

**"GO HARLEM!" CHICK WEBB AND HIS DANCING AUDIENCE DURING THE GREAT  
DEPRESSION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Christopher Jason Wells: “Go Harlem!”: Chick Webb and his Dancing Audience  
During the Great Depression  
(Under the direction of David F. García)

This dissertation examines the career and music of Harlem drummer and bandleader William Henry “Chick” Webb (1905-1939). Foregrounding Webb’s connections with audiences, it emphasizes local circumstances and dialogic, co-creative performer-audience relationships. While many scholars mark 1935—when heavily arranged big band jazz became broadly popular—as the “Swing Era’s” beginning, this project situates swing as a local genre in Harlem in the late 1920s and 1930s. Adopting conjunctural analysis from cultural studies, it emphasizes the particular sociopolitical and economic conditions in which Webb and other African American bandleaders and arrangers developed this music during the Great Depression. It explores the interplay between composition, improvisation, race, gender, dance, economics, urban geography, and political power through which Webb’s deep sonic connections with local audiences developed.

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, the dissertation’s three internal chapters are discrete methodological case studies that explore Webb and his music through spatial practice theory, carnal musicology, and critical discourse analysis. Spatial practice theory updates the classic “jazz itinerary” method—built here from over 1,000 clippings in African American newspapers—to follow how specific ballrooms and

nightclubs, neighborhood dynamics, race and gender identities, political events, and ideologies informed Webb's tremendous stylistic diversity. Carnal musicology blends the author's experience as a vernacular jazz dancer with close readings of diverse historical source material and analytical tools from music theory to reconstruct and analyze Webb's live interactions with improvising lindy hop dancers at Harlem's Savoy Ballroom. Critical discourse analysis routes critiques of Webb and singer Ella Fitzgerald from white male aficionados in the emerging field of jazz criticism through queer theory and critical race theory to connect jazz's aesthetic system with broader structures of white supremacy, patriarchy, and class privilege. The concluding chapter blends these perspectives to analyze Webb's 1937 battle of music with Benny Goodman's orchestra.

Ultimately, the dissertation advances an immanence-focused, rather than transcendence-focused, approach that can investigate figures whose significance, like Webb's, stems primarily from their popularity with specific audiences in particular times and places. Through this paradigm, jazz studies can disentangle itself from the uncritically transcendent narratives that entrench jazz history within problematic discourses of American exceptionalism.

To five incredible women in my family:  
Rebecca Muñoz, Elizabeth Heller, Abbie Cooper, Jacki Gordon, and Cecile Cooper.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables and Figures.....	xi
Chapter 1: “SPINNIN’ THE WEBB”: THE JAZZ TRADITION AND THE MYTH OF METHOD.....	1
De-Centering the Record.....	3
More Horns for the Woodshed: Towards an Immanent Jazz Studies.....	6
Jungles, Palaces, Depressions—Harlem’s Spheres of Spatial Practice.....	9
Carnal Musicology—Research from “Under the Skin”.....	20
Critical Discourse Analysis—Reception Study as Allyship.....	29
Conclusion.....	40
Chapter 2: “HARLEM CONGO”: BLACK BALLROOM CULTURE AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION.....	42
A Tale of Two Harlems.....	49
Harlem After the Crash.....	72
The Brief Life of the Dixie Ballroom: Race and the Battle for 125 <sup>th</sup> Street.....	86
The Riots of 1935: Racial Anger and the Harvest Moon Ball as “Social Insurance”.....	95
The Savoy Ballroom and Heterogeneous Class Performance.....	103
Conclusion—Webb’s Nimble Musicianship as Spatial Practice.....	109
Chapter 3: “LINDYHOPPER’S DELIGHT”: DANCING TO WEBB’S MUSIC.....	112
An Imperfect Artifact: Fleshing Out “Let’s Get Together”.....	116
A “Kicking-the-Ass-Beat”: Recovering Webb’s “Savoy Tempo”.....	120
Form and Phrasing: “Let’s Get Together” as Participatory Framework.....	129

Saying “Gotcha!”: Dialogue, Gamesmanship, and Mirroring.....	146
“That Push Pull Suggestion”: Haptic Communication and Intercorporeality .....	157
Conclusion.....	173
Chapter 4: “DON’T BE THAT WAY”: RACE AND GENDER IN WEBB’S CRITICAL RECEPTION.....	177
Why (and How) Critics Matter.....	180
Critics and their Early Connection with Webb.....	187
“The Count Steps In”: The Emergence of the “Kansas City Sound” .....	193
“Poor Little Rich Girl”: Feminine Frivolity and Critical Reaction to Ella Fitzgerald.....	202
Chapter 5: “BREAKIN’ IT DOWN”: UNPACKING THE WEBB/GOODMAN BATTLE.....	220
The Webb-Goodman Battle in Contemporary Media.....	221
Battles of Music and Representations of Difference.....	224
Intercorporeal Ecstasy and the Racial Politics of Tempo.....	236
Racial Discourse and the Battle’s Legacy.....	246
Towards an Anti-Exceptionalist Jazz Studies.....	253
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	259

## LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure 2.1 – Lafayette Theatre “Hallowe’en Fantasy” Advertisement, <i>New York Amsterdam News</i> , September 18, 1929, 9.....	69
Figure 2.2 – Advertisements for the Savoy Ballroom and Dixie Ballroom, <i>New York Amsterdam News</i> , March 8, 1933, 8.....	90
Figure 2.3 – “Reduced Prices” Advertisement for the Savoy Ballroom, <i>New York Amsterdam News</i> , May 3, 1933, 8.....	94
Figure 3.1 – Metric structure for “Opus One” chorus compared with Minns & anon. partner’s dance figures.....	137
Figure 3.2 – Excerpt of fig. 3.1: first A section.....	137
Figure 3.3 – Transcription of “Opus One” A section melody alongside Minns’s and anon. partner’s footwork.....	138
Figure 3.4 – Metric structure for transition from first to second A sections.....	138
Figure 3.5 – Transcription (melodic reduction) of “Opus One” mm.8-17 with rhythmic transcription of Minns & anon. partner’s footwork.....	139
Figure 3.6 – “Opus One” A Section melody with rhythmically-stressed 3 <sup>rd</sup> beat circled.....	140
Figure 3.7 – Metric structure as in fig. 3.1 with rock-step, stressed 3 <sup>rd</sup> beat alignment in m. 13 and m. 25 circled in yellow.....	140
Figure 3.8 – Excerpt from fig. 5, m.13. Rock step alignment with beat 3 circled in red.....	141
Figure 3.9 – “Opus One” melody re-barred with a longer pickup and stressed G as downbeat.....	141
Figure 3.10 – Excerpt from fig. 3.5, mm.30-33, dancers’ alignment with B section pickup circled in red.....	141
Figure 3.11 – “Opus One” B-section melody (bridge) re-barred with pickup as downbeat.....	142
Figure 3.12 – Transcription of “Let’s Get Together” A section melody.....	142

Figure 3.13 – “Let’s Get Together” melody shifted by two beats, four beats, and six beats against basic eight-beat lindy hop footwork.....	143
Figure 3.14 Rhythmic transcription of Webb’s “fill” in “One O’Clock Jump,” radio transcription from the Southland Ballroom, 1939.....	150
Figure 3.15 – Transcription of Frankie Manning scatting a step rhythm.....	151
Figure 3.16 – Transcription of Frankie Manning scatting Webb’s response to his step.....	151
Figure 3.17 – Transcription of “Let’s Get Together” A section riff with my own “scat” vocables.....	169
Figure 3.18 – Transcription (melodic reduction) of the Chick Webb Orchestra’s “Let’s Get Together” mm. 30-35 with the author’s internal rhythmic response expressed in scat vocables.....	170
Figure 3.19 – Excerpt from fig. 3.18, mm. 31-32.....	171
Figure 3.20 – Excerpt from fig. 3.18, mm. 32-33.....	171
Figure 3.21 – Excerpt from fig. 3.17 m.33.....	172
Figure 3.22 – Excerpt from fig. mm. 33-34, arrows indicate correspondences between the tune and the author’s felt rhythms.....	172
Figure 5.1 – “War is Declared” advertisement, <i>New York Amsterdam News</i> , May 11, 1927, 11.....	226
Figure 5.2 – Interracial band battle advertisement, <i>Baltimore Afro-American</i> , February 23, 1929, 8.....	231
Figure 5.3 – Interracial band battle advertisement, <i>Baltimore Afro-American</i> , May 4, 1929, 12.....	232
Table 3.1 – Ballew and Cameron’s dance movements to reflect the repeating trumpet riff in first chorus of “Let’s Get Together” .....	154-155

## Chapter One: “Spinnin’ the Webb”: The Jazz Tradition and the Myth of Method

I was wandering through the National Broadcasting Studios in the R.C.A. Buildings, New York, just looking around at the fine sights, peering in at rehearsals, listening to broadcasts, trying to find Ray Noble, and generally giving the National Broadcasting Company a thorough going-over, when I walked into a studio full of fifteen Negro musicians beating the hell out of *Singing a Vagabond Song*. There in the centre of the band was a short man on a high stool with his shoulders hunched over a mess of drums, his head in the clouds and his hands going like fury. It was none other than that uptown drummer Chick Webb, rehearsing his band for the four o’clock broadcast over the N.B.C. network. ...The amusing part to watch of the broadcast was the clowning of the boys in the band throughout the whole broadcast. One fat little trumpeter danced around the soloists who were improvising and made faces at them. He couldn’t sit still; every time the brass had some ensemble work to do, he stood up and pretended he was playing first trumpet with the utmost difficulty, writhing and waving his trumpet around. After the program I met that swell little gentleman Chick himself, and complimented him on the fine performance the band had just given. “No,” he said, “that was no good. You come down to the Savoy tonight and hear what we can really do. It’s a big night to-night and we’ll show you some jazz.” So down we went to Harlem and up to the Savoy to hear what Webb can really do, since if they were just fooling back in the studio, they must really send it down when they get swinging with the dancers in the Savoy.<sup>1</sup>

In September 1935, Harold Taylor, a correspondent for British jazz magazine *The Melody Maker*, was on assignment in New York. Somewhat by accident, he stumbled upon Chick Webb (1905-1939) and his orchestra doing a live broadcast for NBC. He also stumbled upon an important historical artifact: our only trace that Webb himself was aware of what many have stated since—that, as jazz critic Gary Giddins puts it, “those

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Taylor, “The Genial Chick Webb – A Broadcast and a Dance Session Described by Harold Taylor,” *Melody Maker*, January 9, 1937, 2.

who heard him live insist that records hid his genius.”<sup>2</sup> In his autobiography, Count Basie recalled of playing opposite Webb at the Savoy that “I just went somewhere and found me a place so I could sit and listen. If you never got to hear that band live, you really missed something.”<sup>3</sup> Responding to a letter from an Oxford University student who claimed critics over-rated Webb’s records, British bandleader/critic Spike Hughes responded, “I suggest to Mr. Miller and the others that they should be good little boys, work hard, save up and visit Chick Webb in his home surroundings. They’ll know what we’re talking about then.”<sup>4</sup> Hughes repeatedly argued that

To me the music that it makes belongs not to records or to the radio, but to a softly lighted ballroom with an enormous dance floor surrounded by tables occupied by gay, laughing, chattering dark figures. It is music for dancing, and such dancing as only those who have seen it can possibly imagine—lithe, vivid, brightly-clad Lindy-hopping creatures swinging their way around the dance floor, oblivious of time and place, of everything except their own graceful movements and the music coming from the dim platform at the end of the room. This is what these recordings by Chick Webb mean to me. What they mean to you I neither know nor can I possibly imagine. The listener who has never seen Chick’s small form raised above the band, playing his drums so quietly beating his high-hat cymbal for the gut-bucket choruses, will probably hear *Get Together* as an ordinary swing tune.<sup>5</sup>

As Hughes places Webb’s music where it “belongs,” his words in the above passage chart the trajectory through which my dissertation listens to Webb—through the diverse spaces of interwar Harlem’s ballroom culture, through the active bodies of lindy hopping dancers, and through the discursive filter of elite white jazz critics. Stretching

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<sup>2</sup> Gary Giddins, *Faces in the Crowd: Actors, Writers, Musicians, and Filmmakers* (New York: Da Capo, 1996), 111.

