

# Moral Outrage and Musical Corruption: White Educators' Responses to the "Jazz Problem"

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## Abstract

*More than a musical genre, jazz in the 1920s was viewed by critics and supporters alike as a type of lifestyle, one that frequently led to drinking, dancing, and "petting." Much to the horror of older generations, white young people were particularly drawn to jazz and its "hot rhythms." Secondary school teachers and administrators took up the formidable task of persuading youth of jazz's morally corrupting influences. I argue that, in the first half of the decade, such educators instituted curricular and various informal policies designed to replace jazz, universally associated with black musicians, with more "wholesome" European-originated alternatives. By the latter part of the decade, however, most educators admitted a grudging acceptance of jazz's permanence and abandoned their efforts to convince students of its iniquity.*

Like many 1920s social critics, *Ladies Home Journal* editor John McMahon felt a profound sense of anxiety about jazz, its associated vices, and the appeal of each to young people. In 1922, he contributed a series of articles to his magazine outlining the threats he believed jazz posed to respectable society, with particular attention to youth. For one such article, "Unspeakable Jazz Must Go!" McMahon quoted a dance instructor who believed, "It is degrading. It lowers all the moral standards. Unlike liquor, a great deal of its harm is direct and immediate. But it also leads to undesirable things. The jazz is too often followed by the joy-ride . . . . This strikes especially at the youth of the nation, and the consequences are almost too obvious to be detailed."<sup>1</sup> Such

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<sup>1</sup>John R. McMahon, "Unspeakable Jazz Must Go!" *Ladies Home Journal* 34 (December 1921): 115.

concerns not only reference now-standard Jazz Age tropes of dance, alcohol, and an increasingly recognizable youth culture, but also suggest the inseparability of such vices. McMahon went on to applaud the handful of cities that had taken action against such “disgusting” jazz dances, though he lamented how many young flappers were beyond “reform.” Such alarmist calls to protect young people from jazz and its corrupting forces had become increasingly common by the early 1920s. One high school teacher evoked a certain notion of responsibility many white secondary school teachers felt about the recognizably black genre, that “[jazz] is a disease that will have to be rooted out of the young folks if we are to return to the safety and sanity of pre-war years.”<sup>2</sup>

Historians have pointed to changes in dress, sexuality, and dance as evidence of a developing and uniquely identifiable youth culture that eschewed any lingering Victorian ethos.<sup>3</sup> Jazz, a genre created by black musicians, served as the clearest single cultural dividing line between young people and adults. Referencing one manifestation of this generational divide, dance, Paula Fass writes in her classic study: “Because popular forms of dancing were intimate and contorting, and the music was rhythmic and throbbing, it called down upon itself all the venom of offended respectability.”<sup>4</sup> More synoptic studies not focusing solely on the 1920s similarly cast the decade as a tipping point in adult/youth relations, a decade of widespread recognition that the attitudes and beliefs of young people and adults were not consistently aligned.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the role teachers played as safeguards against this spread of “modernism” has received comparatively little attention. Instead, research has emphasized efforts of *external* actors to ensure schools counteract “acids of

<sup>2</sup>Frederick Neil Innes, “The Musical Possibilities of the Wind Band,” *Music Supervisors’ Journal* 10, no. 5 (May 1, 1924): 42.

<sup>3</sup>At its heart, Victorianism rested on various identifying characteristics: a clear conception of whiteness, a near obsession for maintaining the clearly defined social order, female modesty in dress and deportment, and the centrality of Christianity in people’s lives. Jazz was, in many ways, the opposite: a justification for female “immodest dress,” plainly sexualized dance steps, unabashedly secular, and regularly alcohol-fueled. Court Carney correctly argues in his history of early jazz, “The shift from Victorianism to Modernism formed the context in which Americans reacted to jazz music. In general, Victorianism created a dichotomy separating controlled human instincts from natural impulses, and modernism strove to reunite these two forces.” Court Carney, *Cuttin’ Up: How Early Jazz Got America’s Ear* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2009), 129. See also Stanley Coben, *Rebellion against Victorianism: The Impetus for Cultural Change in 1920s America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup>Paula S. Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 301.

<sup>5</sup>Steven Mintz, *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 213–33; Kelly Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girls’ Culture, 1920–1945* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 24–43, 98–117; Joseph M. Hawes, *Children between the Wars: American Childhood, 1920–1940* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997); and Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 254–64.

modernity” in the 1920s—and, indeed, throughout the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Still, the ways teachers and administrators used their positions to try and influence young people’s attitudes, values, and beliefs have been less adequately examined.<sup>7</sup> My focus on the efforts of these teachers and administrators indicates the response schools deliberately encouraged white youth to make in an environment of shifting urban demographics.

This study describes that response. Drawing mainly on public statements by educators published in the popular press, I describe a brief period of deliberate critique and attempt at correction of jazz culture during the late 1910s and early 1920s. This effort was relatively short-lived, essentially ending in failure. Specifically, I argue that the response of white teachers and administrators to the “jazz problem” shifted from an initial policy of actively attempting to persuade young people of jazz’s iniquity to an eventual grudging acceptance of its durability.<sup>8</sup> Beginning in the late 1910s, white educators implemented formal curriculum changes and informal policies designed to convince their students of jazz’s depravity, with particular concern for girls. Yet by the middle of the decade, as lingering hopes of jazz’s impermanence dissipated, frustrated educators began abandoning those efforts.

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<sup>6</sup>For instance, see Adam Laats, “Red Schoolhouse, Burning Cross: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and Educational Reform,” *History of Education Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (August 2012), 323–50; Joseph Moreau, *Schoolbook Nation: Conflicts over American History Textbooks from the Civil War to the Present* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 137–74. The phrase “acids of modernity” comes from Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 148.

<sup>7</sup>As various historians have pointed out, by the early 1920s, many academics were in outright opposition to Victorianism’s unquestioned social order. However, this increase of anti-Victorianist thinking was not synonymous with condoning “modern” behavior with young people. See B. Edward McClellan, *Moral Education in America: Schools and the Shaping of Character from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999), 57; Roderick Nash, *The Nervous Generation: American Thought, 1917–1930* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally, 1970). For examples of increasingly recognizable differences between young people and adults on matters of dating, dance, and fashion in the 1920s, see Lawrence J. Nelson, *Rumors of Indiscretion: The University of Missouri “Sex Questionnaire” Scandal in the Jazz Age* (Columbia, SC: University of Missouri Press, 2003); Jeffrey P. Moran, *Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 68–97; Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 13–27, 77–81; Ann Louise Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance: From the Puritans to the Present* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 261–312; Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 186–241; and Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin’ Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890–1930* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 233–66.

<sup>8</sup>I borrow the phrase “jazz problem” from a 1924 issue of the music education magazine *The Etude*. The full title read, “The Jazz Problem: Opinions of Prominent Men and Musicians.” The magazine’s editor wrote that the music had been an “accursed annoyance to teachers for years,” before promising neutrality in his reporting. James F. Cooke, “Where the Etude Stands on Jazz,” *The Etude*, 42, no. 8 (August 1924), 1.

This article develops over three parts. The first section lays out the jazz problem, paying particular attention to the relationships between race and American culture and how these relationships impacted the spread of jazz. After sketching the broader outline of the jazz problem, the article turns to providing a close analysis of Chicago Superintendent Peter Mortenson's (1918–1923) attempts to combat the perceived dangers of jazz. By using the lens of Chicago and its key actors, this article provides insights not only about a consequential city and school system, but also a way by which the national jazz problem can be studied in local context. Indeed, as one contemporary observer noted, Chicago was the unofficial capital of the “jazz-spotted middle west.”<sup>9</sup> Further, its school system was a prime example of the new urban school systems that were working out a number of structural, curricular, and cultural issues that faced the newly modernized and progressive public schools.<sup>10</sup> To complement the second section's depth of inquiry, the final section will showcase the variety of pedagogical responses to the jazz problem, providing a sense of the various curricular and extracurricular attempts white educators employed to dissuade young people from their interest in jazz. Though it is difficult to deduce consistent patterns or methods that educators used to attack jazz, this article offers insights into white teachers' and administrators' concerns and, ultimately, provides reasons as to why they were unsuccessful in containing the jazz problem. And while opponents did not universally acknowledge race, their language condemning jazz often betrayed prejudicial attitudes.

## The Jazz Problem

Critics and enthusiasts alike in the 1920s overwhelmingly agreed that jazz had developed as the province of black musicians.<sup>11</sup> Though a

<sup>9</sup>John R. McMahon, “Our Jazz-Spotted Middle West,” *Ladies Home Journal* 39 (February 1922): 38.

