923," *Le Passe-Temps* 726, February 7, 1923, 56-7.

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LE PASSE-TEMPS

No 726 — Montréal, 17 février 1923

SOUVENIR DU CARNAVAL DE 1923

MISS CANADA

FOX-TROT

J. H. METCALF

ALLEGRO (Rivoli)

PIANO

*p* *mf* *p* *mf*

*cresc.* *ff*

*p* *mf*

**Marche des Vainqueurs** (March of the Victors) par Mme E. J. Dupuis (née Anna Boisclair) auteur de plusieurs morceaux populaires, entr'autres Espérons (marche) et René (valse). En vente chez tous les marchands de musique, prix 40c. Par la poste, 2c en plus.



CHORUS



Le Monde qui Chante 1905

Nouveau Recueil de chansons comiques les plus nouvelles. Prix franco 25c. En vente chez tous les libraires.



Appendix II: "Salamambo," Charlys, score.

Charlys, "Salamambo: La légende du voile sacré," fox-trot, *Canada qui Chante* 2, no. 10, October 1928, 145-146.

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# SALAMMBO

LA LÉGENDE DU VOILE SACRÉ  
FOX TROT

Tempo di Fox-trot Paroles et Musique de CHARLYS

Cor's Cuivres  
f Tutti Tromb.

Cym.  
8a bas.

A Car-thage dans la ville an-ti-que Où Sa-lammbô re-gne par sa beau-té

p Triangle

Pour el-le dans un tem-ple mys-ti-que Est gar-de le voi-le sa-

Triangle

-cré Un des sol-dats Un mer-ce-nai-re Pour Sa-lammbô vi

CHARLYS - EDITION,  
115, Rue Monge, Paris (Ve)

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et d'arrangements réservés pour tous pays.



- brant d'a - mour - La dé - si - rait - Vou lait lui plai - re - Et pour el -

**REFRAIN**

- le di - sait tou - jours Sa - lamm - bô -

- Ton nom chan - te comme un é - cho - Il ré - sonne en mon cœur Et son at -

- trait vainqueur Promet la joie et le bon - heur Sa -

8a bas. Cym.

- lamm - bô - C'est toi que j'aime et qu'il me faut - Tes grands yeux sont si beaux

Qu'ils troublent mon cerveau Di - vi - ne Sa - - lamm - bô -

8a bas. Cym. 8a bas. Cym. 8a bas. Cym.

A suivre à la page suivante



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# TRAHISON

Valse Boston

Paroles et Musique de CHARLYS et MONTAGNON

Mouvement de Valse

Ce soir Ni - non tu es mo - ro - se Des lar - mes brill - lent  
 dans tes yeux De ton cha - grin je suis la cau - se Et c'est ce -  
 la qui me rends malheu - reux Tu m'at - ten - dais à la de - meu - re  
 Je suis ren - tré très en re - tard Et main - te - nant Ni - non tu  
 pleu - res Et c'est toi qui me par - le de dé - part Ta ja - lou - sie,  
 je la com - prends Oui j'ai bien tort je le sais mais pour -  
 REFRAIN  
 tant. Tu veux par - tir Pour - quoi? Ni - non Tu le sais  
 bien c'est tou - jours toi Que j'ai - me Tu quit - te - rais No -  
 tre mai - son Où je res - te - rais seul Le cœur à l'a - ban -  
 don Je t'ai men - ti, c'est vrai Par - don! Je t'ai trom -  
 pé, mais je t'ai - mais Quand mè - me En un soir de fo - lie j'ai per -  
 du la rai - son De cet - te tra - hi - son Par - don! Ni - non.

## IIe COUPLET

Le Casino, le Jeu, la Fête,  
 L'amour qui passe et vient s'offrir,  
 Le vin qui fait tourner la tête,  
 Dans la fumée, les femmes, le plaisir,  
 Tout vous captive et vous entraîne,  
 Je me suis laissé prendre alors.  
 Ninon, je t'ai fait de la peine,  
 Tu le devines, et je l'avoue, j'ai tort.  
 Tout ton orgueil s'est révolté,  
 Et pour cela, tu voudrais me quitter...

(AU REFRAIN.)

## IIIe COUPLET

Une autre m'a séduit, sans doute,  
 J'ai connu son amour menteur.  
 Quand dans mes bras je l'avais toute,  
 C'est encor toi qui restais dans mon cœur  
 La "passagère" et "l'aventure",  
 L'égarement d'un soir d'oubli,  
 Rien n'est resté, je te le jure,  
 De ce baiser, qu'à présent je maudis.  
 Tu briserais tout notre amour  
 Pour ma folie, mon caprice d'un jour!