<sup>3</sup> Count Basie with Albert Murray, *Good Morning Blues: The Autobiography of Count Basie* (New York: Da Capo, 2002), 209.

<sup>4</sup> “Mike” [Spike Hughes pseud.], “Sayings of the WEAK,” *Melody Maker*, April 10, 1937, 5.

<sup>5</sup> “Mike” [Spike Hughes pseud.], “Hot Records Reviewed: Chick Webb’s *Unsophisticated* Music Making,” *Melody Maker*, May 26, 1934, 5.

jazz studies' methodological toolbox and building new tools when necessary, this project aims to place Webb in dialogue with his audiences in a specific time and place to reconstruct those contextual traces upon which the band thrived. This dissertation thus uses Webb as a window into the cultural life of Harlem audiences with whom his band co-created its musical world.

### **De-Centering the Record**

Through an interdisciplinary investigation of live performance and local context, this dissertation offers a necessary corrective to jazz scholarship's central privileging of studio-produced recordings. The field has traditionally used recordings as stand-ins for printed scores in order to maintain a set of fixed aesthetic texts through which to make critical and analytical claims about style, relevance, and brilliance. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with emphasizing musical recordings; if one seeks to apply specific analytical observations to a musical world that foregrounds improvised performance and de-emphasizes the written score, recordings are an absolute necessity. However, our privileging of recorded material has become a dependence that has obscured artists, listeners, and locations that left no sonic traces through the literal and institutionally machinery of the commercial recording industry.

The centrality of recordings to jazz historical and critical discourse dates to these discourses' origins in the hot record collecting clubs of the 1930s.<sup>6</sup> Crystalized in the plethora of record reviews offered by publications like *Jazz Hot*, *Melody Maker*,

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce Boyd Raeburn, *New Orleans Style and the Writing of American Jazz History* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

*Metronome*, and *Downbeat*, this discursive tradition became central to academic jazz discourse through the works of pioneers like Marshall Stearns and Gunther Schuller. In particular, Schuller leaned heavily on recordings in both *Early Jazz* and *The Swing Era*, where he spatialized jazz recordings into transcriptions to be analyzed, like scores, as static musical works.<sup>7</sup> Flattening the distance between composition and improvisation, Schuller re-rendered jazz—via the stabilizing medium of the recording—as a form open to the same methods of analytical inquiry as classical music’s printed scores, a crucial step in positioning jazz as a form of high art worthy of serious music theoretical and musicological study.

While at one point critical in creating institutional space for the rigorous study of jazz and its history, a record-centric methodology obscures the often significant and influential careers of artists who did not record. As such, it often ascribes genius to those figures who particular institutional connections, social relationships, or accidents of history happened to place in front of the cones and microphones that have built jazz’s sonic archives. It also privileges particular historical spaces—most notably Chicago and New York City—as the central locations of jazz production, because these cities served as major recording hubs. Rather than offer some kind of unmediated sonic archive of jazz’s greatest performances, jazz recordings represent the results of specific musical and social maneuverings and preserve a type of performance with particular temporal, spatial, and social constraints.<sup>8</sup> As a result, we know far less than we should about the

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<sup>7</sup> Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz 1930-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> Damon J. Phillips, *Shaping Jazz: Cities, Labels, and the Global Emergence of an Art Form* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).



traveling territory bands in the American mid- and southwest and even less about jazz scenes from New England to the Barbary Coast to say nothing of significant international jazz hubs like Mumbai and Shanghai.<sup>9</sup> The need for sounding texts also yields some peculiar fuzzy math when tying sounds to local music scenes; the New Orleans scene of the 1910s, for example, receives its soundtrack through recordings produced in 1920s Chicago. Thus, the jazz tradition's particular aesthetic canon and its hegemonic geographies—as well as its many lacunae—are produced and reproduced through what Mark Katz has termed “phonograph effects.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, recording-centricity, like all forms of privilege, is an agent of blindness; it obscures more than it reveals.

As an object of study, Webb resists a record-centric approach because, by virtually all surviving accounts, his band's live performances were far superior to what they put on record. Though Webb was born and raised in Baltimore, he spent nearly his entire professional career based in New York City and maintained a relatively consistent identity as a local, Harlem musician. While the band recorded and appeared on radio prolifically during the 1930s, they built their reputation on their dynamic live performances in Harlem ballrooms. As Webb himself makes clear, to focus on his band's studio output obfuscates what they could “really do.” Although located at the jazz

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<sup>9</sup> For work on pre-World War 2 jazz outside the US and Europe, see Andrew F. Jones, *Yellow Music: Media, Culture, and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Bradley Shope, “The Public Reception of Western Music in India: From Imperialist Exclusivity to Global Receptivity,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 31, no 2 (2008): 71-89; Bradley Shope, “They Treat Us White Folks Fine: African American Musicians and the Popular Music Terrain in Late-Colonial India,” *Journal of South Asian Popular Culture* 5, no.2 (Nov. 2007): 97–11.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology has Changed Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

tradition's geographic centering point of New York City, this dissertation seeks to develop tools and approaches more broadly applicable to jazz worlds less accessible through the jazz historian's standard resources: recordings and oral histories. Casting a wide net for source material, this dissertation aims to build a diverse methodological toolbox. The project's core position is that Chick Webb and his music demand a dialogic approach that centers live performance and the interactions between Webb's band and its audiences.

### **More Horns for the Woodshed: Towards an Immanent Jazz Studies**

The seed for this project's methodological approach was planted well before I had any idea I would become a musicologist. In my senior year of college, I took a comparative religions course and was captivated by the introduction to Wendy Doniger's book *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*. In this essay, "The Myth of Method in Mythology," Doniger argues that a pluralist approach can yield stronger, clearer results than orthodoxy.

When one is confronting a body of raw material (and this is the first step in any original analysis), it is good to have tucked away somewhere in one's mind all the patterns that other scholars have seen in other materials, all the ways in which they have tried to solve analogous problems. In this way one develops a vocabulary in which to recognize and express the patterns that appear in the new corpus as the need arises. The material itself will suggest what is the most appropriate pattern to look for at each point. ... This is the toolbox approach to the study of myth: carry about with you as wide a range of tools as possible, and reach for the right one at the right time.<sup>11</sup>

Inspired by her work, my own approach is akin to creating a hologram: the more angles from which one examines the object, the more complex and nuanced the final image.

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<sup>11</sup> Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 5.

This project's chapters thus seek to triangulate Webb's position through three distinct approaches: spatial practice theory, carnal musicology, and critical discourse analysis. In different ways, these three methods all advance an approach to jazz studies that emphasizes immanence over transcendence.

The concept of immanence ties together this dissertation's emphases on local communities, embodied experience, and gendered/raced aesthetic discourses. As I deploy the term for this project, immanence emphasizes relationality and participatory interaction. Within the broader world of American aesthetic discourse, and specifically jazz discourse, such an approach deviates from canon-building strategies that emphasize artists' autonomy and universality. To explain how a relational and, therefore, immanent analysis could threaten traditional jazz narratives and injure an ostensibly great musician's transcendent status, I want to examine a criticism I received on a course evaluation the first time I taught "Introduction to Jazz." An anonymous student offered the following critique:

I gained very little knowledge of what makes jazz jazz. It seemed all I really got from the class was an appreciation of how hard life was for many of the jazz pioneers; but, this in some sense seems to belittle their contributions to the western musical tradition.<sup>12</sup>

From this student's perspective, emphasizing the relations of power and the specific sociopolitical worlds in which music circulates "belittles" a musician's contribution, makes it into something less by interrogating it as relational rather than elevate it by emphasizing artistic individualism and "timeless" universal appeal. This concern

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<sup>12</sup> Anonymous student, course evaluations for MUSC 145, "Introduction to Jazz", instructor Christopher J. Wells, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Spring 2013.

reflects a fairly ubiquitous understanding of what makes artists and art important and worthy of serious discussion within American aesthetic discourse.

The rhetoric of transcendence in jazz studies turns jazz into a fuel source for the political project of American exceptionalism. As philosopher Lydia Goehr argues, American notions of freedom, liberalism, and individualism trade on a romantic discourse of transcendent musical autonomy—that true artists who create great art do so by moving beyond their immediate sociopolitical circumstances and act as transcendent bodies-for-themselves to create works that, in their disarticulation from social and political structures and relations, can achieve a kind of universality, can “stand the test of time.” By contrast, an immanent work lives within the less prestigious realm of craft, and its immanence is established through its relational positioning; it exists for others rather than purely for itself.<sup>13</sup>

This parsing of immanence versus transcendence as work-for-itself versus work-for-others comes from philosopher Gail Weiss’s feminist critique of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body. As Weiss argues, even as Ponty seeks to explicate lived experience, he still reinscribes a problematic Cartesianism that elevates transcendence above immanence, associating transcendence with the mind and soul as well as with masculinity while linking immanence with relational interaction, corporeal experience, and femininity.<sup>14</sup> The linkages Weiss draws here thus outline my project’s trajectory: in Chapter 2, I use spatial practice theory to argue that Webb achieved local

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<sup>13</sup> Lydia Goehr, “Political Music and the Politics of Music,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52, no.1 (Winter 1994): 100-102. My analysis here fuses Goehr’s critical discussion of autonomy in Euro-American aesthetic discourse with Gail Weiss’s working definitions of transcendence and immanence as a constructed (she argues false) dichotomy between the autonomous and the relational.

