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Jazz Banned: How Jazz Music Shaped Nazi Germany

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As Anne Frank aptly noted in her diary, “people can tell you to keep your mouth shut, but it doesn’t stop you having your own opinion. Even if people are still very young, they shouldn’t be prevented from saying what they think.”¹ She experienced firsthand the attempts of Adolf Hitler and his party to control the every move of the German and Austrian people. During the time that Frank was writing, the Nazi regime used every means necessary to create an empire of sorts, completely free from anything deemed “un-patriotic.” Their violent methods are widely known—what is less commonly discussed is their subtler efforts to censor all media and spread their message to the people of Europe through the information that was consumed every day. As a consequence, resistance movements latched on to these forms of media as a way to hold on to the culture and life that they were fighting for. The Nazis recognized the power of music as a form of communication and community. Hence, they censored the music that reached the public, banning any music that was composed by a Jew or a person of color (called ‘non-Aryans’), or that belonged to a culture that was in any way thought to be “antisocialist,” and forcing the composers and performers to leave. Jazz, in particular, was considered to be absolutely abhorrent. The Nazi Party condemned jazz music for being distinctly un-patriotic and directly contradictory to the values of the Party, especially because of its roots in the American Black community: they coined the term “negermusik” to reference this style of jazz, and made efforts to limit the performance. At the same time, however, jazz and swing were growing increasingly popular throughout Europe. Jazz clubs began forming, and groups of German youth such as the ‘Edelweiss Pirates’ and the ‘Swing Youth’ began to meet at clubs for swing dancing and jazz music. Groups such as these found community and passion amongst each other and in their

¹ Frank, Anne. *The Diary of Anne Frank*. New York: Doubleday, 1986. 528

music and dancing, and it became the launching point for many small-scale acts of resistance. Nazi leaders recognized the power that jazz held, and they began to harness it to their own benefit as well, re-writing lyrics and forming their own bands. Hence, jazz music proves to be an indicating factor of the political turmoil of Nazi rule, acting both as a unifying force in the youth resistance movement and as a vessel for Nazis to feed propaganda to the public.

The 1920s marked a “turning point” in the German music world.² The International Society for Contemporary Music was founded in 1922, and, two years later, the Beyreuth Music Festival re-opened for the first time in ten years. In the political climate of the Weimar Republic, this festival “came to represent a symbol of extreme nationalist defiance” and even became a hub for “political extremism,”³ marking the first instance of music culture serving a community function for political activists and government opposers. Additionally, Berlin specifically became a hub for arts, culture, and social life. Offering proliferous opportunities for arts and entertainment, it kept with the Weimar Republic standards of liberal culture and modernity. By the late 1920’s, Berlin high culture was flaunted in several major opera houses and concert halls, cabarets, museums and small galleries, and upwards of forty theaters.⁴ Here, the upwardly mobile class of German mass consumers was able to experience the modern social culture which was still new and exciting at the time. By the end of the Weimar Republic, Germany was envied as the center of musical achievement across Europe.⁵ Berlin’s role was to cater to the wants and needs of the people, especially of this upper class, and it eventually became evident that what

² Levi, Erik. *Music in the Third Reich*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994. 6

³ *ibid.*, 6

⁴ Kater, Michael H. *Different Drummers: Jazz in the Culture of Nazi Germany*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. 3-4

⁵ Potter, Pamela M. *Grove Music Online*. s.v. “Nazism.” 2001. 1

was even more exciting than all this European modernity was American modernity. Thus came first the chorus line and later, jazz. Starting on the tail end of the First World War, jazz and swing came to be intertwined into the fabric of Berlin's light-entertainment culture.⁶

In Germany, World War I was followed by a resurgence of interest in entertainment culture, called the "postwar dance craze," which helped to, quite literally, "shake off the memories of war."⁷ At this point, jazz already had a firm footing in England and in France, but thanks to the postwar dance craze it quickly became central to German music and dance culture. This influence only continued to expand, first as the country reached financial stability in the mid 1920's and was able to spend more on public entertainment, and shortly thereafter with the expansion of the German broadcasting system, which featured jazz "dance music" broadcast on the evening programs.⁸ Mainstream American jazz and swing, such as the music of Benny Goodman, was available and popular; however, European musicians also began to experiment with jazz music and grew increasingly prominent. Thus, a generation of German jazz fans (and some musicians) were being raised in Germany during the 1920's. It was these fans who bolstered the fad of jazz music, allowing it to sweep through Europe in the 1930's and continue to be popularized despite the growing Nationalist sentiment and Nazi control shortly thereafter.