<sup>10</sup>Mortensen was prominent among superintendents and other educational bureaucrats who historians David B. Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot referred to as the “Managers of Virtue.” David B. Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, *Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1982). One observer in the *National School Digest* noted, “Mortensen belongs to school men this year. He is the official host of the big meeting of superintendents next month. More correctly speaking, he is the spokesman for the city of Chicago, which will play host. The kind of man he is will influence all of us, and affects the benefits which the country will gain from the largest gathering of . . . educators . . . the world has ever seen.” “What Manner of Man Is Mortenson?” *National School Digest* 42, no. 5 (January 1922), 271.

<sup>11</sup>A small number of observers attributed the music to other groups. Perhaps most prominently, the music journalist and one-time *Harvard Music Review* editor Gilbert Elliot Jr. believed jazz had Spanish origins. He wrote, “In looking over some of this modern Spanish music one would be inclined to think that its authors were intimately acquainted with the intricacies of our rhythms . . . of which more . . . have also in some

universally agreed upon creation story has eluded scholars, some general facts are clear. The music developed as black musicians in the South and various points in the Midwest combined some semblance of African rhythm and European harmony.<sup>12</sup> To be sure, jazz's musical antecedent, ragtime, developed through a similar blend of musical ingredients. Yet, the relative lack of technological development limited ragtime's spread. For instance, the phonograph was prohibitively expensive and commercial radio did not appear until 1920.<sup>13</sup> The Great Migration carried jazz across the country, altering the cultural landscape by creating an increasingly permanent presence of jazz in regions outside the South.<sup>14</sup> Large urban centers, destinations for such migration, became centers of both jazz performance and racial tensions. James Grossman has evocatively written about Chicago's changing demographics: "The sounds of New Orleans jazz and Mississippi blues; styles of worship; patterns of speech: these were but the most obvious manifestations of the extent to which black southerners reshaped their cultural heritage and their new environment," though he cautions, "incidents of violence plagued Chicago race relations and the violence increased as the black population grew."<sup>15</sup>

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unknown fashion strongly influenced our jazz." Still, such views existed very much in the minority. Gilbert Elliot Jr., "Our Musical Kinship with the Spaniards," *Musical Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (July 1922): 414.

<sup>12</sup>In his famous history of early jazz, Gunther Schuller acknowledges that "the African and European lineages will become somewhat entangled." Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 4. For a more updated treatment, see Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>13</sup>The first commercial radio station, KDKA in Pittsburgh, went on air in 1920. Eighteen months later, the number of commercial stations had risen to 220. By 1930, over 900 stations existed nationwide and over 40 percent of households owned radios. In 1928, when jazz's permanence had been established, one reader wrote the *Sunday School Times*, "We hate jazz and often it is hard to get much else but that" on the radio. Douglas Carl Abrams, *Selling the Old-Time Religion: American Fundamentalists and Mass Culture, 1920–1940* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 100. Statistics come from Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Sox*, 103; and William Barlow, *Voice Over: The Making of Black Radio* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998), 19.

<sup>14</sup>Among these immigrant musicians, "Jelly Roll" Morton and Louis Armstrong famously went to Chicago while the trombonist "Kid" Ory moved west to Los Angeles in 1919, three years later making what was likely the first instrumental black jazz recording at a studio on Santa Monica Boulevard. Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff, eds., *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya: The Story of Jazz as Told by the Men Who Made It* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955); and Burton W. Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz: Music, Race, and Culture in Urban America* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

<sup>15</sup>James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago: Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 262, 178; Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: the Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010); Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010). Eileen Southern similarly refers to Chicago in the 1920s as the "capital of classic jazz in the New Orleans tradition." Eileen Southern, *The Music*

Jazz's origin among black musicians intrigued many white young people. Kathy Ogren correctly notes in her history on the "meaning" of jazz during the 1920s that the decade was the first in which the music of black musicians dominated white youths' musical interests. Jazz's origins among black musicians particularly appealed to young whites who wished to become jazz musicians. For these youths, jazz represented an exciting musical evolution, one that eschewed static marches and sentimental popular songs for "hot" rhythm. Members of the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, a popular early jazz group, were not shy to articulate their musical influences. One teenage member explained, "We did our best to copy the colored music . . . . We did the best we could, but naturally we couldn't play the real colored style."<sup>16</sup> In Indianapolis, a young "Hoagy" Carmichael similarly received his first jazz piano lessons at the downtown home of Reginald Duval Sr. While walking around the city, Carmichael heard Duval practicing in his living room and then sat on the porch to listen. Duval invited the young Carmichael in and offered to be his teacher—the beginning a valuable teacher-student relationship for Carmichael.<sup>17</sup> Carmichael's friend, the trumpeter Bix Beiderbecke, spoke openly of listening to black musicians in dance halls and steamships and then trying to "outdo" them with his trumpet playing, though complained he did not have the true "jungle beat" in his pulse.<sup>18</sup>

Jazz also appealed to white nonmusicians who saw various jazz dances as welcome outlets for youthful energy. For them, jazz dancing represented a welcome alternative to "staid and conservative" adult-sanctioned dances, such as the waltz.<sup>19</sup> This interest was on display

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of *Black Americans: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 378. Similarly, an early jazz history text suggested "Many [whites] detected in its carefree melodies a symbolic language of satire in which the embittered Negro was expressing his dislike for his white neighbors." Winthrop Sargeant, *Jazz: Hot and Hybrid* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), 26.

<sup>16</sup>Kathy J. Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution: Twenties America and the Meaning of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 11, 53. For discussion of white Broadway dancers appropriating dance steps from black teachers, see Danielle Robinson, "Oh You Black Bottom": Appropriation, Authenticity, and Opportunity in the Jazz Dance Teaching of 1920s New York," *Dance Research Journal* 38, no. 1/2 (Summer–Winter 2006), 19–42.

<sup>17</sup>Hoagy Carmichael, John Edward Hasse, and Stephen Longstreet, *The Stardust Road and Sometimes I Wonder: The Autobiography of Hoagy Carmichael* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1999), 16–29. For analysis of the influence of black musicians on Carmichael's compositions, see Roger Hewitt, "Black through White: Hoagy Carmichael and the Cultural Reproduction of Racism," *Popular Music* 3, no. 1 (1983): 33–50. For analysis of the influence of black performers on young white jazz musicians, see William Howland Kenney, *Chicago Jazz: A Cultural History, 1904–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3–116; and William Howland Kenney, *Jazz on the River* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 115–40.

<sup>18</sup>Carmichael, Hasse, and Longstreet, *The Stardust Road*, 29.

<sup>19</sup>Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance*, 302.

during a 1922 dispute about radio licensing fees. In an effort to increase revenue, the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) began requiring that radio stations pay royalties when playing recordings that used ASCAP-copyrighted music. Secondary school students responded by expressing frustration that stations might have to limit or eliminate the amount of airtime devoted to jazz.<sup>20</sup> One fifteen-year-old boy suggested students need jazz music as a corrective for dull algebra lessons. Jazz music at the end of the school day provided an adrenaline rush after the drudgery of classes. The boy went on to swear the next day's lessons went much better after "listening to a bass drum beat the rhythm of a popular song." Another boy reported he was "frightened to death" after hearing stations may replace jazz fox-trots with speeches and jokes.<sup>21</sup> He said listening to people talk on the radio did not provide any needed relief after listening to teachers talk all day during school.

White adults provided jazz a less welcoming reception, not only condemning jazz's supposed inferior musical quality, but linguistically connecting the music to a type of unrefined blackness. Jazz opponents regularly attached similar terms like "primitive" that referenced jazz's musical origins among black musicians. In an article on how the Italian island of Trieste could "cure" the jazz habit, one *Chicago Daily Tribune* journalist referenced "oscillatum Ethiopius," though denied the term was prejudicial, excusing it as a scientific term.<sup>22</sup> One Methodist preacher made a particularly common assertion, likening jazz dancing to "jungle antics."<sup>23</sup> Others applied a seemingly contradictory terminology, citing jazz as a uniquely "modern" invention. University of Chicago sociologist William I. Thomas argued that "modern [jazz] dances are disgusting," while prominent music journalist James Cooke referred to the "modern music" as aesthetically "upside down."<sup>24</sup>

While today it may seem problematic referring to jazz as simultaneously "modern" and "primitive," at the time it was a common practice. One university president even used the two together, complaining of the "untutored savage" and his "modern music."<sup>25</sup> Both terms embodied a sense of pernicious frenetic energy found both in the pace of

<sup>20</sup>Barlow, *Voice Over: The Making of Black Radio*, 21–22.