<sup>14</sup> Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 58.

success in Harlem by sensitively reading and negotiating the specific dynamics of power and desire in diverse venues and performance contexts; Chapter 3 constructs an analytical framework for approaching Webb's music grounded in a carnal musicology that is simultaneously reflexive and historical; Chapter 4 critiques white music critics' erasure and feminization of Webb's immanence to expose the systems of privilege and oppression that uncritically transcendence-oriented jazz discourse has supported since its inception. The dissertation closes by blending the previous chapters' methods to unpack Webb's 1937 battle with Benny Goodman's orchestra and critique the political implications of this moment's canonization.

### **Jungles, Palaces, Depressions—Harlem's Spheres of Spatial Practice**

Spatial practice theory as developed by Henri LeFebvre, Michel de Certeau, and Edward Soja articulates space as both constructing and constructed by the assemblages of practice that constitute everyday life.<sup>15</sup> By tracing the flows and movements that constitute everyday existence, spatial practice seeks to de-center our core assumptions about the relationships between objects, subjects, practices, and places. It characterizes the boundaries between these categories as fluid and, thus, reconceptualizes them as interlocking assemblages. I see spatial practice as a useful theoretical tool to bolster a perspective already highly present in black music studies and vital for my own research: a focus on cultural flows whose manifestations cut across subject and object, performer and audience, context and content. As a tool for theorizing everyday life,

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<sup>15</sup> Henri LeFebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life*, trans. Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore (New York: Continuum, 2004); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Steven Randall, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989).

spatial practice also strips certain actions, like creating art, of their privileged position as somehow more significant to cultural creation—and more autonomously generated—than the social, economic, and political fabric woven through routine acts.

Within musicological discourse, my application of spatial practice theory takes inspiration primarily from ethnomusicologist Travis Jackson's recent work on spatiality and jazz scenes. As Jackson argues,

The complex of factors that has allowed jazz to flourish in particular spaces and at particular times, therefore, argues for a history that takes account of the built environment and human uses and representations of it as more than silent partners to presumably more vocal historical processes.<sup>16</sup>

Operating from a Marxist geography rooted in the work of Soja and LeFebvre, Jackson interprets New York City's jazz scene through the concept of *spatiality*, which emphasizes human manipulation and negotiation of physical space. Focusing thus on the "contingency and variability of geography," his work foregrounds relationships between the individuals and groups that construct, maintain, and alter cultural scenes. This approach resists the separation of content from context, and it is crucial to my analytical approach to Chick Webb as an African American male musician, bandleader, entrepreneur, entertainer working and living in Harlem in the late 1920s and 1930s.

Over the past ten years, other jazz scholars have turned to space as an interpretive framework. Focusing on movement and travel, musicologist Andrew Berish builds critical interpretations of swing music in the 1930s by interrogating traveling musicians' drifting movements between rapidly changing modern landscapes.<sup>17</sup> Where

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<sup>16</sup> Travis Jackson, *Blowin' the Blues Away: Reflection and Meaning on the New York Jazz Scene* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 54.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Berish, *Lonesome Roads and Streets of Dreams: Place, Mobility, and Race in Jazz of the 1930s and '40s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

Berish's work focuses on the dislocation of travel, my analysis of Webb emphasizes his and his band's fixed positions and charts their movements internally within a single local scene: Harlem. While Webb also toured nationally, his reputation came from his long residency as the house bandleader at the Savoy Ballroom and, before that, his band's ubiquity in Harlem's wide range of cabarets and dance palaces. His was a sound forged in the clubs and ballrooms of Harlem's popular entertainment scene, and Chapter 2 seeks to excavate the specific practices that gave form to these diverse performance contexts. I explore Webb's career choices as manifestations of his movements through Harlem's popular entertainment scene as he negotiated the massive social and economic restructurings of the Great Depression. Ethnomusicologist Patrick Burke's thick history of jazz clubs on Manhattan's 52<sup>nd</sup> street provides a closer model for what I seek to accomplish as he explicates the relationships between one strip of nightclubs and ongoing negotiations over racial identity and shifting contexts for interplay between performers and audiences; Burke's work is all the more useful as he explicates these shifts as they play out in sound, in space, and in discourse.<sup>18</sup>

My emphasis on Webb as a local musician and on the specific conjunctural spatiality of Harlem seeks to productively narrow the national scope that most recent swing music scholarship employs. Over the last fifteen years, the phenomenon or "craze" within interwar American popular culture commonly referred to as "the swing era" has become a significant topic of interdisciplinary inquiry. Rooted in the traditions of American Studies, these works use swing music as a tool to explicate broader shifts in

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<sup>18</sup> Patrick Burke, *Come in and Hear the Truth: Jazz and Race on 52<sup>nd</sup> Street* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

American culture and ideology on a national level. Kenneth Bindas links swing as a cultural movement to American modernity and ties swing music to industrialization and the rise of an urban machine culture, and he claims that swing personified urban factory production.<sup>19</sup> Adopting a new historicist approach, Joel Dinerstein weaves together a network of cultural phenomena not obviously related to each other in order to present the rise of machine culture and technology as a fundamental paradigm shift in how Americans experienced the world around them, and he positions swing music as both a reflection of and response to that change.<sup>20</sup> Lewis Erenberg argues that swing was sustained on a national level by the social instability, skepticism, extended adolescence, and delay of stable work and family life brought about by the Depression.<sup>21</sup> David Savran uses “jazz” explicitly as a metaphor for shifting American ideologies and values as expressed in various forms of media and cultural production.<sup>22</sup> These studies have been critical to rekindling broader interest in this period and its musical culture, yet the broad brushes with which they paint the American *Zeitgeist* pave over important distinctions and particularities, especially when it comes to locality and race. As an intervention into this discourse, my focus on Harlem in the 1920s and early 30s shifts the focus of inquiry to this style of popular dance music’s ten years of local development before Benny Goodman’s crossover appeal sparked its

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<sup>19</sup> Kenneth J. Bindas, *Swing, That Modern Sound* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), 27.

<sup>20</sup> Joel Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture Between the World Wars* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> Lewis A. Erenberg, *Swinging the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), xiii.

<sup>22</sup> David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2012).



national rebranding as “swing.” Furthermore, my work rejects the equivalency, stated or implied, that these studies assign to black and white experiences of the Great Depression and emerging American modernity.

As a corrective to such nationally oriented approaches, this chapter emphasizes Webb’s band’s success within a local context; here, I explore Webb through Harlem as I explore Harlem through Webb. Two significant models for this approach—investigating individual jazz musicians through rich explications of specific places—are Thomas Brothers’ *Louis Armstrong’s New Orleans* and Mark Tucker’s *Duke Ellington: The Early Years*. These books employ thick explications of context to explore specific musicians’ stylistic influences and the communities in which they developed their sounds.<sup>23</sup> While studying significant individuals at the heart of the jazz canon, these books emphasize community and group dynamics by emphasizing the rich web of social relations and spatial maneuverings these artists negotiated, and they thus resist constructions of autonomous, esoteric genius even as they emphasize jazz’s two most central icons. Still, these books focus on Armstrong and Ellington’s early careers and thus function as origin stories that retroactively validate backwards-gazing observations about these artists’ mature styles as they narrate these jazz icons’ gestational periods of “pre-relevance.” Webb’s short professional career and early death make such an origin-focused history conveniently difficult to execute, and I instead apply Brothers and Tucker’s approaches to Webb’s core period of significant popularity.

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas Brothers, *Louis Armstrong’s New Orleans* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007); Mark Tucker, *Ellington: The Early Years* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

This study also joins a chorus of interdisciplinary voices re-exploring the dynamics of popular culture and social life in Harlem. Shane Vogel's work on the Harlem cabaret scene enriches our understanding of the racial politics of cabaret floorshows during the 1920s adding significant depth to more shallow portraits, which conscript the Cotton Club into service as a simulacrum for all Harlem nightlife in this period.<sup>24</sup> James F. Wilson explicates interwar Harlem's gender fluidity, queer culture, and articulations of same sex desire during this period. As a theater historian, he expands his discipline's notions of social performance, and his work explores the politics of desire in public and private social spaces, thus offering layers of nuance to the highly diverse performative contexts that shaped the dynamics of Harlem nightlife.<sup>25</sup> Broadening scope and context, Jonathan Gill's recent history charts Harlem's shifting social and racial trajectories over four hundred years, providing a longer view of the forces that defined the neighborhood's unique social geographies.<sup>26</sup> His work explains the particular confluence of local, national, and international events through which Harlem became the United States' most densely populated black neighborhood. I also lean heavily on Cheryl Greenberg's thorough study of Harlem's social and political economy during the Great Depression. Her analysis and the significant collection of quantitative data she puts together make possible my own exploration of the Great Depression's specific impacts on Harlem's musical culture. In fact, the temporal

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<sup>24</sup> Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> James F. Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Gill, *Harlem: The Four Hundred Year History from Dutch Village to Capital of Black America* (New York: Grove Press, 2011).

boundaries of Greenburg's study—1926-1935—neatly mark the rough borders of Chapter 2.<sup>27</sup> Where she uses this date range to move from the Great Depression's early onset in Harlem to the 1935 race riot, her study's temporal borders also mark the period from the Savoy Ballroom's opening and Webb's first press coverage in New York to the beginning of his national popularity and significant radio and touring career.

For all the talk of building new tools, this chapter hinges upon my reinvigoration of a classic jazz history method: the artist itinerary. Generally, itineraries have served to chart jazz musicians' careers and movements over time, providing important practical information regarding the precise times, dates, labels, and locations of significant recording dates and tracking sidemen's movements between orchestras. Itineraries give jazz researchers the necessary historical framework to explore and articulate relationships between artists' music and their social and spatial contexts. However, as close relatives of another ubiquitous methodology—jazz discography—itineraries tend to focus on artists' recording careers and, therefore, these ostensible charts of artistic pathways and full careers tend to erase the plethora of live performances that constituted the bulk of most jazz musicians' professional practice during the period on which my study focuses.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Cheryl Greenburg, *"Or Does it Explode?": Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>28</sup> Three such discography/itineraries exist that document Webb's performance career: Charles Garrod, *Chick Webb and his Orchestra—Including Ella Fitzgerald and Her Orchestra* (Zephyrhills, FL: Joyce Record Club, 1993); Ken Vail, *Ella Fitzgerald: The Chick Webb Years and Beyond 1935-1948 (Ken Vail's Jazz Itineraries 2)* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003); J. Wilfred Johnson, *Ella Fitzgerald: An Annotated Discography; Including a Complete Discography of Chick Webb* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2010[2001]).

I build my analysis of Webb's spatial practice through a detailed itinerary of live performances I constructed through more than 1,000 clippings from black newspapers between 1926 and 1939. In assembling these raw materials from African American newspapers, I relied on two important digital humanities databases: the Black Studies Center Newspaper Search (ProQuest) and America's Historical Newspapers (Readex). Through text-searchable newspaper databases, one can build a far wider dataset with which to produce itineraries including live performance reviews, advertisements, press releases, and announcements in the society pages. These vital digital humanities research tools render such a thorough collection of historical data far more practical than would otherwise be possible; we can now, and in relatively short order, expand itineraries and build analyses from them that reflect the full matrix of a jazz artist's professional life. Even for jazz researchers more interested in sound than context, traces of live performance in the print media—including both live reports and the rich iconography of advertisements—reveal the diversity and expansive scope of popular musicians' professional lives. In Webb's case, itinerary study reveals the drummer—today remembered exclusively for hot, uptempo swing music—was at the time celebrated for sweet orchestral music including waltzes, though he never recorded one.

