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# MUSICAL POPULARITY CONTEST: THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS ON THE JAZZ AGE

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**ABSTRACT:**

**KEYWORDS:**

In the wake of the Jim Crow era, African Americans who migrated to the North found themselves with unprecedented legal rights and with access to physical and cultural resources in newly-formed communities. As a result of these major social changes, the "Black Mecca" of Harlem quickly developed into the centre of the cultural explosion known as the Harlem. However, the Harlem Renaissance itself would never have been possible without developments to the American economy and technology of the late19th and early 20th centuries, both of which helped foster the creation of a society conducive to the spread of new ideas. This openness is perhaps best seen in the production of jazz, a flowering of the Harlem Renaissance and one of the main artistic contributions through which African Americans established themselves in the Gilded Age/Progressive Era zeitgeist. Though jazz as a musical genre existed since the late 19th century, it was not until the Roaring Twenties that it established itself as a staple of American culture, for two main reasons: first, the African American community had yet to fully establish its own independent identity; and second, there had never previously existed an audience willing to accept that identity. Ultimately, jazz's establishment in contemporary popular culture was dictated not only by the developing economic and social standards of African Americans, but by the similar cultural changes occurring in American society as a whole.

The precursor to the Harlem Renaissance was the "Great Migration," an influx of African Americans from the South to the northeast United States following the Civil War. This exodus of millions of families resulted in the rapid development of Black communities teeming with culture by the early 20th century. The Great Migration was dictated by the economic repercussions of two contemporary events: Jim Crow and World War I (Tolnay, 2003). First, in the wake of the failed Reconstruction era throughout the latter half of the 19th century, disenfranchisement and a lack of economic mobility exacerbated by systemic racism in the Jim Crow era incentivized those who could do so to flee the Deep South. After decades of social stagnation, many African Americans became disillusioned with the empty promises of landownership and their lives as sharecroppers constantly in debt. Similarly, hate crimes and the resurgence of groups such as the Ku Klux Klan rendered life in the South too dangerous for those African Americans still living there (Tolnay, 2003). It is no surprise, then, that many Blacks looked to the North and its seemingly endless supply of factory jobs as an appealing alternative to the harshness of the status quo. To this extent, labour shortages sparked by the conscription of millions of men during World War I resulted in a plethora of opportunities to be filled in the North's industrial economy through cheap labour (Tolnay, 2003). These jobs would be filled by members of the Great Migration, who would later comprise the Black community instrumental to the development of jazz.

However, it was not solely migrants from the South who contributed culturally to the Jazz Age, as the Harlem Renaissance was also significantly impacted by a simultaneous influx of Black immigrants from the West Indies. Specifically, the Immigration Act of 1924 imposed a strict quota system that drastically reduced the number of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, banning Asian immigration altogether (Cowley, 2006). A by product of these policies was the increased ability for the United States to take on immigrants from the West Indies and various Caribbean countries, who similarly saw American industry as a means of attaining greater economic prosperity (Cowley, 2006). The significance of these immigrants stems from their connection to their countries of origin; unlike African American migrants, who were mostly descendants of involuntary immigrants and had their identity forcibly stripped from them for generations, this group of people was in touch with their

Black culture. In turn, immigrants provided new and unique touches of culture that led to the rapid dissemination and development of the Harlem Renaissance.

The convergence of the Great Migration of African Americans from the South with the immigration of Blacks from the West Indies cantered around the northern Manhattan neighbourhood of Harlem. It is here, too, that the effects of external economic factors can be seen; Harlem, as a historically wealthy and white neighbourhood, only began to rent to black tenants following a real estate crash at the turn of the 20th century (Tolnay, 2003). Though the white residents initially fought against the integration of their neighbourhood, they eventually resorted to offloading their properties and moving out, which further caused the price of Harlem's land to drop. In turn, the now-majority-Black neighbourhood began to attract more and more immigrants and migrants looking to join a vibrant colored community (Tolnay, 2003).

It is important to note, however, that the Harlem Renaissance was less about the innovation of new forms of artistic expression than about the boom of art popularized to the point of having national reach. In this sense, the existing social quirks of New York were crucial in the fostering and sponsorship of African American culture. For instance, New York was the perfect location for an artistic boom because it was home to much of the required artistic infrastructure (Schulz, 1997). The migration of publishing companies from Boston to New York, along with the creation of modern art showcases and museums, provided the foundation for the Harlem Renaissance to grow and develop (Schulz, 1997). Compounded with the aforementioned diversity from international and black migrant populations, Harlem became a hotbed for cultural experimentation and modernization.

The result of such economic and cultural factors was a creative surge defined by a unified sense of "Blackness" that permeated every aspect of the Harlem Renaissance (Whalan, 2008). In particular, the rise of the "New Negro" movement came about in response to openness to new ideas and a desire to redefine what it meant to be Black in American society (Whalan, 2008). In this sense, literature, art, and music became tools and vehicles for self-expression in the fight against racist stereotypes. By extension, the Harlem Renaissance arguably came about to push back against the social and economic situation that African Americans were forced into. Whalan (2008) notes that community leaders such as Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. DuBois used the Harlem Renaissance to establish African American culture as belonging to the American zeitgeist and to prove the concept of "black excellence." (pp. 170-172). By pushing for the Black community to get the credit it deserved in American culture, the African American community took advantage of the opportunities that Harlem's location provided, using them to push education and progress and to legitimize the Black community from that point onward. Perceived social and economic slights thus established the motivation for African Americans to push forward with the Harlem Renaissance in the wake of the Great Migration.