<sup>21</sup>Genevieve Forbes, "Copyright Bar Stirs Radio Fans' Static," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 15, 1923, 17.

<sup>22</sup>Larry Rue, "Trieste Has Guaranteed Cure for Jazz Habit," *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, April 9, 1922, sec. 8, 17.

<sup>23</sup>Ralph G. Giordano, *Satan in the Dance Hall: Rev. John Roach Straton, Social Dancing, and Morality in 1920s New York City* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 55.

<sup>24</sup>Thomas, William I. *The Unadjusted Girl: With Cases and Standpoint for Behavior Analysis*. Criminal Science Monographs. Vol. 4 (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Company, 1923).

<sup>25</sup>Moran, *Teaching Sex*, 85.

urban life (1920 was the first year more than half of Americans lived in cities) and jazz tempos. Many adults harbored simultaneously fears an increasingly urban existence was forcing young people to live at an unhealthy pace.<sup>26</sup> Such language of the “primitive” and “modern” perhaps suggests an uncomfortable familiarity many whites had with jazz.<sup>27</sup>

Jazz’s origins among black musicians further served to inflame racialized fears of sexual misdeeds, particularly involving black men and white girls. Certainly, such sentiments were not new. Yet, as the first black genre to achieve widespread popularity, the music and associated dances further stoked already extant anxieties tied to race, particularly those referencing black men and their supposed interest in white women. Musicians were not immune from such allegations. The black jazz clarinetist Buster Bailey regularly heard fears from whites that “we’d go after their women.”<sup>28</sup> More common, though, and actually more pernicious, was the worry that white girls were learning to imitate supposed unchecked black sexuality through jazz dancing. That is, critics did not condemn solely jazz dancing for its own sake (though they found it aesthetically reprehensible), but worried more about its aphrodisiac effects. An Oregon man complained, “We have bartered the courtly minuet for the syncopated rhythm of a voodoo orgy . . . the nasal whine and blare of the musical monstrosity known as ‘jazz,’” while one musician suggested jazz “has been employed by other barbaric people to simulate brutality and sensuality.”<sup>29</sup> Reformers sought to regulate the public dance hall, which “supposedly weakened moral inhibitions and led many girls astray.”<sup>30</sup> Harry O. Anderson, a prominent evangelist prone to exaggeration, claimed that some 5,000 girls turned to prostitution annually after visiting dance halls.<sup>31</sup> Viewed through such a prism, jazz dancing was evidence of moral corruption.

Black critics similarly fought the jazz problem, though not on the same terms as whites. In particular, black teachers and administrators expressed concern over the potential to “jazz up” or replace the spiritual, the song genre that developed out of slavery and addressed themes

<sup>26</sup>Ocean Howell, “Play Pays: Urban Land Politics and Playgrounds in the United States, 1900–1930,” *Journal of Urban History* 34, no. 6 (September 2008): 961–94.

<sup>27</sup>For an excellent discussion on the coexistence of primitivism and modernity, see Nancy Nenko, “Femininity, the Primitive, and Modern Urban Space: Josephine Baker in Berlin,” in *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, ed. Katharina von Ankum (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 145–61.

<sup>28</sup>Neil Leonard, *Jazz and the White Americans: The Acceptance of a New Art Form* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 39.

<sup>29</sup>“Folk Dancing Versus Jazz,” *Oregonian* (Portland, OR), June 28, 1920, 6; Leonard, *Jazz and the White Americans*, 39.

<sup>30</sup>Mary E. Odom, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 104.

<sup>31</sup>As cited in Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance*, 273.

of suffering, religion, and perseverance. The early twentieth-century black aesthetic, particularly among the middle class, held up the spiritual as the apex of musical achievement.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, jazz dancing, which emphasized individual pleasure, challenged such a community ethic. One Jackson, Mississippi, teacher summed up her colleagues' concerns about jazz's creeping secular influence: "[Jazz] is sensuous instead of spiritual; it is, therefore, destructive. Jazz music is low vibrations; it scatters our energies and we become weak . . . . Real music is spiritual; it is the breath of God."<sup>33</sup> Speaking in 1925, prominent Indianapolis music teacher Lillian Lemon was even more adamant about the need to separate the sacred and secular. In an interview with the *Chicago Defender*, she bluntly stated, "Jazz is a desecration of the Negro Spiritual."<sup>34</sup> Such responses suggest that jazz eschewed a sense of community and respectability for young people, instilling in them a lust for individual pleasure via their tawdry dances.<sup>35</sup>

Punishments for moral insubordination could be harsh for black students caught listening to or playing jazz. In Indianapolis, student Jimmy Coe was suspended from the segregated Crispus Attucks High School for two weeks after the principal caught him practicing saxophone in the school basement. Principal Lane told him, "We don't play that type of music."<sup>36</sup> Fears among black community leaders about jazz's social divisiveness extended beyond schools. In *Cayton's Monthly*, a black Republican-leaning newspaper in Seattle with a generally progressive reputation, Madge R. Cayton complained of a generational divide jazz engendered, writing "[Jazz] is a result of the savage musician's wonderful gift of progressive retarding and acceleration which is guided by his sense of ewing [*sic*]." Cayton went on to argue that jazz, which came to America from West Africa, was kept in check

<sup>32</sup> Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 227–43.

<sup>33</sup> Olive Coleman Thomas, "How to Create an Appreciation for Good Music in the Public Schools," *Mississippi Educational Journal for Teachers in Colored Schools* 3, no. 4 (February 1927): 89.

<sup>34</sup> Willis Charles Patterson, "A History of the National Association of Negro Musicians (NANM): The First Quarter Century, 1919–1943" (PhD dissertation, Wayne State University, 1993), 188.

<sup>35</sup> In his book on music and racial uplift, Lawrence Schenbeck points out another criticism unique to black jazz critics: "Many in the black intelligentsia maintained a wary distance from black popular music, in part because of its distasteful proximity to the minstrel legacy." Lawrence Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878–1943* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 131.

<sup>36</sup> Coe would have the last word, of sorts. In the mid-1980s, after a successful touring career, Coe served as Jazz Artist in Residence for the Indianapolis Public Schools. Lissa Felming May, "Early Musical Development of Selected African-American Jazz Musicians in Indianapolis in the 1930s and 1940s," *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education* 27, no. 1 (October 2005), 21–32.

during slavery, but found an audience in “impatient youth.”<sup>37</sup> In Seattle and points across the country, such critics worried jazz presented a less-than-respectable image of blackness. Jazz’s emphasis on individual corporeal pleasure potentially challenged community-building efforts taking place in black churches and fraternal organizations.<sup>38</sup> Writing in the *Pittsburgh Courier* in 1926, managing editor William G. Nunn suggested jazz, despite being “originally Negro,” was luring young people away from the church. He complained how the “jazz fervor of modern youth presents a serious problem.”<sup>39</sup> While community activism developed schools and other social organizations, jazz potentially redirected young people’s interests toward dance and drinking.<sup>40</sup>

Although criticism of jazz can be found in the black press, the present article focuses primarily on responses of white educators to jazz culture as represented in the white-dominated popular and professional presses. For both black and white critics, jazz referred not solely to a musical genre, but operated as a useful metaphor for various vices. In the 1920s, jazz became the clearest dividing line between those who sought to maintain some semblance of the fading traditional Victorian ethos and those who challenged that world view.<sup>41</sup> Detractors referenced “jazz morals” as nonmusical by-products of this multifaceted jazz problem.<sup>42</sup> One white Chicago-area teacher questioned, “One wonders if much of the looseness in speech, morals, dress and conduct that characterizes the modern age is not directly traceable to the degradation of one of the fine arts, a universal art—music. Consider the popular music of today.

<sup>37</sup>Madge R. Cayton, “The Origin of Jazz,” *Cayton’s Monthly* (Seattle), February 1, 1921, 10.

<sup>38</sup>Quintard Taylor, *The Forging of a Black Community: Seattle’s Central District from 1870 through the Civil Rights Era* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1994), 135–56.

<sup>39</sup>William G. Nunn, “Has the Negro Church Been Weighed in the Balance and Found Wanting?” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 2, 1926, 1.

<sup>40</sup>On the importance of community, see James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Vanessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>41</sup>Terminology here is inconsistent and somewhat problematic. While music and dance historians generally tend to prefer the term *Victorian* to describe critics of 1920s cultural changes, scholars focusing on emergent youth culture are more likely to use terms like *traditionalists* or *conservatives*. Examples of the former include Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz*, and Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance*, 261–312. One notable counterexample is Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution*. Such discrepancies are reminiscent of Henry May’s famous 1956 essay, “Shifting Perspectives of the 1920s.” That is, historians with differing interpretations about the decade can easily find adequate case studies to support their views. Henry F. May, “Shifting Perspectives on the 1920s,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 43, no. 3 (December 1956), 405–27.