Close attention to black newspapers also yields more detailed insight into venues and their management structures. Absent any surviving records for the Savoy Ballroom, which owner Moe Gale's son Richard believes were destroyed by former manager Charles Buchannan in the 1970s, official public announcements of closings, openings, renamings, renovations, etc. make it possible to map the shifting social,

economic, and political geographies that created musicians' performance contexts.<sup>29</sup>

For example, a study focused only on newspapers' direct discussion of Webb might miss the Savoy Ballroom ownership's 1929 takeover of the Alhambra Ballroom and their efforts to repurpose it as a venue for social and fraternal organizations' formal balls. On its own, this piece of information may be relatively trivial, but taken as part of a larger collection of events, it paints a more specific picture of Webb's growing relationship with the Savoy's management, which expressed itself not only in his band's well-known tenure as the Savoy's house band, but also in the significant national touring and radio broadcast opportunities through which the band blazed trails for better known African American bands. Like this event, most of the material I use to build this chapter's narratives predates the bulk of Webb's recorded catalogue. Indeed, to work from an itinerary focused on recorded material would be to relegate the entire first half of Webb's professional career to a marginal position as "prehistory."

Finally, focusing on the black press provides an important counterweight to jazz reception histories that privilege white critical opinion. While in Chapter 4 I explore the prominent role of white jazz critics in shaping jazz discourse and the problematic dynamics of representation that have resulted, the ubiquity of critics' work as a source of historical information in jazz studies stems from their outsized access to print media. The subject positions that offered critics such access have skewed the historical record, bending it toward an archive of privileged opinion. While focusing on the black press does not completely solve the problem, it still moves towards a more comprehensive and balanced perspective that at least lets us access Harlem events through media

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<sup>29</sup> Richard Gale, personal e-mail communication, 2010.

intended for audiences in Harlem and other black urban enclaves. While praising the increased access to these print sources that text-searchable databases offer, I should acknowledge those elders in the field who created similarly invaluable resources “the hard way.” Specifically, Franz Hoffman, who in preparing his massive and thorough study of Henry “Red” Allen, elected to turn his significant collection of advertisements from the black press into a series of thoroughly indexed anthologies.<sup>30</sup>

This chapter thus works from my own itinerary, using it as a temporal-spatial map of Harlem’s evolving nightlife through Webb’s particular professional movements. As we consider Webb’s navigations through Harlem as spatial practices, his experience also marks the on-the-ground movements through which this chapter arrives at its perspective “*in the city*.” Following de Certeau’s image of the street and the skyscraper as perspectives for inquiry and analysis, tracing Webb’s footsteps situates this chapter firmly on the street, “below the threshold at which visibility begins.”<sup>31</sup> From this perspective, de Certeau argues, we experience urban space not as a grandly designed, intentional plan but as a social text written through the movements and relations of individual bodies in motion. These individual bodies, in his words, “follow the thicks and thins of an urban text they write themselves without being able to read it.”<sup>32</sup> This is, however, where de Certeau and I part company as he considers this urban text, created from down below, only visible/legible from a privileged bird’s eye perspective.

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<sup>30</sup> Franz Hoffman’s collection of advertisements and clippings from black newspapers, as well as a series of thorough indexes, are now available online in pdf format at <http://www.rainerjazz.de/adverts.html>.

<sup>31</sup> de Certeau, *The Practices of Everyday Life*, 93.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

I contend that African Americans on the ground, in their neighborhoods, and in dance clubs displayed phenomenal social literacy; they absolutely read this “urban text” as they wrote it in music, in dance, in print, and in the diverse assemblages of public and private performances that comprised depression-era Harlem’s of everyday life. Harlem residents, and African Americans generally, felt and still feel the negative impacts of shifting social and spatial formations more acutely than those with more privilege and are thus more hyper-aware of the true stakes in contests over the politics of economies and spaces and also the politics of style and affect. As I argue in Chapter 2, the performance of style and affect were complex venues for highly sophisticated attempts to restructure and control the physical and social spaces of Harlem in resistance to the external forces that marginalized and segregated black people physically, spatially, and socially; this may just be what happens when spatial practice theory butts against the city’s “last hired, first fired” population. Chapter 2 thus works through Liggett and Perry’s contention that “conventional categories of space, of symbolic meaning, and of practical use are not just the purview of academic speculation, nor are they discreet areas of inquiry; they are active components of ongoing political play and struggles to define and enforce social realities.”<sup>33</sup> It demonstrates that, to Harlem’s black population, these connections were, if not verbally articulable, at least viscerally legible. Tracing these social geographies through Webb’s movements provides a different kind of window into the band’s sound and style, which they built in dialogue with the shifting circumstances around them.

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<sup>33</sup> Helen Liggett and David C. Perry, eds. *Spatial Practices; Critical Explorations in Social/Spatial Theory* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995), 5.

## Carnal Musicology—Research from “Under the Skin”

If Chapter 2 operates from a perspective “on the street”, Chapter 3 digs still deeper, entering into the body to explicate Webb’s uniquely strong musical connection/collaboration with lindy hop dancers. In doing so, I follow Brian Harker’s exploration of Louis Armstrong’s 1920s collaborations with eccentric dancers Brown and McGraw, in which he argues this collaborative engagement anticipated “the union of acrobatic music and dance in the swing era.”<sup>34</sup> Where Harker focuses on performance dancing intended for proscenium floorshows, my analysis of Webb’s “Let’s Get Together” engages primarily with social dance and focuses on how dance and music feel within one’s body. Following ethnomusicologist David F. García’s rich explication of how specific local and regional dance styles intersected with the musical style of Cuban tres player and bandleader Arsenio Rodríguez, I seek to deploy transcription and music analysis as tools to unpack the communicative dynamics between lindy hop dancers and Webb’s band during their longstanding residency as the Savoy Ballroom’s house band.<sup>35</sup> Also emphasizing dancer/musician collaboration and its impact on musical style, musicologist Howard Spring argues that the lindy hop was a major factor in the stylistic shifts in popular dance music between the 1920s and the 1930s.<sup>36</sup> Spring articulates the reciprocity that sparked mutual innovation within music and dance during this time, yet his lack of available evidence of lindy hop dance hinders his

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<sup>34</sup> Brian Harker, “Louis Armstrong, Eccentric Dance, and the Evolution of Jazz on the Eve of Swing,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 61, no.1 (Spring 2008): 70.

<sup>35</sup> David F. García, *Arsenio Rodríguez and the Transnational Flows of Latin Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> Howard Spring, “Swing and the Lindy Hop: Dance, Venue, Media, and Tradition,” *American Music* 15, no.2 (Summer, 1997): 183-207.



argument. As many contemporary dancers do today, he conflates dance as performed on film with social dance within ballrooms. In this project, I widen the field to find more sources through which to access the lindy hop including more recent videos of older dancers, contemporary film of new dancers, and a plethora of accounts in literature and in oral histories. Placed in dialogue with these sources, my own embodied perspective is vital to excavating this history as I seek to quasi-literally “flesh out” these accounts.

In this chapter, I approach the link between music and social dance through what I will call an “under the skin” perspective, which focuses on internal corporeal experience rather than on outward expression and presentation. The concept borrows a phrase from Russian choreographer/scholar Mura Dehn who, in her description of a lindy hop move she calls “the jazz pause” articulates the importance of those elements of dancing invisible to the naked eye,

The pause is a choked movement, thoroughly felt by the dancers, but executed, so to say, under the skin. It manifests itself in a pressure of muscles, a hesitation, or a step. The jazz pause is never an empty waiting for time. It is withheld rhythmic energy. It produces anticipation a kinetic excitement. There is a reserve which implies more than it shows.<sup>37</sup>

Dehn’s description here thus demands an analytic perspective formed “under the skin,” which I claim has two vital advantages in studying jazz dance. First, it accesses those elements of dance that exist beyond externalized expression and that are often unobservable through visual analysis. Just as music analysis traditionally relies on aural interrogation of sounding objects or, more frequently, on visual renderings of sounds, dance analysis and criticism similarly rely on the visual study of observable

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<sup>37</sup> Mura Dehn, “The ABCs or the Fundamentals of Jazz,” unpublished draft manuscript, Mura Dehn Papers on Afro-American Social Dance, Box 1, Folder 1, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

movements. This principle has bled into the emerging field of social dance research, where even dance never intended as performance is still analyzed as presentational and evaluated for what it displays or expresses to a real or imagined external viewer. Moving “under the skin” allows us to access less obvious yet arguably more significant elements’ of dancers’ corporeal experiences, or what dance anthropologist Drid Williams describes as “features about gesture and moving in general that belong to implicit (unexpressed) rather than explicit (expressed) knowledge.”<sup>38</sup> This perspective foregrounds dancers’ internal experiences and accesses, in Dehn’s parlance, “a reserve which implies more than it shows.” It invites dancer-scholars to use their own embodied practice as a tool for inquiry, which Williams calls a “dancerly point of view.”<sup>39</sup> It is an analytic both about and *through* the dancing body. Sociologist Black Hawk Hancock, in his recent ethnography of the lindy hop revival, articulates the vital role of embodied practice to his research methodology: “My approach of carnal sociology blurred the lines between dancer and academic, as my body became both a tool of social analysis and the object under investigation.”<sup>40</sup> Hancock’s “carnal sociology” echoes my own interpretation of “carnal musicology”, a term coined by Elisabeth Le Guin in her innovative study of Boccherini’s cello music. Her innovative book, *Boccherini’s Body* introduced a practice of “carnal musicology” that emphasized her own embodied experience as a tool of historical inquiry, or as she describes it in

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<sup>38</sup> Drid Williams, *Anthropology and the Dance: Ten Lectures* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004[1991]), XV.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Black Hawk Hancock, *American Allegory: Lindy Hop and the Racial Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 6.

reference to a Boccherini Cello Sonata, “the act of describing and interpreting this aggregate of fleshly phenomena called a sonata.”<sup>41</sup>

Le Guin’s approach to carnal musicology blends practices from the two traditions in which she engages with music as performer and musicologist. Through fusing her own contemporary experience with historical understandings of the body she forms a “kinesthetic analytical framework” through which to approach Boccherini’s music and locate its meaning simultaneously in his time and place and in hers. Like Le Guin, my analysis thus establishes a relationship between contemporary and historical practitioner, which involves working at the level of small details to produce knowledge from “sub-verbal, sub-intellectual assessment” on a communicative plane just beneath “the granular level of translation from sensation to concept.”<sup>42</sup> However, even before Le Guin’s pioneering text, musicologists have, since the founding of the discipline, relied on highly cultivated score reading and aural analysis skills forged through years of rigorous practice on one musical instrument or another. Furthermore, those scholars who overtly or covertly practice aesthetic criticism do so from a perspective that accesses their thoroughly practiced musical ears.