It is evident, therefore, that the economic and social standards of African Americans in the early 20th century created a situation conducive to massive cultural growth. At the same time, previous circumstances also provided a motivation for the Black community to engage in such cultural innovation, especially the desire to redefine Blackness in the context of contemporary America. Just as important, however, is the need for a receptive audience to provide the demand for the artistic works of the Harlem Renaissance. To this extent, jazz becoming a cultural phenomenon was important to the movement of the Harlem Renaissance because it paved the way for the other aspects of the movement to be accepted and popularized (Whalan, 2008). Music, therefore, was the precursor to the redefinition of the "New Negro" both on the domestic stage and beyond. The importance of this artistic statement lies in the fact that jazz itself most likely would not have achieved the same level of success without another set of contemporary circumstances enabling it to spread as quickly as it did. In particular, advancements in technology paired with economic prosperity resulted in the rise of a culturally independent new generation throughout America—one that embraced jazz, regardless of its origins from the Black community.

First, technological advancements in mass media enabled jazz, once an esoteric art form, to be enjoyed by the masses throughout the country. The advent of recording technology coupled with the creation of radio broadcasts enabled jazz to be played wherever, and whenever, people wanted (Taylor, 2002). In the past, because jazz was by nature formless and based on improvisation rather than the traditional rules of Western musical expression, musicians were previously limited to sharing jazz through live performances at specific venues. In contrast, phonograph recordings and advancements in communications technology meant that Americans across the country could both listen to jazz on the radio and purchase recordings for private consumption (Taylor, 2002). The immediately impact of such increased accessibility meant that jazz could transcend its physical limits. In turn, more Americans would be exposed to jazz, meaning that the market would be stimulated not just locally in Harlem but nationally as well. Ideas about popular culture could thus be spread at unprecedented speeds.

Similarly, increased automation in technology provided Americans who could afford appliances and cars with increased leisure time to enjoy jazz. Mass production quickly became the norm and led to a reduction in price for goods such as electrical appliances and more; this increased accessibility freed Americans up to enjoy luxuries—namely, the arts (Dumenil, 1995). At the same time, the rise of assembly-line cars such as the Model T meant that Americans where more mobile than ever, meaning that families could drive to social gatherings and

enjoy jazz there. Consequently, technological advances indirectly increased the potential market for jazz and the other products of the Harlem Renaissance.

At the same time, the decade of economic success called the "Roaring Twenties" provided Americans with newfound financial security, which many capitalized on via increased consumerism (Dumenil, 1995). This prosperity was brought in large part due to the Republican administrations throughout the 1920s of presidents Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge, both of whom advocated for tax cuts and a reduction in government spending (Dumenil, 1995). These policies, compounded with increased import duties as a result of Protectionism, gave the United States' domestic economy the freedom to rapidly boom. At the same time, factors in the private sector such as the expansion of private credit were paired with the rise of mass production and the boosting of industry in the wake of World War I (the same factors that had previously resulted in the Great Migration) led to a rise in work opportunities and consumerism (Dumenil, 1995). Ultimately, Dumenil (1995) finds that together, these factors combined to create economic prosperity via higher wages and shorter working hours, meaning that Americans now had both the time and the means to enjoy jazz.

The direct result of the Roaring Twenties' economic boom was increased consumerism, a radical departure from previous American social norms and lifestyles. In turn, the enjoyment of jazz by the younger, freer generation signaled a paradigm shift that embodied the newfound openness and independence of the era that enabled the Harlem Renaissance to arise in the first place (Drowne, 2005). This cultural liberation can best be seen in the relationship between jazz and Prohibition. Simply put, the ratification of the 18th Amendment in 1919 led to the rapid rise of speakeasies and other entertainment venues such as dance halls. Drowne (2005) argues that these locations were prime backdrops for jazz performances, which complemented the relaxed atmosphere with its upbeat tempo. The most famous of these speakeasies was Harlem's own Cotton Club, but the fact remains that jazz was popularized throughout the country via bars and venues in every state (Drowne, 2005).

Finally, just as much as the social and economic status of American society dictated the popularization of jazz and the Harlem Renaissance, external circumstances brought about its end as well. Specifically, the Harlem Renaissance, much like the rest of the Roaring Twenties, fizzled out at the turn of the decade due to the Great Depression. Economic hardship resulted in less patronage for the arts, and entertainment mediums like jazz lost their prominence in society as the artistic drive of the Renaissance dwindled (Spencer, 1997). Instead, artists and patrons alike struggled with unemployment and focused on earning enough money to satisfy basic needs rather than focusing on the "luxuries" of the arts.

In the end, jazz was instrumental to the Harlem Renaissance movement. In redefining the role of African Americans in contemporary American society, the Black community established itself as a staple in the cultural fabric of American society. Similarly, the Harlem Renaissance brought a newfound sense of self-worth and pride to African Americans throughout the country, with products such as jazz testifying to the community's contributions to American culture. Most importantly, however, the artistic expressions in the Jazz Age came about only as the result of specific social, cultural, and economic conditions that not only enabled the Harlem Renaissance but also legitimized its subsequent popularity.

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