<sup>42</sup>“Jazz morals” comes from Innes, “The Musical Possibilities of the Wind Band,” 40, 42–45, 62–64.

It consists chiefly of ragtime and jazz.”<sup>43</sup> Historians writing about the decade have similarly recognized how the meaning of jazz extended beyond music. Lawrence Levine has noted, “The primary impact jazz had was not as a form of revolt; it was . . . a medium of culture.” Others have argued how “jazz conveyed broader meaning than it does today,” and how for young people the music represented a “revolt against Victorianism.”<sup>44</sup>

### The Responses of White Chicago Educators

In early 1920s Chicago, educational leaders, teachers, and school officials waged a deliberate campaign against jazz culture. Apparently led by the city’s school superintendent, the campaign consisted of rhetorical criticism published in the press as well as a brief attempt at official sanction and behavioral modification. Educators visiting Chicago voiced similar concerns regarding jazz and young people. Speaking to Chicago high school teachers in 1922, University of Wisconsin Professor of Education Michael Vincent O’Shea sounded a rallying cry among his education colleagues about the dangerous influence jazz was having on secondary students. O’Shea reported the results of a recent study he had undertaken in twenty-two American cities about the recreational habits of young people. He concluded that jazz dancing, movies, and driving in automobiles had produced “an emotionalism on the part of boys and girls which has cut short their intellectual development.”<sup>45</sup> O’Shea rebuffed any suggestion that jazz dancing had any elements of beauty. He argued, “I contend it is simply a pose in which two persons are stacked up together with nothing but their feet to move.” As a solution, O’Shea ended his talk on a nostalgic note, referring to the “gymnastic, callisthenic, and dramatic . . . dances of our forefathers” and said “the sooner we can get back to those dances, the better it will be.”

O’Shea felt he more than adequately understood the developmental needs of youth. In addition to his work at the University of Wisconsin, he served as educational director of *Mother’s Magazine and Home Life* as well as chairing the department of education of the National Congress of Mothers and Parent-Teacher Associations. O’Shea

<sup>43</sup> Edith L. Hilderbrant, “Music Memory Contests,” *School Review* 30, no. 4 (April 1922), 300.

<sup>44</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, “Jazz and American Culture,” *Journal of American Folklore* 102, no. 403 (January–March 1989): 15; Mary Herron Dupree, “‘Jazz,’ the Critics, and American Art Music in the 1920s,” *American Music* 4, no. 3 (1986): 287; Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz*, 2.

<sup>45</sup> “Educator Says Movies and Jazz Retard Student,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 8, 1922, sec. 2, 15.

was also a prolific author and often wrote on issues regarding the health of young people.<sup>46</sup> The education professor suggested parents arrange for their children to spend time nightly with “their books or their music or something worth while [*sic*] in an intellectual way” and similarly recommended teens and adults alike find time daily for relaxation, that “there is no music so restful to many people as the lapping of the waves.”<sup>47</sup> If jazz opponents and aficionados could agree on one thing in the 1920s, it was that the music’s “hot tunes” represented the antithesis of lapping waves.

While O’Shea’s claims that jazz could “retard” students academically may have been met with some degree of skepticism, his larger anti-jazz position was common among Chicago secondary educators during the first half of the 1920s. Much of the case against jazz rested on moral grounds and the appeal of jazz dancing to impressionable youth people. Not only were the Black Bottom and the shimmy seen as lewd and inappropriate acts, the plethora of Chicago dance halls also provided opportunities for additional iniquitous behaviors, including “petting” and drinking alcohol. Edith L. Hilderbrant, a high school English teacher in the Chicago suburb of Harvey, Illinois, made this argument to her education colleagues in 1922:

Music and dancing are so closely allied that the degradation of one means the degradation of the other. Jazz music means jazz dancing. It is difficult to say which proceeds in the process of degeneration. In all probability the two move downward together. Jazz dancing means the taking of liberties . . . . The natural accompaniments of jazz dancing are slang, immodest dress, and the general lowering of moral standards.<sup>48</sup>

Lamenting such a social condition, Hilderbrant absolved students of much of the blame they faced. Instead, she primarily pointed to teachers as bearing the real responsibility for such declines in morals and manners. She suggested, “But are not educators in some sense responsible for these conditions? Youth hardly can be blamed for them. The ignorant and uninformed cannot be held altogether accountable.”<sup>49</sup> Tellingly, Hilderbrant did not pretend that students had no interest in jazz, and was willing to acknowledge the challenge and responsibility educators faced. She did not argue that the music had no appeal or that it could never attract listeners, that there could be no appealing

<sup>46</sup>Examples include the following: M. V. O’Shea and John Harvey Kellogg, *Health Habits* (New York: MacMillan, 1924); M. V. O’Shea, *First Steps in Child Training* (Chicago, IL: F. J. Drake, 1920); and M. V. O’Shea, *Dynamic Factors in Education* (New York: MacMillan, 1917).

<sup>47</sup>M. V. O’Shea, *The Trend of the Teens* (Chicago, IL: F. J. Drake, 1920), 63, 153.

<sup>48</sup>Hilderbrant, “Music Memory Contests,” 300.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 300–1.

side to jazz. Indeed, Hilderbrant was more than willing to concede the point that jazz has the ability to draw listeners in. The answer, for her, rested on an education that cultivated aesthetic taste. Youth were “ignorant and uninformed,” attracted to jazz principally because they had not learned how to appreciate better music. Jazz preyed on the uneducated and unrefined. For Hilderbrant, jazz was a “tantalizing” music and children could be especially susceptible to its lure.

Hilderbrant also identified the perceived inevitable connection between the music and other vices, especially sexual ones. The jazz problem for Hilderbrant and other teachers revolved primarily around the potential for sexual activity. In her calculation, young people came across as helpless against the pernicious “natural” decline in morality that accompanied jazz dancing. The danger was not necessarily in jazz itself, but the various immoral acts that often swirled around it. If there was jazz dancing, various other undesirable acts would unavoidably also be present, not the least of which was an increase of revealing clothing among young women. Stripped of rational thought, and to a degree physically aroused, some form of sexual activity became the natural consequence. Hilderbrant’s “natural accompaniments of jazz dancing” were the predictable results of the sort of torrid thoughts and feelings jazz dancing created.

Such concerns overlapped with those of Chicago’s highest official in education, Peter A. Mortenson, superintendent from 1918 to 1923 and one of the country’s “leading educational authorities.”<sup>50</sup> During his tenure, Mortenson enjoyed a reputation as a progressive education reformer. The *Journal of Education* suggested his initials “P. A.” might stand for “Progressive Attitude,” before citing progressive bonafides such as speaking out about the necessary role schools play in a healthy democracy and recommending English teachers find some “happiness for the children.”<sup>51</sup> In another characteristically progressive act, Mortenson supported his Los Angeles counterpart during negotiations over raising teacher salaries. Speaking to the *Los Angeles School Journal*, he said, “The teachers must be provided for properly” and “The nation will judge Los Angeles by what it does for its teachers.”<sup>52</sup> Mortenson also made protecting students from immoral cultural threats a focus of his tenure as superintendent. Among his earliest recommendations, he acted to eliminate teaching German from schools during World War I. In 1918, his first year in the position, Superintendent Mortenson persuaded the school board to ban teaching the

<sup>50</sup>Peter Mortenson, “Chicago’s Superintendent on the Los Angeles Salary Issue,” *Los Angeles School Journal* 3, no. 36 (May 10, 1920): 10.

<sup>51</sup>“What Manner of Man Is Mortenson?”

<sup>52</sup>Mortenson, “Chicago’s Superintendent on the Los Angeles Salary Issue.”