As an exceptional talent (I use the term to denote infrequency rather than my skill level) within musicology and jazz studies, my internalized knowledge as a dancer serves a similar function in my approach to interpreting this dissertation’s subject matter. Having taken up dancing at precisely the same time I began formal musical study, these two worlds of aesthetic knowledge have shaped my aural and kinesthetic

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<sup>41</sup> Elisabeth Le Guin, *Boccherini’s Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 36.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 14, 16.

sensitivities simultaneously, and I now find them often inseparably bound to each other through my intertwined perspectives as an analyst, historian, and practitioner. As such, the translation between my formal language for music and my corporeal language for dance happens largely naturally, and for me the scholarly work is to forge from this implicit, “under the skin” awareness a set of explanations and methods that will be legible and useful to other researchers.

My knowledge within both worlds suits this specific project well, because my analysis focuses on communication *between* musicians and dancers. I use my own bimusical perspective in an attempt to reconstruct the shared language that functioned “under the skin” of each art form’s expressive vocabulary. Ultimately, I situate my disciplinary entry point into this research as follows: I am a musicologist with a thoroughly dancerly point of view. To build upon the lauded jazz concept of listening with “big ears”, which jazz scholars Sherrie Tucker and Nicole Rustin reinvigorate as a metaphor for hearing gender in jazz, I would offer that—at least for swing music—big ears are not enough, for even the biggest of ears only scratch the surface of the corporeal tools we have available to listen deeply.<sup>43</sup> Feeling jazz through the body lends it an immediate presence that is difficult to pin down in language yet vital to jazz’s production and reception. As musicologist Charles Carson identifies the problem, “we are constantly frustrated with our inability to properly convey the moment-to-moment *nowness* of real time musical creation and how these fleeting moments are situated

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<sup>43</sup> Nicole Rustin and Sherrie Tucker, eds., *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

within equally fluid social, cultural, and political context.<sup>44</sup> Answering Carson's call for "more flexible analytical frameworks," I offer an under the skin stance as a framework that foregrounds participatory, kinesthetic listening. For me, "nowness" starts with shifting one's focus to the body as it listens, responds, and creates.

At the core of the historical phenomena I seek to explicate is the concept of affect. As defined by Lisa Blackman,

Affect refers to those registers of experience which cannot be easily seen and which might variously be described as non-cognitive, trans-subjective, non-conscious, non-representational, incorporeal, and immaterial. ...Affect is not a thing but rather refers to processes of life and vitality which circulate and pass between bodies and which are difficult to capture or study in any conventional methodological sense.<sup>45</sup>

The affective registers Blackman outlines describe unconscious movement, movement/motion and the interaction of multiple bodies. Affect theory is useful here because it emphasizes the "receiver" of culture, in this case music, as an active, participating subject, which Lawrence Grossberg explains in unpacking the "affective economy" of rock music.

The fact that we are dealing here with a musical apparatus makes it clearer that this affective economy exists at a level of materiality that need not be consciously experienced nor represented as such. Music's sensuous materiality transforms passive reception into active production. Music surrounds and invades the body of its listeners, incorporating them into its spaces and making them a part of the musical event itself. The listener becomes a producer in real and complex ways. Many of the musical practices of rock and roll clearly function to guarantee if not exaggerate this effect.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Charles Carson, "Broad and Market: At the Crossroads of Race and Class in Philadelphia Jazz" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2008), 8.

<sup>45</sup> Lisa Blackman, *Immaterial Bodies: Affect, Embodiment, Mediation* (London: SAGE, 2012), 4.

<sup>46</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, "'I'd Rather Feel Bad than Not Feel Anything at All': Rock and Roll, Pleasure and Power" in *Dancing in Spite of Myself: Essays on Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 77.

Grossberg's model of affect is doubly useful as he rejects a more simplistic "politics of pleasure" in favor of an affective register that emphasizes inarticulable levels of participation through which fans control their own listening and their own subjectivity. One could liken the distinction to Viktor Frankl's logotherapy and his rejection of Freud's pleasure principle in favor of an existence driven by the search for deeper meaning.<sup>47</sup> Especially vital to my study is the concept of affective or haptic communication, which "draws attention to what passes between bodies, which can be felt but perhaps not easily articulated."<sup>48</sup> The idea of "registers" speaks to my own dance experience (shaded through my study of the term as an opera singer), and I translate this roughly as close, elided layers my unconscious attention can move fluidly and rapidly between. The physical haptic communication and motion vision being two planes of attention—two "registers"—I think dancers access frequently within the affective realm.

While neither of these registers thoroughly indexes the significance of sound, ethnomusicology has a strong body of literature from which one could theorize an aural-affective register through scholarship that focuses on how music *feels* rather than how it sounds. As I seek to find articulable links between feeling and communication, two pieces of ethnomusicologist Ingrid Monson's work have influenced me tremendously: her book *Saying Something* and her subsequent work on "Perceptual Agency." Monson's work takes us within the communicative dynamics through which

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<sup>47</sup> Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, trans. Ilse Lasch (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).

<sup>48</sup> Blackman, *Immaterial Bodies*, 12.

musicians, specifically jazz rhythm sections, communicate in live performance.<sup>49</sup> These dynamics form the basis of my analysis for broader networks of intersecting conversations between musicians and dancers in which each individual processes and expresses sound and movement through a complex cycle of simultaneous translation between aural, visual, and kinesthetic media. Perceptual agency takes these interactions deeper into the brain by highlighting the cognitive decision-making through which individuals control and negotiate their listening experiences.<sup>50</sup> Building from Monson's explication of these dynamics, I see the tension and negotiation between the desires of listener and sound as a form of social dance in itself. This dance, both literal and metaphoric, functions thus in concentric spheres within the individual, interpersonal, and macro-social levels; dancers dance with their own cognition, with the music they hear, with their partner, with the musicians on the bandstand, with the mass of bodies in the room, with the physicality of the ballroom space itself.

While this approach may seem radical when applied to dance, it is, in fact, pervasive throughout musicology. Within ethnomusicology, developing a practitioner's perspective has long been a valued, even required in some schools of thought, tool for penetrating the logics of foreign musical cultures through participant observation and for developing an internalized sense of practice which one must translate into language interested outsiders will find legible, a process Mantle Hood termed "bimusicality."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>50</sup> Ingrid Monson, "Hearing, Seeing, and Perceptual Agency," *Critical Inquiry* 34, no.2 (Winter 2008): S36-S58.

<sup>51</sup> Mantle Hood, "The Challenge of 'Bi-Musicality,'" *Ethnomusicology* 4, no.2 (May, 1960): 55-59.

My approach takes inspiration from the merging of participant ethnography music theorist Jocelyn Neal employs to explicate the metric dynamics of structural interaction between dance and music in country dance halls.<sup>52</sup> Suzanne Cusick offers another vital perspective within musicology in “On a Lesbian Relationship with Music,” a piece which also focuses on how music *feels* to a listener. Blurring the line between the literal and metaphorical, Cusick’s description of an “on our backs” stance through which to listen highlights the importance of identity and experience as core parameters that shape our engagement with music.<sup>53</sup> Expressing musicality as fundamental to experience in the same ways as sexuality, Cusick emphasizes the significance of stance and perspective to how one listens and engages. Just as Cusick may not need to be *literally* on her back to access the mode of listening to which she gravitates naturally, my practice of listening to jazz “on my feet” is always with me.

An under the skin perspective, grounded in embodied practice offers vital “flesh” to descriptions otherwise constrained through what Charles Seeger identified as music scholarship’s “linguocentric predicament.”<sup>54</sup> Bridging the linguistic gap is particularly difficult when discussing black social dances, and I echo dance scholar Thomas F. DeFrantz’s claim that “the difficulty of relating social dances in general, and this practice [funk] of black dance in particular, amplifies the unstable, extra-linguistic

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<sup>52</sup> Jocelyn Neal, “The Metric Makings of a Country Hit,” in *Reading Country Music: Steel Guitars, Opry Stars, and Country Bars*, ed. Cecilia Tichi (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 322-337.

<sup>53</sup> Suzanne Cusick, “On a Lesbian Relationship with Music” in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Phillip Brett et al. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 67-84.

<sup>54</sup> Charles Seeger, “The Musicological Juncture: Music as Fact,” in *Charles Seeger: Studies in Musicology 1935-1975* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977), 47.



potential of these modes of corporeal exchanges.”<sup>55</sup> To access this extra-linguistic potential, I build this chapter through a carnal musicology designed to stabilize these potentials and render them linguistically. Through an auto-ethnographic inquiry that creates a “kinesthetic analytical framework” into both sound and history, this chapter deploys affect theory to reconstruct the ephemeral practices of improvised embodied knowledge that made Webb’s music something special for those dancers who moved with it and through it.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis—Reception Study as Allyship**

Chapter 4 focuses on reception history, which has become increasingly common within musicology—in particular to historical musicologists interested in engaging with culture and the politics of identity.<sup>56</sup> Reception histories have played a significant role in placing music of the past within its spatial and temporal context and focusing on contemporaneous local audiences in resistance to a canonic, critical lens that celebrates music’s ability to transcend said context. It has become a vital avenue for “the new musicology” to echo ethnomusicology’s call to study music both within and through culture.<sup>57</sup> In Chapter 4, I advance a form of reception study that foregrounds jazz

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<sup>55</sup> Thomas F. DeFrantz, “Unchecked Popularity: Neoliberal Circulations of Black Social Dance,” in *Neoliberalism in Global Theatres: Performance Permutations*, ed. Lara D. Nielsen and Patricia Ibarra (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 138.

<sup>56</sup> The intersection of identity politics and reception history has been explored most significantly in opera studies and in explorations of colonialism and exoticism in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century French music. See, for example, Ralph P. Locke, *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Gundula Kreuzer, *Verdi and the Germans: From Unification to the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Susan McClary, *Georges Bizet, Carmen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Tamara Levitz, *Modernist Mysteries: Perséphone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>57</sup> An effective use of reception study by an ethnomusicologist, and a major inspiration for this project, is David F. García, “Going Primitive to the Movements and Sounds of Mambo,” *Musical Quarterly* 89, no.4

criticism's material impact and the social systems of privilege and power it constructs and maintains. Toward that end, my reception history employs the practice of critical discourse analysis as defined by textual linguist Teun A. Van Dijk, "Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social political context."<sup>58</sup> My chapter thus seeks to understand the material impact of critical discourse both on Webb's career and on the field of jazz studies in general.