As Nazi influence grew, propaganda became a central means of gaining support and power. Their propaganda techniques were far reaching and grew to encapsulate nearly every aspect of popular culture. Although there was not originally a Chamber of Music included in the Nazi Propaganda Directorate, the Nazi Party employed methods to prevent prominent figures in

⁶ Kater, 5

⁷ *ibid.*, 5

⁸ *ibid.*, 5,12

the German music world from practicing. They made some semi-successful attempts to control the press and radio, so as to limit the music which reached the public ear, but this proved difficult as there were countless sources which were not under government control. They therefore focused their efforts on the “eradication of ‘undesirable’ personnel” from the industry.⁹ The most apparent of these methods was perhaps the Law for Restoration of the Civil Service, passed in April 1933, which allowed Nazis to dismiss and replace any state-employed musician.¹⁰ The result of this was a purging of Jews and ‘non-Aryans’ from the music industry, which became the most successful out of all Nazi attempts at jazz censorship. Eventually, however, a Chamber of Music was started by Alfred Rosenberg in August of 1933. Joseph Goebbels, founder of the Nazi Propaganda Directorate, saw Rosenberg’s leadership as a threat to his control over cultural affairs and immediately campaigned against Rosenberg, beginning a political rivalry which would influence the music industry through 1934.¹¹ As Rosenberg and Goebbels competed for power over media censorship, their policies became more of an attempt to assert authority over each other, rather than establish a consistent and enforceable policy regarding the practice and purchase of music. Consequently, musical life in the Third Reich was characterized by inconsistencies and contradictions of policy, and, as a result, specific musical standards were never implemented or enforced.¹² Through all of this, Hitler himself directly intervened relatively little, although certain aspects of musical life, such as funding and patronage, remained

⁹ Potter, 3

¹⁰ Levi, 14

¹¹ *ibid.*, 21

¹² Potter, 3

strictly under his control.¹³ However, he did use his influence indirectly to encourage a music scene which was patriotic and promoted his Nationalist values and ideals, aiming to popularize music such as that of Richard Wagner and facilities such as the National Theatre in Weimar. These qualifications naturally excluded jazz music from any state-endorsed music events.

The growing attitude of nationalism and patriotism inevitably led to the denunciation of jazz music and swing clubs once Nazi policies turned to music. Jazz music was considered to be the opposite of the ideal put forward by Hitler's regime. Hitler sought to erase any aspects of German culture which were not of white, German, gentile origin; jazz, meanwhile, was originated and popularized by Black and Jewish musicians in America. Thusly, Nazi officials denounced jazz music as a "potent symbol of cultural decay,"¹⁴ forbidding the hiring of musicians of color and publicly castigating the so-called "orgies of negro jazz."¹⁵ The term 'negermusik' was coined, and while the linguistic origins may be obvious, the term was loaded with cultural implication: blacks were associated with exaggerated sexuality and were deemed to be "morally and aesthetically inferior to high German culture."¹⁶ Nazi polemics used four main arguments to justify their denunciation of jazz culture: it had originated from the United States and was therefore decidedly un-German, the rhythm of typified jazz was unsuitable for marching, the use of the German-manufactured saxophone meant that the German musical instruments industry became involved, and the elements of black culture and origin infused in

¹³ Levi, 35

¹⁴ Kater, 21-22

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 22

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 19

the music were corrupting national morality.¹⁷ Although these arguments may have been flawed, it was enough for Nazi supporters to latch on to in order to justify their attack on the jazz industry. Jazz and swing did not fit with the monotonous and controlled atmosphere that the Nazi party was trying to promote: the dancing was too loose, the rhythms too syncopated, the lyrics contrary to Nazi values. Extremists even believed that blacks and Jews were using jazz music as part of a larger attack on German society. Blacks were thought to be using the “sexual ingredient” of jazz music naively without any planning or purpose, as they were not considered to have the brain capacity to properly strategize.¹⁸ The Jews, who were thought to have more brain capacity but use it for evil, were then blamed for taking that ingredient and arranging it to systematically target and seduce German women and girls as part of a larger plot.¹⁹ In reaction to these convictions, Nazi leaders put considerable effort into limiting the amount of jazz and swing which reached the public ear. Nazi decrees put in place very specific limits and qualifications for jazz and swing bands, banning anything that they found to be especially non-Aryan. The following is an excerpt from a ban promoted by a Nazi gauleiter in Bohemia:

1. Pieces in foxtrot rhythm (so-called swing) are not to exceed 20% of the repertoire of light orchestras and dance bands.
2. In this so-called jazz type repertoire, preference is to be given to compositions in a major key and to lyrics expressing joy in life rather than Jewishly gloomy lyrics;
3. As to tempo, preference is also to be given to brisk compositions over slow ones (so-called blues); however, the pace must not exceed a certain degree of allegro, commensurate with the Aryan sense of discipline and moderation. On no account will Negroid excesses in tempo (so-called hot jazz) or in solo performances (so-called breaks) be tolerated;
4. So-called jazz compositions may contain at most 10% syncopation; the remainder must consist of a natural legato movement devoid of the hysterical rhythmic reverses

¹⁷ Kater., 31-32

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 32

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 32-33

characteristic of the barbarian races and conducive to dark instincts alien to the German people (so-called riffs);

5. Strictly prohibited is the use of instruments alien to the German spirit (so-called cowbells, flexatone, brushes, etc.) as well as all mutes which turn the noble sound of wind and brass instruments into a Jewish-Freemasonic yowl (so-called wa-wa, hat, etc.)²⁰

Beyond simply putting limits and guidelines in place for how this music could be played, the Nazis used these decrees as a vessel for their political propaganda. The strong wording regarding non-Aryans propagates the party's outlandish hatred and fear of the 'other,' which came to permeate German culture. Their words were intended to scare Jews and other targeted peoples out of the music industry and to stop the production and performance of such music; however, jazz musicians and dancers were determined to not let this fear inhibit their practice and celebration of culture. Jazz culture was still going strong, and as Nazi leaders recognized this, they began to approach it from a different angle.

Nazi leaders understood the power of music, and they used it to their advantage in spreading their message to the public. Music, especially jazz and swing, was an enormous part of Germany's cultural identity, and the Nazis recognized that it was an important tool for maintaining their reputation and making a good impression on the German people. This meant that music was central to Nazi propaganda and administration of cultural affairs.²¹ Accordingly, Nazi control extended beyond censorship and controlling public availability to forming Nazi-sanctioned propaganda bands and orchestras, which played popular music thought to promote Nazi values. Ironically, despite Nazi disapproval of jazz and swing music, it was popular enough that it was to their advantage to repurpose it as propaganda. It was out of this idea that Joseph

²⁰ Skvorecky, Josef. *The Bass Saxophone*. New Jersey: The Ecco Press, 1994. 8-9

²¹ Potter, 1

Goebbels created the Templin Orchestra.²² Later re-named ‘Charlie and his Orchestra,’ it consisted of the best jazz musicians in Europe, who played swing music as accompaniment for parody lyrics, which poked fun at Americans and their allies.²³ They would perform covers of traditional popular music, usually with the first verse untouched but with subsequent lyrics re-written to act as blatant Nazi propaganda, assuring people that Germany was winning the war, and that Churchill was a “drunken megalomaniac who hid in the cellars at night to avoid German bombs.”²⁴ The smash hit “Little Sir Echo,” for example, was performed with the following lyrics: “Poor Mr. Churchill, how do you do?/Hello... Hello.../Your famous convoys are not coming through/Hello.../German U boats are making you sore.../You’re a nice little fellow, but by now you should know/That you never can win this war.”²⁵ After the British Prime Minister, the Jews, unsurprisingly, were a favorite target. Lyrics to covers such as “Makin’ Whoopee” blamed the Jews for the war, singing of “Another war, another profit/Another Jewish business trick.”²⁶ Interestingly enough, the music was not meant for the German public, as it still employed rhythms and musical techniques which were condemned by the Nazi party. Rather, it was meant to target the Allied war effort, sending political messages and spreading Nazi thought to a wider and perhaps unsuspecting audience by “polluting the airwaves.”²⁷ Any Germans caught listening to it were subject to severe punishment. Additionally, members of the Orchestra

²² Dash, Mike. “Hitler’s Very Own Hot Jazz Band.” Smithsonian.com. Published May 17 2012.