“language of the hun,” an increasingly common practice at the time.<sup>53</sup> Mortenson’s move to forbid German instruction apparently did not violate his self-imposed rule to “avoid unprofitable controversy.”<sup>54</sup> Yet while Mortenson saw the German language as a worrisome external threat, jazz was a homegrown menace. As a “manager of virtue,” Mortenson avoided crass comments about jazz, though his statements did not preclude racial prejudices.<sup>55</sup>

At the first 1922 Board of Education meeting, Mortenson took advantage of his bully pulpit to speak out against jazz. Following an announcement about extending emergency authority for Chicago Public Library branches in high schools, Mortenson spoke passionately about the need to address “generally accepted principles” of student behavior.<sup>56</sup> What followed was a list of regulations meant to rid students of their “modern” tendencies. The list, Mortenson added, “evolved” from his discussions with deans and high school principals about problems in student behavior both during the school day and outside of school hours. These problems included “joy riding,” smoking, jazz dancing, and “dress extremes.”<sup>57</sup> Specifically with respect to jazz and jazz dancing, Mortenson said:

We feel that no effort on our part can counteract this evil unless the parents realize the danger and help up maintain the standards . . . . We believe that jazz music has done much to corrupt dancing and to make it impossible for young people to learn the more refined forms of dancing, at the same time violating their taste for good music.<sup>58</sup>

The superintendent’s suggestions were warmly received by the school board, which declared there existed “too much jazz dancing, too much auto riding, and too much cigarete [*sic*] smoking among high school students.”<sup>59</sup> The board unanimously accepted Mortenson’s statement about the inherent relationship between jazz

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<sup>53</sup>“School Board Bans Teaching Language of Hun: Favors Superintendent’s Idea Regarding German in Elementary Work,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 7, 1918, 1. See also Jeffrey Mirel, *Patriotic Pluralism: Americanization, Education, and European Immigrants* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 59–60, 109–10; and Paul Ramsey, *Bilingual Public Schooling in the United States: A History of America’s “Polyglot Boardinghouse”* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 142–61.

<sup>54</sup>“Educational Sanity,” *Journal of Education* 91, no. 3 (Jan. 15, 1920): 71.

<sup>55</sup>Tyack and Hansot, *Managers of Virtue*, 127, 69, 204.

<sup>56</sup>Louis S. Wilk, “Board Meeting Minutes of January 25, 1922,” *Chicago Board of Education Archives*, Unboxed Reference File.

<sup>57</sup>Genevieve Forbes, “Mortenson Asks Parents to Curb Student Revels,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 26, 1922, 15.

<sup>58</sup>Louis S. Wilk, “Board Meeting Minutes of January 25, 1922.”

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*

dancing and various immoral activities. Acting to curtail the jazz problem as a whole served as a more efficient method to influence students' behavior than addressing each vice individually. As a solution, Mortenson, again, with the deans' and principals' input, suggested students "keep early hours" and only attend school-organized dances. To help with implementation, the superintendent suggested, and the board approved, some 45,000 fliers outlining the district's behavioral concerns be made up and taken home for students and parents to review and 500 additional posters be placed in secondary schools.<sup>60</sup>

Other Chicago progressives similarly acted to contain the jazz problem, though not necessarily as forcefully as Mortenson. Such critics often targeted the public dance hall—an increasingly popular, yet controversial, institution among Chicago's young people. Among them, Jane Addams helped organize a series of 1924 community singing sessions and general welfare discussions that the *Chicago Daily Tribune* described as an "antidote" to young people's interest in jazz. The newspaper reported such activities could counteract the "jazz spirit and youthful cynicism of modern boys and girls."<sup>61</sup> For Addams, such an anti-jazz attitude was consistent with her views about young people and social dancing, as described in *Twenty Years in Hull-House*: "Young people, well-meaning but impatient of control, become the easy victims of the worst type of public dance halls, and of even darker places, whose purposes are hidden under music and dancing."<sup>62</sup> Such an appraisal was not wholly incorrect. One high school boy bragged about his sexual prowess to a young Saul Alinsky, then a student at the University of Chicago and researching the city's omnipresent dance halls. The boy said there would be "no virgins left" in the city if he had a car and could take young girls on "joy rides" following dances.<sup>63</sup>

Yet, unlike other jazz critics with less of a bully pulpit, Mortenson used his position as superintendent to ensure his message was heard. His indiscriminate use of the word *jazz*—referring both to the genre as well as the litany of unacceptable behaviors that it was associated with—found a receptive audience in school parents. Framing schools as "the greatest source for good," Mortenson asked parents to educate themselves about possible solutions for the vices that were commonly

<sup>60</sup>Forbes, "Mortenson Asks Parents to Curb Student Revels." The precise number of fliers printed up is debated. Another contemporary source, one perhaps prone to exaggeration, placed the number at fifty-eight thousand. Phillip Yarrow, ed., *Fighting the Debauchery of Our Girls and Boys* (Chicago, IL: self-published, 1923), 169.

<sup>61</sup>"Plan 'Sings' as Jazz Antidote among Youth," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 9, 1924, 5.

<sup>62</sup>Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House: with Autobiographical Notes* (New York: Signet Classics, 1999), 229.

<sup>63</sup>Saul Alinsky and Constance Weinberger, "The Public Dance Hall," 1928, Ernest W. Burgess Papers, box 126, folder 10, University of Chicago Special Collections.

associated with jazz.<sup>64</sup> These included limiting such behaviors in their homes as well as chaperoning school dances so appropriate decorum could be maintained there as well. Yet, Mortenson did not direct his criticisms at boys and girls equally. Instead, Mortenson singled out female students and their dress and dance habits, not mincing words in his call for reform. The superintendent asserted jazz dancing “has done much to break down the respect for womanhood” and went on to call out high school girls for “dress extremes,” questioning why their mothers would allow such immodesty.<sup>65</sup> Mortenson stopped short of calling for any universal set of rules—such as the acceptable length of a girl’s skirt—instead appealing for “common sense” on the part of parents, teachers, and students.

Mortenson’s crusade did not endear him to the students whose attitudes he sought to influence. In fact, reaction from students to Mortenson’s claims was overwhelmingly negative. Female students particularly complained they were being unfairly singled out in the superintendent’s critique, that similar charges were not leveled against boys. High school girls countered that the superintendent misunderstood constructions of morality in students’ lives, that he had no real basis to make such claims. One Hyde Park student argued, “Because a dance is freakish doesn’t make it immoral.”<sup>66</sup> Others seemed genuinely hurt by the superintendent’s argument and characterizations. One girl went so far as to say, “Girls aren’t wicked as superintendent Mortenson thinks.” Such student responses reflect the undeniable gendered standard that characterized Mortenson’s condemnations of Chicago boys and girls and the changes in dance and fashion associated with jazz. Only girls were critiqued for “immodest dress” and the problem of new dress styles marked a restriction shared unequally by the sexes. Complaints about student dress were firmly grounded in notions of female sexuality; the notion of physical corporeal display was not felt equally by boys and girls.

To be sure, changes in attire and grooming were more pronounced for young women than young men. As Joseph Hawes suggests in his study of emergent 1920s and 1930s youth culture, “The discussion of youthful sexuality, especially the celebration of female sexuality, was in large part a reaction against the ideology of Victorian repression.”<sup>67</sup> Kelly Schrum has similarly pointed out how the changes in girls’ clothing in the Jazz Age created the first major rift between

<sup>64</sup>Forbes, “Mortenson Asks Parents to Curb Student Revels.”

<sup>65</sup>Wilk, “Board Meeting Minutes of January 25, 1922.”

<sup>66</sup>Genevieve Forbes, “98% of School Children Good, Mortenson Says,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 27 1922, 2.

<sup>67</sup>Hawes, *Children between the Wars*, 26.

girls and their mothers about dress. While girls made their clothing choices more independently, “conflicts between parents and teenage girls about clothing reflected larger tensions related to sexuality, femininity, age-appropriateness, and peer culture.”<sup>68</sup> The raised hemlines and provocative steps associated with jazz dancing challenged the Victorian notion of superior female intuition, particularly regarding sexuality and modesty.<sup>69</sup> The ideal female form in the Jazz Age was not the Victorian buxom woman wearing a corset to accentuate breasts and hips, but one liberated of such garments, able to move freely.<sup>70</sup> Of course, such fears were not fundamentally about dance and dress, but potential extra-musical ends.

Following his January 1922 speech, Mortenson continued efforts to rid Chicago schools of the jazz problem. The superintendent recommended short daily music programs in schools, including glee clubs, orchestras, and soloists, as a way to replace students’ jazz interest with “good music.”<sup>71</sup> He also sought to continue alerting the public of the danger jazz posed to young people. A pair of photographs published in the *Chicago Tribune* the same week as his speech demonstrated the difference between acceptable and lurid dancing (see Figure 1).<sup>72</sup> Mortenson himself oversaw the appropriate dancing technique for young people. In one photo, Mortenson observes as two students exhibit appropriate Victorian era dancing technique—visible space between the two dancers, no “hugging,” and no “cheek rubbing.” The other photograph shows a different scenario. In it, the two dancers’ bodies are touching, and their arms are slightly lower than the other pair. The caption beneath reads “NAUGHTY! NAUGHTY!” and continues, “The school board says students who dance as this picture shows are not nice.”