My focus on elite critical appraisals of Webb serves to flesh out the early formations of a potent aesthetic discourse scholars have come to call "the jazz tradition." Musicologist Scott DeVeaux explicated this tradition as a potent institutional and discursive construct that drives jazz's privileged status as an elite musical genre.<sup>59</sup> The jazz tradition's embedded ideologies and aesthetics drive patronage systems that trade on jazz's status as a significant art form to access support from public arts organizations, academic institutions, and the festival circuit. DeVeaux's incisive critique launched an interdisciplinary project of inward-focused critical historiography, often called the "new jazz studies," which has sought to both excavate and undermine the jazz

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(2006): 505-523. In this piece, García shows how reception reflected white anxieties regarding, and attempts to reconcile and socially assimilate, racial difference while maintaining white superiority. In this work, I build on this analysis by emphasizing white desire and appropriative deployment of blackness as the kind of subversive, enlivening cultural spice bell hooks explicates in her essay "Eating the Other." bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 30.

<sup>58</sup> Teun A. Van Dijk, "Critical Discourse Analysis," in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, eds. Deborah Schiffrin et al. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) 352.

<sup>59</sup> Scott DeVeaux "Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography," *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no.3 (Autumn 1991): 525-560.

tradition's logics and stories.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, Critical historiography has become, perhaps, the richest line of inquiry within the new jazz studies. One of the reasons Webb's reception is important is that it charts the early formation of jazz discourse as a coherent aesthetic system. Seeking to trace the formations through which this "jazz tradition" came to define the genre and its institutional structures, scholars have largely pointed to the emergence of bebop as the most obvious and significant aesthetic rupture, but philosopher Bernard Gendron has argued that debates over bebop formed from earlier clashes between swing fans and supporters of the Dixieland revival.<sup>61</sup> However, following Gendron's important article on the subject, others began studying the emergent elite jazz discourse in the 1930s in greater depth. Patrick Burke highlights jazz discourse's role in the shifting politics of race, gender, and popularity on 52<sup>nd</sup> street, and historian Bruce Boyd Raeburn emphasizes the roots of jazz historical discourse in emerging hot record collecting circles.<sup>62</sup>

Several authors have directed attention to those market forces, institutional structures, and agents of cultural change who define and police jazz's aesthetic borders.<sup>63</sup> Scholars also tend to locate what Bernard Gendron has termed "the bebop moment" as the point of rupture most central to jazz's narrative, the moment where the music becomes "high art." Leaning on the new jazz studies' feminist turn—and

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<sup>60</sup> Mark Tucker, "Musicology and the New Jazz Studies," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51, no.1 (Spring 1998): 131-148.

<sup>61</sup> Bernard Gendron, "Moldy Figs and Modernists: Jazz at War (1942-1946)," *Discourse* 15, no.3 (Spring 1993): 130-157.

<sup>62</sup> Burke, *Come in and Hear*; Raeburn, *New Orleans Style*.

<sup>63</sup> David Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Goldmark, eds. *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Frank Kofsky, *Black Music, White Business: Illuminating the History and Political Economy of Jazz* (New York: Pathfinder, 1998).

specifically the work of Sherrie Tucker, Tammy Kernodle, and Lara Pellegrinelli—this chapter uses dramatic shifts in Webb’s critical reception to expose the pathways through which racism and sexism are embedded in the foundation of jazz aesthetics.<sup>64</sup> Specifically, I seek to explicate a particular articulation of anti-capitalist ideology to fetishized constructs of black masculinity. However, criticism of elite white jazz critics is far from new and has a long history within African American critics and scholars of jazz. The most famous such piece is poet and scholar LeRoi Jones (Imanu Amiri Baraka)’s “Jazz and the White Critic,” which emphasizes the centering of white desire, experience, and institutional culture in the formation of jazz aesthetic discourse.<sup>65</sup> However, such scholarship tends to be marginalized in a space outside the dominant voices of jazz studies as an institutionalized discipline, especially within music departments.<sup>66</sup> As musicologist Richard Crawford has argued, Baraka and the stream of thought he represents, should be integrated more rigorously within scholarship about black music, and Guthrie Ramsey’s recent work has sought to put these two discursive spheres into more productive dialogue.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: “All Girl” Bands of the 1940s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Tammy Kernodle, *Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004); Lara Pellegrinelli, “Separated at ‘Birth’: Singing and the History of Jazz,” in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, eds. Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 31-47.

<sup>65</sup> Amiri Baraka, “Jazz and the White Critic” in *Black Music*. (New York: Morrow: 1960).

<sup>66</sup> For an in-depth study of the specific institutional formations of jazz studies and the differences between its role as a tradition of academic inquiry and as a field of applied music study, see Ken Prouty, *Knowing Jazz: Community, Pedagogy, and Canon in the Information Age* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2012).

<sup>67</sup> Richard Crawford, “ON Two Traditions of Black Music Research,” *Black Music Research Journal* (1986); 1-9. Cited and discussed in Guthrie Ramsey, *The Amazing Bud Powell: Black Genius, Jazz History, and the Challenge of Bebop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 194, n.16.

As this chapter developed, I realized it was less about blackness and femininity than it was about white masculinity, and it came take its cues from bell hooks' use of "White Heterosexist Capitalist Patriarchy" as a paradigm that both foregrounds intersectionality and redirects the theoretical apparatuses of identity politics toward those identities with the most privilege and power. It joins the growing discourses in masculinity studies and critical whiteness studies that seek to expose whiteness and masculinity as problematic yet potent constructs whose politics impact social formations and narratives that, like whiteness and masculinity themselves, read as neutral discourses unmarked by power and privilege. Contesting such readings, this chapter exposes the deeply embedded layers of raced and gendered privilege that drive jazz aesthetics. It does not contend, nor does it need to, that critics were consciously malicious, yet genuinely well-intentioned support and benevolence can have severely damaging effects within systems of unequal social power. As Robin Wagner-Pacifici argues in her study of discourse and violence, "the discourses do their work regardless of how attuned or oblivious a given social speaker is to the specific institutional variables of power in each case."<sup>68</sup> Following this line of analysis, I thus interpret what African American studies scholar Perry Hall identifies as the "racist habits of thought and association" that distort white admiration of black culture and route it through patterns of exploitation that stem from the simultaneous omnipresence and invisibility of white male privilege.<sup>69</sup> Jazz criticism's embedded racism and sexism become all the

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<sup>68</sup> Robin Wagner-Pacifici, *Discourse and Destruction: The City of Philadelphia versus MOVE* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 4.

<sup>69</sup> Perry A. Hall, "African-American Music: Dynamics of Innovation and Appropriation," in *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, eds. Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers

more disturbing when read through the concept of microaggression, a concept which further reveals that well intentioned critique, when filtered through the cultural traumas and injustices that create systems of privilege, can manifest as a form of social and psychological violence.

Webb's reception is a crucial object of study because the period in which he received significant critical attention coincides with the emergence of jazz criticism as a coherent discursive formation. Through charting shifts in Webb's reception during the mid-1930s, we see the foundational patterns of jazz aesthetics begin to coalesce. This early critical rhetoric has important historical as well as historiographic significance because of jazz scholarship's roots in the practice of jazz criticism developed by hot record collectors in the 1930s. The cultural brokers who fostered jazz's institutional turn in the 1950s and 60s, creating the academic space for "jazz studies", came from the same hot record collecting circles from which jazz's first formal written histories emerged. While "the bebop moment" remains the canonized creation point for jazz as non-commercial high art, the rhetorical and institutional groundwork for this turn was being built during the 1930s through the establishment of "professional critic" as an identity in jazz's art worlds and through the resultant development of historical narratives and coherent aesthetic criteria—constructs that continue to drive jazz discourse today. Indeed, studying this formational period reveals the roots of embedded racism and sexism that have survived the relatively seamless and underscrutinized transition of jazz criticism into the scholarly practice of jazz history.

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University Press, 1997), 34. Hall's more substantial explication of this dynamic appears in the epigraph to Chapter 4 (p. 173 of this document).

Given that the height of Webb's popularity was coterminous with the formation of jazz criticism as a practice, I use Chick Webb's critical reception to build a theory of the relationships between criticism and privilege that should have broader application across musicological discourse, especially in the areas of reception study and aesthetics. I form this theory by placing the concepts of four thinkers in dialogue: Howard Becker's "aesthetic systems," Judith Butler's "regulatory fiction," Todd Reeser's "crisis of masculinity," and bell hooks' "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy."<sup>70</sup> In Chapter 4, these concepts join to explicate how structures of unequal power in social systems create, through discourse, the aesthetic formations that govern evaluative judgment and spheres of opportunity within art worlds.

Chapter 4 thus builds from recent scholarship by Ben Filene, John Gennari, and Bruce Boyd Raeburn on jazz critics and their social circles in the 1930s. Raeburn's book emphasizes the New Orleans revival and the roots of jazz history within "hot record collecting" social clubs, Filene's study of roots musicians exposes the dangerous paternalism of well-meaning liberal white saviors, and Gennari's analysis of John Hammond's Ellington criticism exposes Hammond's interventionist drive to police black musicians' creative development.<sup>71</sup> My research on Webb's reception further develops the links between jazz aesthetics and anti-capitalist ideology suggested in these studies but routes their emphasis on race and class in a more intersectional direction that critically interrogates white critics' relationships with their own

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<sup>70</sup> Todd Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2010); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (London: Pluto Press, 2000[1988]); Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (University of California Press, 1982).

<sup>71</sup> John Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

masculinity. It also develops an intersectional theory that articulates a problematic relationship between anti-capitalism, unstable masculinity, and white privilege that I argue drives the raced and gendered microaggressions often present within jazz criticism.

Two terms need further clarification and unpacking here: privilege and microaggression. According to D.W. Sue,

Microaggressions inevitably produce a clash of racial realities where the experiences of racism by blacks are pitted against the views of whites who hold the power to define the situation in nonracial terms. The power to define reality is not supported at the individual level alone, but at the institutional and societal levels as well.<sup>72</sup>

Like many contemporary perpetrators of microaggression, early jazz critics often viewed themselves and their projects as integrationist and anti-racist. On that level, it is neither my intention or my goal to criticize their intentions or label them “bad people.” However, microaggressions often result from the aforementioned blindness that results from social privilege. This chapter thus articulates not only how jazz critical discourse’s oppressive rhetoric injured black artists, but also how it injured critics themselves. Indeed, through Reeser, I demonstrate that this cycle of oppression resulted from a crisis that male critics faced due to their own nonconformity to dominant narratives of masculinity, affirming the now widely expressed feminist position that patriarchy also deeply hurts men. This perspective highlights an important element of oppressive social systems articulated by Martin Luther King Jr., who said that “it is evil we are

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<sup>72</sup> Derald Wing Sue, Christina M. Capodilupo, and Aisha M.B. Holder, “Racial Microaggressions in the Life Experience of Black Americans,” *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 39, no.3 (2008): 335.



seeking to defeat, not the persons victimized by evil.”<sup>73</sup> The victims, in this case, include those knowingly or unknowingly perpetrating acts of oppression. Indeed, the averse-racist and microaggressive behaviors I identify in jazz criticism function, as Sue notes, “below the level of awareness of well-intentioned people.”<sup>74</sup> While microaggressions are fundamental to contemporary society, does such a concept meant to uncover covert racism post-civil rights era apply to a time of more overt racism? In this case, absolutely; jazz critical discourse had particular ties to anti-racist progressivism and an integrationist agenda. Thus, the concept directs needed attention toward the unconscious damage caused by well-meaning white men lacking both awareness of their(our) privilege and sensitivity to the problematic dynamics of institutionalized racism and the power structures in which their(our) behavior and relationships function.