(AU REFRAIN.)

# SALAMMBO

Suite de la page précédente

## 2e COUPLET

Sous la pâle clarté des étoiles,  
 Il pénétra dans le Temple endormi  
 Et dans l'ombre il déroba le voile  
 Qui lui ouvrait le paradis.  
 De Salammbô, femme jolie,  
 Il eut le charme d'un baiser,  
 Mais il mourut de sa folie,  
 En murmurant le cœur brisé:

(AU REFRAIN.)

## 3e COUPLET

De toutes les amours, c'est l'image,  
 L'amour trahit aussitôt qu'on l'atteint,  
 Ainsi que les amants de Carthage  
 Tous les amants ont ce destin.  
 Propos charmeurs, ivresses folles,  
 Mais quand le voile tombe... alors...  
 Tout est fini, l'amour s'envole,  
 Combien de fous disent encor:

(AU REFRAIN.)



### Appendix III: "Au Pays d'Allah!," Henri Miro, score

Henri Miro, "Au Pays d'Allah," fox-trot oriental, french lyrics by Leon Chevalier, english lyrics by Geo. Dunbar, *La Lyre* 1, no. 4, 1923, 14-16.

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## Au Pays d'Allah!

Paroles francaises de  
LEON CHEVALIER  
English words by  
GEO. DUNBAR

Fox-trot Oriental = Oriental Fox-Trot

HENRI MIRO

**Furioso**

PIANO



Al - lah! ra-mè-ne-moi dans ton beau pa-ys, Ou sous les  
Al - lah! fais-ré-el mon rê-ve de bon-heur, Fais que je  
Al - lah! all my life is just a lone-ly dream Two eyes keep  
Al - lah! all my hap-pi-ness is in my dreams It seems I'm



pal - miers ma bel-le m'at - tend;  
re - vois l'Hin-doustan loin - tain,  
stare - ing at me night and day  
with her on that lone - ly shore



Al - lah! je veux re-voir ce doux pa-ra-dis, vi-vre près  
Qu'en - fin à l'u-nis-son bat-tent nos deux coeurs, Sous le so-  
Al - lah! bring me near-er to my lit-tle Queen, It seems I  
Al - lah! all day long and thru the night it seems My heart keeps



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d'el - le dans son Hin - dous - tan. Deux pe - tits  
 - leil d'or du pa - ys di - vin. Two lit - tle  
 - see her when I kneel and say.  
 cal - ling to her more and more.

*f* *mp*

yeux bleus, purs re - flets des cieux, Y bril - lent lan - gou - reux, at  
 blue eyes, be - neath the blue skies Are lone - ly, watch - ing there for

*f* *mp*

- ten - dant mon re - tour. O ma dé - es - se quelle al - lé -  
 me in Al - lah - land. There in the calm breeze be - neath the

*f* *mp*

gres - se de te pos - sé - der là - bas pour tou - jours.  
 palm trees A - cross the lone - ly de - sert sands she dreams;

*f* *mp*

*f*

Tout près de toi, an - ge qui m'est si chère,  
 Soon I will stray there to the O - ri - ent,

*f*

Je se - rai roi de l'im - men - se dé - sert, A - lors tous les deux  
 Then I will stay there in her lit - tle tent; "Two lit - tle blue eyes"

nous vi - vrons heu - reux, Car par toi j'ai com - pris ce  
 be - neath the blue skies My ca - ra - van will car - ry

1. que c'est que l'a - mour! Deux pe - tits yeux.  
 me to Al - lah - land! Two lit - tle land.

2.

*fz*

An Pays d'Allah! 3

**Appendix IV: “Maple Leaf Rag,” Scott Joplin, score**

Scott Joplin, “Maple Leaf Rag” (Sedalia, Missouri: John Stark & Son, 1899), accessed on *IMSLP.org*, April 9, 2017, [http://imslp.org/wiki/Maple\\_Leaf\\_Rag\\_\(Joplin%2C\\_Scott\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/Maple_Leaf_Rag_(Joplin%2C_Scott))

# MAPLE LEAF RAG.

BY SCOTT JOPLIN.

*Tempo di marcia.*

The image displays the first four systems of the piano accompaniment for "Maple Leaf Rag" by Scott Joplin. The music is written in 2/4 time with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The first system begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The second system includes first and second endings, marked "1." and "2." respectively. The third system features a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The fourth system concludes with a repeat sign and first and second endings. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, accidentals, and dynamic markings.

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*M. L. R.*