Other superintendents also lent their voices to the cause of alerting the public to such jazz-based moral challenges. B. B. Cobb, the superintendent of schools in Waco, Texas, framed his argument against jazz as a challenge to democratic ideals.<sup>73</sup> Cobb pointed to chorus singing as one of the most democratic activities for students. Each pupil had an individual part to perform but must also listen to other sections of the ensemble. Cobb then identified the challenge of keeping students interested in such beautiful music, not the desire for personal pleasure that came from jazz’s “uncontrollable craze for speed.” He

<sup>68</sup>Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Sox*, 25.

<sup>69</sup>Coben, *Rebellion against Victorianism*, 15.

<sup>70</sup>Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*, 218–41.

<sup>71</sup>“Students in Arms against Jazz,” *Literary Digest* 72, no. 11 (March 18, 1922), 35.

<sup>72</sup>“News of the Day through the Eye of the Camera,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 27, 1922, 26.

<sup>73</sup>B. B. Cobb, “Music as an Essential,” *Music Supervisors’ Journal* 9, no. 4 (March 1923), 20.



Figure 1. Chicago education superintendent Peter Mortenson, Superintendent of Chicago Public Schools, has students demonstrate inappropriate student dancing, left, and appropriate student dancing, right. (Photos courtesy of the Chicago Daily Tribune.)

went on to argue jazz as “unspeakable,” while calling for more courses in “wholesome, restful music.” W. F. Webster, the superintendent of Minneapolis public schools, similarly used his 1927 address at the National Education Association Department of Superintendence meeting to address the necessity of music education and, simultaneously, the dangers of jazz. Beauty, which Webster never defined, acted as a major theme in his analysis. The superintendent argued beautiful music could do more than any other subject to instill in students a love of family and general deportment. He explained, “Mother at the piano and, beside her, brother or sister with a violin or saxophone [*sic*], is the surest protection against a wasted life I know.”<sup>74</sup> However, the opposite of musical beauty, jazz, threatened this idyllic scene, as “This [behavior] could not have been, had they been soused in jazz; but beauty begets refinement, and refinement is the mother of self-control.”

Yet among superintendents, Mortenson was unusually vocal about jazz’s nefarious influences on young people and called for a sort of teacher-parent alliance against the increasingly formidable enemy.

<sup>74</sup>W. F. Webster, “Music and the Sacred Seven,” *Music Superisors’ Journal* 13, no. 5 (May 1927), 35, 43, 45.

Chicago parents understood this growing generational divide and reacted positively to Mortenson's multifaceted "war on jazz music, 'petting parties,' cigarettes [*sic*], and extremes in dress, as indulged in by high school students."<sup>75</sup> The superintendent reasoned that, left to their own devices, young people would engage in any number of wicked acts, from petting parties to drinking. Parents were quick to acknowledge the role home life must play in the return to previously accepted norms of dress and decorum. While not disagreeing with the superintendent's claim that schools were "the greatest source for good," parents welcomed the call for greater involvement in the home. To involve parents, and perhaps to verify some level of parental accountability, Mortenson sent out "pledge cards," which "thousands" of parents returned, according to the *Chicago Daily Tribune*.<sup>76</sup> Such cards were meant to require parents to forbid jazz dancing or petting parties at their houses. The president of the Illinois Parent Teacher Association praised Mortenson's morality campaign, saying, "The solution of the problem lies even more with the parents than with the boys and girls themselves." She then added, "excesses in dress, recreation and social life" should all be scaled back.<sup>77</sup>

Mortenson's appeal for a reconstruction of moral values had support among the city's adults, many of whom voiced their approval for the superintendent's plan by writing letters to the editor. In one instance, a Mortenson supporter sought an architectural solution to the moral problems believed to be plaguing the city's youth.<sup>78</sup> One *Chicago Daily Tribune* editorial writer applauded Mortenson's stand against jazz and went on to suggest the construction of a greater number of, yet smaller, high schools. After noting the general press discussion of the superintendent's speech, the editorialist continued that "a remedial agency would be a change of building policy in favor of more and smaller high schools, and not addition to the present buildings." The current "mammoth building" was poorly suited to help the child "mentally, morally, or physically." This less "factory-like" approach, with closer contact

<sup>75</sup>"Parents Back Mortenson in Fight on 'Petting,'" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 21, 1922, 1. Mortenson could also be quite critical of less-than-attentive parents. Speaking to the *Journal of Education*, he said, "Mothers and fathers who are unable to handle their children at home shove the moral responsibility upon the teacher's shoulders." "Who's Who and What They Do," *Journal of Education* 95, no. 9 (March 2, 1922), 239.

<sup>76</sup>"Parents Back Mortenson in Fight on 'Petting,'" *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 21, 1922, 1.

<sup>77</sup>"Parents Back Mortenson in Jazz Crusade," *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, January 29, 1922, 5. For a broader discussion of educators using music as a tool for moral development in the early twentieth century—including Mortenson—see Philip Hash, "Character Development and Social Reconstruction in Music Education at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," *Visions of Research in Music Education* 11 (2008), 1–30.

<sup>78</sup>"For More but Smaller High Schools," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 2, 1922, 8.

between students and teachers, would lead to less “dancing, jazz music, joy riding, and so on.”

Despite the popularity of Mortenson’s plan with adults, long-term implementation of the campaign was limited. His tenure as superintendent became increasingly politicized and ended acrimoniously in 1923, only a year after his speech.<sup>79</sup> Without leadership from the superintendent’s office, no sustained campaign against jazz and its moral laxity remained possible. Four years later, a Chicago assistant superintendent spoke out briefly against the genre. At a speech for the International Council of Religious Education, Charles D. Lowry complained how “he recently turned the dial of his radio thirteen times and heard nine jazz selections.”<sup>80</sup> Yet, unlike Mortenson, Lowry did not follow up his complaint with any action, nor did he express any concern about how such music might be influencing young people.

### Variety of Pedagogical Responses

Outside of Chicago, educators used a variety of tactics to counteract jazz’s influence. Yet while the spread of jazz was truly a nationwide phenomenon, attempts among adults to counter such diffusion varied widely.<sup>81</sup> At the individual, school, and district levels, educators differed in how they responded to the jazz problem. Among them, folk dance advocates saw the negative response to jazz among educators as an opportunity to help solidify folk dancing in schools. Drawing a clear distinction with salacious jazz dancing, folk dancing was promoted as good and natural self-expression, an example of natural beauty and “bodily grace,” terminology often associated with artistic expressions of European origin.<sup>82</sup> Advocates suggested European folk dancing could

<sup>79</sup>The city’s newly elected mayor, William Dever, fired Mortenson over tensions that arose after mistreatments of students were made public at a school for orphaned boys. Mortenson felt strongly the matter could be handled internally and spoke out forcefully about mayoral involvement. Dever responded to such claims by firing Mortenson, though claimed politics played no role in his decision. Mortenson’s termination had little, if anything, to do with his efforts against jazz. “Mortenson to Quit Schools,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 29, 1923, 1; and “Mayor Disputes Politics Charge of Mortenson,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 30, 1923, 3.

<sup>80</sup>“School Official Says He Hears Too Much Jazz,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 11, 1927, 16.

<sup>81</sup>For discussion on jazz’s spread and its cultural significance, see Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution*; William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: the Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3–22; and Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 145–200.

<sup>82</sup>The American Folk Dancing Society was organized in 1905 with the assistance of New York City physical education supervisor Dr. Luther Gulick. Dr. Gulick enthusiastically supported folk dancing, thinking it could teach “large body movement” as well as help students understand individual and group dynamics. Linda J. Tomko, “Fete

cure a variety of physical maladies: lung ailments, general poor health, and possibly even broken hearts. The distinctions drawn between jazz and folk dancing could be stark. Where jazz dancing allowed physical contact between dancers, most folk dances required more space between partners. And whereas jazz was the province of black musicians, folk dances originated with less suspect, more European, peoples.<sup>83</sup>

More than any other person, Elizabeth Burchenal acted as the most prominent proponent of school folk dancing, promoting the dance's Caucasian heritage. The chair of the American Folk Dance Society as well as the head of the Committee on Folk-Dancing of the Playground Association of America, Burchenal began teaching New York City students and educators how to perform such "aesthetically pleasing" dances in the early 1900s. In her work to promote folk dancing, Burchenal emphasized what she saw as its relative whiteness, contrasting folk dances with the universally understood blackness of jazz. Speaking to music educators at the 1918 Music Supervisors National Conference—the country's main music education organization—she carefully pointed out how the folk dances she taught young people were necessarily white: "If there is to be the great American School of Dancing, it must be the school of dancing that incorporates the folk dances of the nation, and it is not the Indian dance and it is not the Negro dance that we build the American folk dance upon . . . . We have this great tremendous wealth of treasure that has been brought to us by other countries, which we must absorb if we want to take advantage of it."<sup>84</sup> The folk dances she promoted, drawn from immigrants of western European countries, were wholesome, in large part because they did not belong to the Other. As if to underscore this point, she had young girls in her instruction manual clothed in virginal white dresses. Referring to jazz, she was especially pointed in her critique, arguing it inevitably led to the "mongrelization" of American society.<sup>85</sup>

Dr. Luther Gulick, New York City physical education supervisor, praised Burchenal's efforts, saying, "Miss Burchenal's work has been a definite, concrete force making this language in America speak the

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*Accompli*: gender, 'folk-dance,' and Progressive-era political ideals in New York City," in *Corporealities: Dancing knowledge, culture and power*, ed. Susan Leigh Foster (London: Routledge, 1996), 162, 64.