Highlighting a dangerous mix of paternalism and desire, Ingrid Monson problematizes “white hipness” as a fetishization black culture that supports systems of oppression by reinscribing racial distance.

To the extent that well-meaning white Americans have confused the most “transgressive” aspects of African American culture with its true character, they fall into the trap of viewing blackness as absence. Whether conceived as an absence of morality or of bourgeois pretensions, this view of blackness, paradoxically, buys into the historical legacy of primitivism and its concomitant exoticism of the “Other.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Nonviolence and Racial Justice,” excerpted in *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: An African American Anthology*, second edition, eds. Manning Marable and Leith Mullings, (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2009), 378.

<sup>74</sup> Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010), 9.

<sup>75</sup> Ingrid Monson, “The Problem With White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48 no.3 (Autumn, 1995): 398; Patrick

Where her essay charts this problematic dynamic to the mid-1940s and subcultures surrounding bebop, my analysis traces this discursive formation to its roots roughly ten to fifteen years earlier in the emergence of a critical jazz press from international networks of hot record collectors. I also extend the concept of harm and impact a bit further than does Monson by emphasizing the extent to which critics' privilege gave them control over not only jazz aesthetic discourse, but also the more immediately material recording and performance opportunities available to black musicians. Though many white critics approached their interactions with black jazz musicians with the best of intentions, they were operating, often without sufficient sensitivity or awareness, from positions of unequal power. As Wagner-Pacifici argues, "social discourses both reflect and reproduce power relations that 'live' in social structures."<sup>76</sup> Therefore, even ostensibly anti-racist discourses still operated to reinscribe and even bolster systems of privilege and traditions of white appropriation and manipulation of black identity. I use Todd Reeser's concept of "crisis of masculinity" to further explain the white fascination with black masculinity that Monson and Patrick Burke identify, and my own analysis further ties this project to white hipsters' rejection of capitalism.<sup>77</sup>

I intend Chapter 4 to intervene proactively and create change in current circumstances. This goal reflects a core tenant of critical discourse analysis, which Van Dijk situates as "dissident research" that takes "an explicit position, and thus wants to

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Burke, "Oasis of Swing: The Onyx Club, Jazz, and White Masculinity in the Early 1930s," *American Music* 24, no.3 (Autumn, 2006): 320-346.

<sup>76</sup> Wagner-Pacifici, *Discourse and Destruction*, 4.

<sup>77</sup> Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory*.

understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality.”<sup>78</sup> Specifically, the chapter seeks to expose these discourses in order to interrupt their continued reinscription in jazz histories, classroom pedagogies, and public arts and commercial jazz institutions through which the “jazz tradition’s” raced and gendered aesthetic system circulates more broadly. As a scholar, I do want my work to disrupt systems of oppression and, in its small way, contribute towards a more just and equal and less racist, sexist, and heterosexist world. The specific tool through which this work enacts an activist project is allyship, a process through which people in positions of privilege—including me as an educated, credentialed, white, cisgendered male—take responsibility for both recognizing and disrupting those systems that offer us material and social advantage at the expense of others. As Paul Kivel defines the practice,

Being an ally to people of color is an ongoing strategic process in which we look at our personal and social resources, evaluate the environment we have helped to create and decide what needs to be done. ...This includes listening to people of color so that we can support the actions they take, the risks they bear in defending their lives and challenging white hegemony. It includes watching the struggle of white people to maintain dominance and the struggle of people of color to gain equal opportunity, justice, safety and respect.<sup>79</sup>

As such, my scholarship/allyship seeks to advance a theoretical model for understanding how music criticism embeds cycles of oppression and privilege within the aesthetic systems through which we process and evaluate music and musicians.

By focusing my attention on the unintentional, yet still significant, systems of oppression forged by elite white jazz critics, I seek to respond productively to Monson’s charge that white scholars of African American music are concerned primarily with the

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<sup>78</sup> Van Dijk, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” 352.

<sup>79</sup> Paul Kivel, “Being a Strong White Ally” in *Privilege: A Reader*, eds. Michael S. Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2003), 401.

“fun parts” of being black.<sup>80</sup> I thus position this chapter as a feminist and anti-racist academic project to identify and disrupt systems of social privilege and discursive violence both past and present. As Monson argues, “non African-Americans must examine the gendered and racial logic that has shaped their popular understandings of African American music and culture.”<sup>81</sup> My work here thus echoes and builds upon Sherrie Tucker’s similarly reflexive explorations of the relationships between her own subject positions and the problematic rhetoric she critiques in her objects of study.<sup>82</sup> My hope is that our “big ears” can stretch a bit further to hear the microaggressive traces of systems of oppression present daily in our music, our scholarship, and our pedagogy. The particular damage of 1930s jazz criticism is that its core assumptions have gone relatively unchecked in forming the ideological framework for jazz history’s dominant narratives. Like the soundwaves in musical recordings, these microaggressions have been thoroughly archived and preserved, embedded in our textbooks, curricular structures, and the language we have for deciding what jazz is “good” or “bad”, or in terms acceptable within scholarship: “relevant” or “marginal.”

## Conclusion

When I began this project, I thought I was making a polemic argument to praise and validate a “*kleinmeister*.” However, the more I have heard other scholars react to

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<sup>80</sup> Ingrid Monson, “Jazz as Musical and Political Practice,” in *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society*, eds. Gariel Solis and Bruno Nettl, (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 32.

<sup>81</sup> Ingrid Monson, “The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no.3 (Autumn, 1995): 405.

<sup>82</sup> Sherrie Tucker, ““But this Music is Mine Already: ‘White Woman’ as Jazz Collector in the Film *New Orleans* (1947),” in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, eds. Nicole Rustin and Sherrie Tucker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 39-40.

my “elevator speech”, the more I have come to see Webb as precisely the kind of figure we need to be writing about, because no one disputes his significance and yet many struggle to find language or strategies to approach his musical world. Thus, I see this lacuna as, ultimately, the type of methodological and discursive problem that the “new jazz studies” has moved towards correcting. From the Columbia Jazz Studies group’s cultural turn in *Uptown Conversation* to Gabriel Solis’ ethnographic study of Monks’ recordings and their influence and Ken Prouty’s analysis of jazz performance and music conservatories, the richest discourse in jazz is coming out of projects that not only tell new stories but that also offer us innovative new approaches and expand our ability to envision how different stories might someday be told.<sup>83</sup> Just as Webb’s music informed and was informed by the richness of cultural dialogue and the experiential and expressive assemblages of Harlem’s cultural life, I hope this project’s contribution is similarly dialogic and relational as a story with relevance both to understanding cultural phenomena in Harlem during the Great Depression and to building new pathways for aural-kinetic experience and cultural discourse in the present. As both a fascinating musician and a figure who poses challenging research problems, Chick Webb invites us to push ourselves towards new types of engagement, to meet him on those little explored planes and registers where we can glimpse what he “can really do.”

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<sup>83</sup> Robert O’Meally, et al. eds., *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Gabriel Solis, *Monk’s Music: Thelonious Monk and Jazz History in the Making* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Ken Prouty, *Knowing Jazz: Community, Pedagogy, and Canon in the Information Age* (Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2012).

## Chapter 2: “Harlem Congo”: Black Ballroom Culture and the Great Depression

*As Harlem’s community rituals were both expressive and ghettoized, however, so its dreams were both profound and deceptive. ... They considered the make-believe ‘signifying monkey’ part of Harlem’s home power to generate art and symbolize aspiration. ...Harlem Renaissance novels explicitly embrace the fusion of truth and pretense—even of paradise and damnation—in the rites of storefront churches and the rhythms of cabarets.*

– Sidney H. Bremer

*Then gradually the music of Chick Webb and his Chicks, the resident band, became closely intermingled with the noise of shuffling feet, the shouting and laughter of Harlemites from every walk of life—smart and rich ones, humble and low ones.*

– Leonard Feather

Born in 1905 and raised in Baltimore, Maryland, Chick Webb came to New York City in 1924 with childhood friend and guitarist John Trueheart., and while Webb’s band developed a strong national following late in his career, for his first ten years as a professional musician in New York, his band forged its career and reputation locally in Harlem.<sup>84</sup> As Webb travelled in the same musical and social circles as Duke Ellington and Coleman Hawkins, journalist Burt Korall has claimed that through these associations Webb “learned the folkways of the New York scene.”<sup>85</sup> Even when Webb

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<sup>84</sup> Webb’s exact birth year is a subject of some controversy as various publications place it in years ranging from 1902-1909. I find the evidence for 1905 most convincing based on Eric B. Borgman’s work with the 1910 and 1920 US Census Records. Eric B. Borgman “Setting the Record Straight” [<http://www.webcitation.org/query?url=http://www.geocities.com/ebbpeg/Webb.html&date=2009-10-25+21:36:34>]

<sup>85</sup> Burt Korall, *Drummin’ Men: The Heartbeat of Jazz, The Swing Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 12.

began to develop more of a name, his fame and his reputation were fundamentally linked to his Harlem popularity. George T. Simon's review of the band, in which he placed them among nation's best dance orchestras, focused fundamentally on their link to this specific locale claiming that "up in Harlem this group of swingsters is looked upon as a bunch of earthly god," and that their intonation and phrasing, often points for which black bands were criticized, were "truly exceptional when measured by Harlem standards."<sup>86</sup> In 1937, critic and promoter Helen Oakley noted that Harlem was Webb's home terrain and that he was "Harlem's true 'King of Swing.'"<sup>87</sup> Defending Webb's recordings with Mezz Mezzrow against ambivalent British critics, Edgar Jackson offered that "maybe this particular gang and its playing mean more to us Harlemites than to the rest of the world."<sup>88</sup> Webb forged this deep connection with Harlem audiences through his band's ubiquitous presence in Harlem's diverse social spaces. In 1932, the *New York Amsterdam News* claimed that, "Webb's crew of music makers are well known to Harlem night club visitors, they having played in most every Negro night spot of note."<sup>89</sup> These comments point to a band whose identity was fundamentally linked with this neighborhood and who enjoyed tremendous popularity with a specific group of fans. But who were these Harlem audiences who worshiped Webb's musicians "like a bunch of earthly gods," and why did Webb connect so strongly with this audience?

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<sup>86</sup> George T. Simon "Best Bands of the Year – 1935," *Metronome*, January, 1936, 35.

<sup>87</sup> Helen Oakley, "Call out Riot Squad to Handle Mob at Goodman – Webb Battle," *Downbeat*, May, 1937, 1.