²³ Willets, Ralph. "Hot Swing and the Dissolute Life: Youth, Style, and Popular Music in Europe 1939-49." *Popular Music*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (May, 1989): 157-163. Cambridge University Press, JSTOR. 157

²⁴ Dash, Mike. “Hitler’s Very Own Hot Jazz Band.”

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Daoust, Phil. "Swingtime for Hitler." *The Guardian*. Published Oct. 27 2004.

²⁷ *ibid.*

were not necessarily Nazi supporters; some even qualified as Jewish according to Nazi race laws, and some were Gypsies, Freemasons, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, and other groups of people who were targeted by Nazi efforts.²⁸ For them, playing this music was the lesser of two evils, an easy way out of fighting in the war or doing forced labor. Czech accordionist Kamil Behounek, who was drafted as an arranger for the orchestra, commented, "my mates were filling shells—I was making music. I don't see that that is any worse."²⁹ Most of these musicians insisted after the war that they never heard or understood the English lyrics which were being put to their music, they were simply doing what they were being asked to do.³⁰

Despite Nazi efforts, jazz and swing grew to be the most popular music of the day, and the culture fostered by this music continued to flourish. Jazz clubs stayed open and youth groups formed, despite Nazi condemnation, and by the simple act of continuing to play they became a source of passive resistance against the Nazi regime. Jazz did not preach any particular politics; however, because the Nazis were so vocal about their opposition of the practice, the simple act of frequenting a jazz club was an assertion of disagreement with Nazi politics. For some, the politics stopped there. Others, especially young fans, took a more active role. They were appalled by the Hitler Youth service, and many dodged it for as long as they could, until it became mandatory.³¹ These young people found community in their act of noncompliance, and out of this community came several youth groups, including the Swing Youth and the Edelwiess Pirates. These groups looked and functioned very differently from each other, but their

²⁸ Dash, Mike. "Hitler's Very Own Hot Jazz Band."

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Kater, 96-97

underlying purpose was the same: to join together as youth who were evading the Nazi regime, and to find community through music. Music and dance were growing increasingly popular as social activities, and these groups, especially the Swing Youth, used that social aspect to create and strengthen their community. The Swing Youth were children from wealthier families and elite schools, who dressed like middle class Americans and delighted in speaking English and adopting American nicknames and customs. They would have private parties where they would jitterbug or listen to forbidden jazz music on the radio, or they would meet at city bars or cafes which still tolerated jazz and swing music.³² Other groups similar to the Swing Youth formed, often as members of jazz or swing clubs. These groups of youth all defied Nazi injunctions passively, however, their active resistance was limited to occasional low-consequence brawls with the Hitler Youth.³³ They did not even necessarily oppose the war. Their goal was to create community and celebrate identity, not to overthrow the Nazi regime.

The Edelwiess Pirates, although they were created with the same intention as the Swing Youth, looked and functioned quite differently. They were typically ages fourteen to seventeen, as those were the ages between required education and required service to the country, and they were generally less affluent than their counterparts. They dressed in what would today be considered something along the lines of early bohemian fashion, and their badge was a small Edelwiess flower concealed behind a lapel, hence their name.³⁴ Although they were less directly involved in the jazz and swing scene than the Swing Youth, they still formed a strong community through their forbidden music. They spent time in nature, away from the prying eyes of adults

³² Willett, 159

³³ *ibid.*, 160

³⁴ *ibid.*, 158

and government officials, and they would go on hikes, attend meetings in the countryside, and play music together.³⁵ The music they chose was often commercial hits or traditional folk and hiking songs, but they would write new lyrics to protest the political regime that surrounded them. The instruments they chose, which were traditional instruments such as the lute and guitar, also served to mock the Hitler Youth movement by ironically mimicking their government-approved music.³⁶ But the Pirates' acts of resistance did not stop there: unlike the Swing Youth, they took a much more active role in the resistance movement. Beyond petty crimes such as slashing tires or leering at members of the Hitler Youth, they hid escapees, deserters and vulnerable individuals from Nazi searches. They were also known to assault Nazis in the street, and they even organized assassination attempts and killed the chief of the Cologne Gestapo.³⁷ The Edelwiess Pirates were more than just a community of young people—they were an organized way for youth to express their anger toward the Nazi regime and to do their part to fight against it.