<sup>83</sup>As various scholars have pointed out, such immigrant groups themselves were in the process of being whitened and amalgamated in American culture. See David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); and Matthew Frye Jacobsen, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>84</sup>Elizabeth Burchenal, "Folk Dancing," *Journal of Proceedings of the Eleventh Annual Meeting of the Music Supervisor's National Conference* Volume 11 (1918): 38–41.

<sup>85</sup>As cited in Giordano, *Satan in the Dance Hall*, 89.

word that is true and wholesome” and praising her for teaching “school children in congested areas in New York City.”<sup>86</sup> Gulick’s comments allude to the particularly urban justification for school folk dances. Proponents such as Burchenal and Gulick believed folk dancing allowed students living in often cramped urban conditions a proper outlet for exercise and youthful energy. Rather than young people visiting dance halls, folk dancing provided a supervised outlet for physical activity. Gulick claimed Burchenal taught as many as 2,000 New York City educators how to properly teach folk dancing in their own classes. Images included in Burchenal’s signature text, *Folk Dances and Singing Games*, provide visual, if also anecdotal, evidence for Gulick’s numerical claim. The original 1909 text includes instructions for each dance, pictures to indicate how portions of each dance look when properly carried out, song texts, and music arranged for the piano as accompaniment (the book was subsequently reprinted in 1913 and 1922). A picture included on the inside cover shows the clearly large number of New York City students in the city’s Van Cortlandt Park dancing in circles around various Maypoles.

The “folk dance movement,” as its proponents called it, had success beyond the Northeast. Gulick’s Portland, Oregon, counterpart, Professor Krohn, instituted folk dancing in that city’s public schools in 1915, again with the aim of providing students with exercise while participating in a more “wholesome” form of dance. One Krohn supporter compared the benefits of folk dances to the increasingly popular jazz dances. Referring to an event at a public park in which up to 1,000 Portland students participated, the unnamed editorial writer again praised folk dances as “revelations of sheer, unsullied beauty,” typical terminology when describing imported European dances.<sup>87</sup> Perhaps to help justify the inherent beauty and grace of such steps, the author avoided describing the dances, but specified they came from English, Danish, and Swedish stock. In contrast, the author did not address the origins of jazz.<sup>88</sup> Yet, such an omission was not synonymous with ignoring jazz’s inherent blackness. As Lara Putnam notes in her recent history of Jazz Age racial politics, jazz flourished in the context of “creation and circulation of black-identified music and dance.”<sup>89</sup> Not addressing jazz’s origins, particularly after referencing acceptable European folk dances, spoke to jazz’s twin aesthetic and moral Otherness.

<sup>86</sup>Luther H. Gulick, preface to *Folk-Dances and Singing Games*, ed. Elizabeth Burchenal (New York: G. Schirmer, 1909).

<sup>87</sup>Wagner, *Adversaries of Dance*, 236–91.

<sup>88</sup>“Folk Dancing versus Jazz.”

<sup>89</sup>Lara Putnam, *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 153.

Unfortunately for such folk dance advocates, the school folk dancing practice was noticeably on the decline just as jazz was gaining popularity among young people. Despite earlier success in New York City in the 1900s and 1910s, folk dancing never gained widespread traction among educators. Burchenal's 1918 appeal to the Music Supervisors National Conference did not spark the implementation she had hoped. Yet, she continued to speak and write about the importance of folk dancing in the 1920s, though the practice slowly fell out of favor. In 1926, Burchenal wrote in the *National Education Association Journal* about "Reviving the Folk Dance" and emphasized the dangers of jazz dancing, offering up folk dancing as the answer. She argued, "The Dance Evil has many phases. The dangers of improper dancing are more numerous and subtle than is implied in most condemnations of the commercialized public dance hall." Burchenal avoided racially inflammatory language in this, her latest appeal, though maintained consistency with earlier statements about the inferiority of jazz's aesthetic blackness. Referencing jazz dancing, she simply contended it was "ugly and unmusical."<sup>90</sup> Yet, the time of Burchenal's message had passed and the excitement many young people associated with jazz simply did not exist in folk dancing. Perhaps not coincidentally, folk dancing also did not appeal to students as much since any adult endorsement of the genre likely lessened the thrill. Though not universally accepted, the predictability of folk dancing, with its set dance patterns, did not have the pull that jazz did. The risk of being caught practicing jazz in schools, of being involved in something new, a level of unchartered musical territory, only made jazz more enticing. Any adult sanctioning of folk dancing likely intensified the relative apathy students felt when compared to jazz's alluring tunes.

While folk dance proponents offered a ready-made solution, for music educators—often viewed as the first line of defense against jazz and its extra-musical iniquities?—efforts to stop the spread of jazz were often haphazard and less systematic. Some sought to ban the music from schools altogether. Such prohibitions included anything from practicing jazz on school property to listening to jazz records on the school Victrola. A survey by the Texas Federated Music Clubs, likely carried out in 1922, found some fifty-four schools out of the seventy schools surveyed had in place some policy prohibiting jazz; under no circumstances could the music be heard in schools. Before being published in the *Music Supervisors' Journal*, the music clubs' findings were presented at that state's teachers' convention, bringing together educators from different disciplines, informing a cross-disciplinary discussion of solving

<sup>90</sup>Elizabeth Burchenal, "Reviving the Folk Dance," *National Education Association Journal* 15 (November 1926), 241.

the jazz problem.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, administrators in Chicago's Senn High School received considerable newspaper coverage when they vowed to eliminate "jazz, immodest dress, joy riding, etc."<sup>92</sup> Though the school's teachers grimaced at the implication that student morals had slid far enough that such action was necessary, they did not disagree about the general need for reform. Still, neither of the cases in Chicago or Texas rose to the level of one Spokane music teacher's efforts. He attempted to sue, unsuccessfully, the leader of a popular local jazz orchestra, claiming it was, "perverting the ideal of classical music held by the people."<sup>93</sup>

Part of any necessary strategy to lessen jazz's appeal to students was replacing it with "better music." As one educator pointed out, "You must make them want something else and give them something else they can appreciate before you take away what they already have and can appreciate."<sup>94</sup> Music teachers also fought the jazz problem with a relatively new pedagogical tool, the music memory contest. Such competitions, many educators hoped, would not only engage students in a more refined genre of music, therefore combating jazz's influence, but would also positively appeal to students' natural competitiveness. The formula for music memory contests was relatively simple. Local newspapers would include a list of works that may appear in the competition itself, which was often separated between elementary and high school levels. Students would have the week to "practice" listening, generally on a phonograph at home or school, carefully noting various identifying characteristics of each piece. The competitions themselves were often much publicized events, and, if possible, held in auditoriums with various music businesses serving as sponsors. In Detroit, the final round of the contests was held in Orchestra Hall with the city's symphony orchestra providing the music as students who had achieved perfect scores competed.<sup>95</sup> The contests spread quickly. In 1922, there were 405 contests nationally; two years later as many as 1,193.<sup>96</sup> Teaching students to identify and appreciate "better" qualities in music, partially through external motivations, was seen as less cumbersome and

<sup>91</sup>"Current Topics," *Music Supervisors' Journal* 9, no. 3 (February 1923), 40.

<sup>92</sup>Margaret M. Sleezer, "Student Citizenship at the Senn High School," *School Review* 32, no. 7 (September 1924), 518.

<sup>93</sup>"Old Question," Says Symphony Director, Branding Jazz Music as Temporary Craze," *Indiana Daily Student*, February 6, 1925, 1.

<sup>94</sup>"Is Music Related to School Life?" *Music Supervisors' Journal* 8, no. 2 (December 1921), 26.

<sup>95</sup>Clara Ellen Starr, "Music Appreciation in the Junior High School of Detroit," *Music Supervisors' Journal* 12, no. 2 (December 1925), 52–56.

<sup>96</sup>James A. Keene, *A History of Music Education in the United States* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1987), 265.

more successful than attempting to directly change their opinions about jazz.<sup>97</sup>

Yet, it was precisely the emphasis on competition that, along with the increase in instrumental music participation in schools, precipitated fairly rapid decline of the music memory contest. The amount of class time devoted to “listening drills” was increasingly viewed with suspicion. Teachers worried that the desire to win money, trophies, or other prizes for their students and school was increasingly driving music education, not student interest in music. As the decade progressed, the idea of advertising in the newspaper which students won \$1 at a weekend contest appeared to be in increasingly poor taste. Percy Scholes, the famed English music appreciation champion and music memory contest advocate, effectively cast the death knell when he wrote in 1935 that the overemphasis on competition over music would eventually lead to “desecrating music,” a claim similar to those leveled at jazz.<sup>98</sup>

Unlike dance and music teachers who felt a real professional angst because of jazz, educators in other subjects were occasionally willing to incorporate the music into their classrooms. Certainly, such teachers represented a minority in their profession, identifying pedagogical benefits that jazz could bring to the classroom. Those who found a use for jazz in the classroom embraced the faster tempos and seemingly frenetic pace of the music, with relatively little concern that it could musically or morally debase their students. As early as 1919, an Ogden, Utah, typewriting teacher had students practice their typing exercises while playing jazz in the classroom, arguing the relatively fast tempos served as useful background listening as students tried to quicken their typing exercises. Contrasting jazz with “canned music,” she also noted how the popularity of the genre among young people meant students looked forward to and enjoyed her class.<sup>99</sup> Luise Freer, director of physical education for women at the University of Illinois, suggested a similar approach in girls’ physical education classes, having experimented with it herself. Here, the music could invigorate and energize girls as they go through their exercises. At one high school conference, she told her colleagues, “In a corrective gymnasium today . . . you will see a girl

<sup>97</sup> Otto Graham, “The Development of Instrumental Music,” *The Proceedings of the High School Conference of November 17, 18, and 19, 1922* (Urbana, University of Illinois, 1922), 333.

<sup>98</sup> Percy Scholes, *Music: The Child and the Masterpiece: A Comprehensive Handbook of Aims and Methods in All That Is Usually Called “Musical Appreciation”* (London: Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1935), 178; and Michael L. Mark and Charles L. Gary, *A History of American Music Education* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Education, 2007), 319–23.

<sup>99</sup> “Jazz Music in High School Class in Typewriting,” *Ogden Standard*, November 18, 1919, 7.

in one corner standing on her head, another swinging on a trapeze, a third using a punching bag, all to a jazz tune on the Victrola.”<sup>100</sup> Such pedagogical uses were not necessarily an endorsement of music or aesthetic quality as much as recognition of the music’s energetic nature. And a New York City substitute teacher made headlines for similar transgressions, playing jazz in classes for “relief” after math, Latin, and other courses.<sup>101</sup>

Such attitudes anticipated the declining efforts of more critical educators regarding the jazz problem as the decade progressed. As music historian Mark Katz has succinctly noted, “opposition to jazz cooled” toward the end of the 1920s.<sup>102</sup> A growing popularity of symphonic or “sweet”—and recognizably white—jazz bands helped push this change in attitudes. Conductors like Paul Whiteman, Isham Jones, Fred Waring, and Vincent Lopez trafficked in a sort of musical hybrid that borrowed as heavily from the symphony hall as the dance hall, with musicians typically dressed in tuxedos and the audience sitting, not dancing.<sup>103</sup> Whiteman was especially cognizant of jazz’s racial politics, once telling black pianist Earl Hines he would hire him “if only he were white.”<sup>104</sup> As much as any single event, his orchestra’s famed 1924 concert in New York City’s Aeolian Hall helped introduce this newer, symphonic jazz to a widespread white audience. Marketed specifically as an “educational” endeavor, the concert was designed as a sort of showpiece for a much tamer version of jazz than was being heard in dance halls. Whiteman’s efforts proved successful; the white press reviewed the concert favorably and Whiteman accepted an invitation to give the concert again two months later at New York’s famed Carnegie Hall.<sup>105</sup> Through the second half of the decade, not only had opposition “cooled,” jazz was becoming respectable and, not coincidentally, increasingly heard performed by white musicians.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>100</sup>Louise Freer, “Modern Tendencies in Physical Education” *The Proceedings of the High School Conference of November 17, 18, and 19, 1921* (Urbana, University of Illinois, 1921), 345–48.

<sup>101</sup>“Teaches ‘Jazz’ in Newark High School,” *New York Tribune*, March 21, 1919, 11.

<sup>102</sup>Mark Katz, “Making America More Musical through the Phonograph, 1900–1930,” *American Music* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 467.

<sup>103</sup>Famed jazz clarinetist Benny Goodman was known to complain such bands did not play “real [hot] jazz.” Ralph G. Giordano, *Social Dancing in America: A History and Reference* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 51–52.

<sup>104</sup>Levine, “Jazz and American Culture,” 16.

<sup>105</sup>Richard Crawford, *America’s Musical Life: A History* (New York: Norton, 2001), 574–75; and Scott DeVeaux, “The Emergence of the Jazz Concert, 1935–1945,” *American Music* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 6–29.

<sup>106</sup>For discussion of whites’ appropriation of jazz, see Gerald Early, “Three Notes toward a Cultural Definition of the Harlem Renaissance,” *Callaloo: A Journal of African American and African Arts and Letters* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1991), 136–49; Carney, *Cuttin’ Up*, 57–77.

In fact, signs of the decline in opposition had begun earlier in some schools. In 1924, C. D. Isaacson, manager of the Chicago Civic Opera, visited the city's Marshall High School to promote the upcoming production of *Aida*. Isaacson told students they did not need to know the "technical side of music" to enjoy the opera and recounted stories of his boyhood when he attended performances. He went on to contrast opera with jazz and "cheap books," telling students, "You are judged by what you like and if you like cheap things you are cheap; if you like fine things you are fine."<sup>107</sup> Unfortunately for Isaacson, the same day of his visit the *Marshall Echo* reminded students about the upcoming "dance week," a two-week dance competition with music by the Marshall Jazz Orchestra. Between 1924 and 1929, Marshall students organized many school-based jazz ensembles, including the faculty-sponsored "Social Orchestra."

Other signs of educators acknowledging jazz's permanence happened elsewhere. In 1928, over a decade after the first jazz records were produced, Kansas music supervisor Edward P. Rutledge surveyed his music students about what music they liked. Rutledge posited, "Do you like jazz records better than those played at school?" Reviewing his study for the *Music Supervisors' Journal*, Rutledge lamented, "Now we have unanimous response."<sup>108</sup>

## Conclusion

As the Progressive Era drew to a close—one at least symbolically capped off by President Harding's 1920 pledge of a "return to normalcy"—a new menace had emerged to threaten young people's morality and musical standards, providing fresh and unprecedented trials for Victorian ethics and the racial status quo. A cultural dividing line, jazz represented, more than any other phenomenon, the shift away from an ethos of restraint to a modern ethos of pleasure. Jazz embodied a combination of instinct and impulse, while the debate about it involved much more than musical aesthetics. In the context of the Great Migration and the more deliberate racial segregation that developed as Jim Crow spread beyond the South, white educators' responses to jazz culture are one barometer of official attitudes toward the educational possibilities of urban diversity. Focus on jazz particularly sheds light on how educators viewed perceived challenges to student morality in a demographically and culturally shifting country. Indeed, the terminology surrounding

<sup>107</sup>"Opera Manager Urges Students to Hear 'Aida,'" *Marshall News* (Chicago), December 9, 1924.

<sup>108</sup>Edward P. Rutledge, "Ascertaining Attitudes in Music," *Music Supervisors' Journal* 15, no. 2 (December 1928), 73–81.

jazz often paralleled race-based prejudices. Its origins among black musicians inflamed fears of young whites imitating inappropriately sexualized dance steps. Critics viewed girls as particularly susceptible to jazz's lure, both as objects of sexual gratification and provocateurs for boys. The jazz problem extended beyond the classroom; it meant changes to dress, dance, and morality. It involved the possibility of alcohol, drugs, and "petting." Educators responded by encouraging folk dances and other recognizably European aesthetics, attempts that failed to replace jazz's popularity among young people.