There were, of course, those who thought that the resistance of the Edelwiess Pirates and other youth groups was unproductive, or even counterproductive. Professor Perry Biddiscombe wrote a criticism of the Edelwiess Pirates in 1995 which argued that “the *Edelwiess* was nearly useless to the Allied war effort.”³⁸ Biddiscombe states that Pirates lacked the maturity to adopt political goals which directly opposed those of the Nazi government, and that the group

³⁵ Willett, 158

³⁶ *ibid.*, 158

³⁷ *ibid.*, 161

³⁸ Biddiscombe, Perry. “‘The Enemy of our Enemy’: A View of the Edelwiess Piraten from the British and American Archives.” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Jan., 1995): pp 37-63. Sage Publications, Ltd., JSTOR, 40.

itself lacked a common goal or any organization to their criminal acts.³⁹ Since much of the historical records from the time were screened through a National Socialist lens, the petty and less than impactful actions of the Edelweiss Pirates were naturally blown out of proportion and even vilified.⁴⁰ However, none of the jazz groups which formed during this period were intended to be organized efforts to oppose the Nazi agenda. Rather, they were simply communities of young people with a common interest, who wanted an outlet to enjoy and express their appreciation for the music and the culture which Nazi policy was attempting to eradicate. These communities proved to be “central to the existential creation of an identity”⁴¹ for young German jazz fans. As was explained by an anonymous German writer who had participated in the youth jazz movement, “everything for us was this world of great longing, Western life, democracy—everything was connected—and connected through jazz.”⁴² The clubs were a way for German youth to hold on to their culture through the trials of World War II, to find joy in their community and their music. The resistance movement that arose within those groups was spurred by their passion and their anger, and was just another way in which they acted upon their common interests. Thus, the jazz and swing culture was the common aspect of the youth resistance, the passion which brought together these youth and gave them a platform to express their political beliefs.

German jazz reached its prime, the height of its popularity, just as the Nazis were attempting to suppress it. Against all odds, in the midst of hatred and fear, jazz music did exactly

³⁹ Biddiscombe, 37-38

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 39

⁴¹ Willett, 160

⁴² *ibid.*, 160

what it was not supposed to do: flourish. In the midst of divisiveness and conflict, jazz and swing brought Germans together and led them to find community, providing an escape from the mess of the world that surrounded them. Even if jazz truly “had no politics at all,”⁴³ even if the musicians and the clubs were not waging war on the Nazi regime, simply participating in the culture which was so frowned upon was an act of passive resistance. The popularity of jazz music declined in Germany following the end of World War II, but music everywhere is still being used as a symbol of hope and unity. Music is used across the world to bring people together and create community in the midst of divisive times. The ability of musicians to continue their work when the odds are against them speaks to the power of the art, and the importance which it holds in so many lives. The effect of the jazz movement under Hitler’s rule was proving this resilience, asserting that music and community is stronger than hatred. Traditional jazz lyrics represent love and beauty, while the language of Nazi proclamations and propaganda such as those examined in this paper are the antithesis of such messages, as they promote hate and exclusion. Reading from a modern perspective, it is possible to see that Nazi leaders used decrees and orders to promote their cause by instilling a fear of the so-called “enemy” into their audience. Today, these methods seem drastic and quite blatant, to say the least. At the time, however, their success speaks to the fact that their manipulative methods were not as obvious to the public as they might be today. In today’s political climate, it is interesting and important to examine times like these in history when propaganda was being spread through every method possible, when people would go to extremes to promote their cause or to protect themselves. It raises the question: if people truly believed the Nazi message that was being

⁴³ Kater, 97

spread through propaganda such as the less-than-subtle lyrics to Charlie and his Orchestra's music, what else is believable? What else is believed right now that might be examined in the future, just as this paper examines the politics of World War II? What needs to be taken away from this research is not that jazz music was popular under the Third Reich. It is rather that music is and historically has been a vessel for promoting change and asserting an opinion, forming community and banding together. In a way, both the Nazis and the jazz community were taking advantage of this power. Anne Frank stated wisely that no one should have the power to express their thoughts taken away from them—as she was writing that, jazz musicians throughout Nazi-controlled Europe were using that same conviction as motivation to continue practicing their music, despite setbacks and even threats. Thus, jazz music served as an indicator of the resistance to Nazi rule, and provided an opportunity for resisters to provide hope and community which was so important during the oppressive time of the Third Reich

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