<sup>88</sup> Edgar Jackson, "Harlem Figures," *Melody Maker*, February 29, 1936, 5.

<sup>89</sup> "Chick to Make First B'Way Appearance," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 8, 1932, 7.

The historical record indicates fairly universal admiration for Webb's band even as accounts of its style differed fairly wildly. Webb's popularity, therefore, came from multiple spaces that placed particular performance demands on both musicians and audiences. Negotiating these performance spaces, unpacking their raw materials and reshaping them to craft fluid identities as musicians, became a route to success and the means by which one became established in Harlem. To be especially skillful at this might be to become an ambassador for Harlem, or even to be worshiped as an "earthly god." In this chapter, I argue that the audience who worshiped Webb thus was far from uniform and that Harlem presented musicians like Webb with a broad range of performance contexts, each with their own social functions and musical expectations. Toward that end, I examine the diversity of Harlem venues at which Webb played, the different audiences he played for, and the types of performances the band offered.

To work successfully and consistently as a popular musician during this time meant understanding diverse performance contexts and adapting skillfully to shifting tastes and demands. Furthermore, in Harlem, context and style were linked strongly to enactments of ideology and identity as Harlem's cultural space was marked by a number of loaded, conflicting, and often contradictory signifiers of status.. This created a certain democratization of eliteness as an identity available to anyone who could skillfully embody its signifiers. Rather than the simple notion that youth and youth culture rejected these visions and the contradictions inherent in them, I argue that Harlemites of all walks of life created their physical and social world from the raw materials of ideological constructs, which they reframed, stripped down and rebuilt to



create new mixes of identities that reaffirmed dominant narratives and ideologies, but also exposed their slippages, excesses, and cracks.

Built from an itinerary of Webb's live performances in Harlem between 1926 and 1935, this chapter reinvigorates the jazz itinerary as a means to foreground live performance and places the chapters at "street-level." Echoing Michel de Certeau's "Walking in the City," this itinerary invites an analysis of Harlem's evolving social and political life through the lens of the Webb band's professional movement through shifting performance contexts within Harlem's vibrant and ever changing nightlife during the years surrounding the 1929 Wall Street crash.<sup>90</sup> This perspective reveals a bandleader with a versatile, chameleon-like musical style able to adapt to the demands of diverse audiences and spaces in Harlem and it treats music making and social dancing as threads in the fabric of everyday life. Within Harlem's clubs and ballrooms, the soundscapes Webb's band helped construct both created and responded to the emergence of black Harlem's public social culture.

This kind of analysis mandates a thorough conceptualization of space and spatial practice, and to construct such a model, I place the landmark theories of Henri LeFebvre in dialogue with several theories that discuss the specificities of space in African American culture. Musicologist Guthrie Ramsey employs the term "community theater" to access the social spaces of music-making in African diasporic cultures within which "audiences negotiate with each other—in a highly social way—what cultural

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<sup>90</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Steven Randall, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 91-110.

expressions such as music mean.”<sup>91</sup> Within such community theatres, meaning can be produced by the intersection of the three types of spatial construction LeFebvre outlines: spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces. In LeFebvre’s model, spatial practices are those everyday movements and performances that create the social relations which define social spaces; representations of space are those more intentional elements of planning and conceptualization deployed by those in positions of power to manipulate spaces and their official rules; and representational spaces are those relations formed through discourse and symbolic meanings.<sup>92</sup> In his work on black politics and the Apollo Theatre, Stuart Alan Clarke adapts LeFebvre’s triad to outline “the symbolic economy of race in New York City.” As Clarke explains,

This symbolic economy of race includes the historical traditions and collective memories that underwrite politics on the Apollo stage; the culturally dominant constructions and representations by which race is defined, and by which races are mobilized for political purposes; and the words, images, and symbols through which contemporary black people live their various lives *as black people*.<sup>93</sup>

Within Harlem ballrooms as “community theaters”, assemblages of musicians, social dancers, professional dancers, club owners, bouncers, poets, reporters, aristocrats, and countless others crafted the sonic, kinesthetic, and discursive performances that created space in Harlem.

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<sup>91</sup> Guthrie P. Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 77.

<sup>92</sup> Henri LeFebvre, *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 37-41.

<sup>93</sup> Stuart Alan Clarke, “Black Politics on the Apollo’s Stage: The Return of the Handkerchief Heads,” in *Spatial Practices*, eds. Helen Liggett and David C. Perry, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1995), 125.

LeFebvre's model is particularly timely when considering nightlife during this period in Harlem's history, because he built the theory specifically to conceive spatially the webs and networks of power relations formed within capitalist economies and official social structures. Harlem's popular culture during this time was a core site for the emergence of what Marc Anthony Neal identifies as America's "black public sphere."<sup>94</sup> As such, ballrooms and nightclubs became formative spaces from which African Americans generated new logics of race, ideology, economy, and cultural life. Specifically, such logics emerged from the urbanization of African American culture through which black "community theaters" transitioned from private or quasi-private cultural spaces to more official, public venues. Such public venues for black social culture existed at one end of what Katrina Hazzard-Gordon has identified as the "jook continuum," a model which offers an entry point into the fluidity of African American social spaces along the axes of public/private, official/underground, celebrated/subversive, and high class/lowdown. Her continuum emphasizes the contextual, contingent nature of these classifications as African Americans constructed and reconstructed social spaces through shifting and unstable articulations of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class. As Neal argues, the Great Migration forced African American social culture into these more "official" public venues.<sup>95</sup> Hazzard-Gordon identifies this as a shift from Jook Continuum spaces to the "commercial urban

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<sup>94</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 16-19.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* 7-10.

complex” of public social space.<sup>96</sup> Yet, there remained a porous boundary between official and unofficial cultural institutions; as Hazzard-Gordon explains, “the jook continuum imparted a distinct identity to the new forms. Rent parties, honky-tonks, after-hours joints, membership clubs, dance halls, and nightclubs existed simultaneously and cross-fertilized each other, forming a conglomerate of black working-class cultural institutions.”<sup>97</sup>

The particular negotiations within such spaces over race, representation, and ideology as enacted through, among other cultural practices, sound and movement, helped to shape the intersections of race, community, and economy that built the framework for black public culture in the United States during the twentieth century. A focus on spaces and spatial relationships as a means to understand the intersections between cultural life, sound, movement, discourse, difference, and power reveals Chick Webb as a skillful reader and writer of social texts who did thoroughly absorb his early lessons in “the folkways of the New York scene.” Webb was able to develop and grow his career as a successful bandleader by remaining attuned and adaptable to a community full of contestations and contradictions as it struggled externally and internally to establish what it meant to have a thriving urban black community in America.

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<sup>96</sup> Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), x-xi.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 124.

## A Tale of Two Harlems

During the 1920s, Harlem became the largest African American community in the US, the neighborhood's black population mushrooming from 20,000 to over 200,000 over the course of the decade.<sup>98</sup> By 1930, Harlem housed eighty percent of Manhattan's black population.<sup>99</sup> Its emergence as the United States' largest and most condensed African American community resulted from the compounding forces of a mass immigration of southern rural blacks and foreign immigrants to northern cities coupled with the formal and informal practices of segregation that consolidated and contained those populations in specific geographic locations.<sup>100</sup>

Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s was also a representational space, to employ LeFebvre's model, and the image of "Harlem" held different aspirations for different groups. For many upper-class whites, Harlem was an exotic ghetto and an exciting, titillating play space that gave them respite and cathartic escape from whatever they found lacking in their more conservative entrapments downtown. Through enacted spatial practices, this Harlem became a primary site of American exoticism and redirected the gaze of minstrelsy, with its own constructions of the simple rural Negro, onto African Americans' new cultural center in the north. Within this vision, exemplified by the representations of space in Carl Van Vechten's novel *Nigger Heaven*, Harlem was a place for extravagant, debauched nightlife that catered to white clientele often to the

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<sup>98</sup> Jonathan Gill, *Harlem: The Four Hundred Year History from Dutch Village to Capital of Black America* (New York: Grove Press, 2011), 282.

<sup>99</sup> Cheryl Lynn Greenburg, *Or Does it Explode?: Black Harlem in the Great Depression*. (New York: Oxford Universit Press, 1991), 15.

<sup>100</sup> I use the word "condensed" here to emphasize the forces of racial discrimination that confined black New Yorkers to an area too small to comfortably accommodate the city's rapidly expanding black population.

exclusion of Harlem residents. As performance historian James F. Wilson described the phenomenon, “Harlem was perceived and advertised as a site that tempted visitors with possibilities of both social and sexual transgressions,” and it promised a “pornographic playground” where adventurous socialites could “publicly enact their private fantasies.”<sup>101</sup> White patrons enacted these fantasies within the segregated performance spaces that lined Harlem’s main commercial thoroughfare on 125<sup>th</sup> street. These clubs catered exclusively to white clientele, offering them an experience of Negro entertainment and Harlem nightlife while maintaining the racial exclusivity they were accustomed to in downtown venues. The absence of black patrons maintained a clear distinction between “consumer” and “consumed,” casting “Harlem” and the black bodies within it as cultural commodities built through white fantasies and for white pleasure. The entertainment thus presented an exotic performance of dangerousness without offering the real subversive danger posed by integration.

In these spaces, black patrons were turned away by black bouncers to keep clear the distinction between white consumers and the black service workers who rendered and validated white desires through exotic floor shows, seductive music, and a plentiful supply of illegal liquor. As tap dancer James Berry recalled, segregated clubs were vigorously guarded to ensure that wealthy whites from downtown experienced the thrill of apparent danger while receiving protection that kept them extremely safe.

It was more protected than any place in New York. Everywhere you go the houses had parties. People had a ball. Luxurious furnished apartments, girls kept by rich men – they entertained at home. People had money, fine clothes, jewelry;

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<sup>101</sup> James F. Wilson, *Boondoggles, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 25.

they made rent parties and kept it going around like that. They made money and gambled too.<sup>102</sup>

This Harlem was simultaneously seedy and respectable, a kind of thrilling “open secret” that validated its white clientele’s progressive and subversive hipness while maintaining the boundaries that affirmed their control and racial superiority.

Webb’s band had at least two steady jobs at segregated Harlem clubs during the late 1920s. In January 1928, the band began a regular engagement at the Rose-Danceland at 209 West 125<sup>th</sup> street near Seventh Avenue. According to the *Baltimore Afro-American*, Webb’s band was regularly featured at the venue and the white clientele considered his band a gem within an otherwise underwhelming establishment. The *Afro-American* quoted an account from *Variety* describing the Rose-Danceland as “the wooziest of creep joints,” although it became a platform for Webb’s band to enhance its reputation.<sup>103</sup> Though the venue received little press coverage, it is likely Webb’s band was a mainstay throughout the late 1920s. In addition to the aforementioned 1928 account, a 1929 article refers to Webb’s Harlem Stompers as “regular favorites at Rose-Danceland.”<sup>104</sup> The venue did manage to distinguish itself through its late hours—it was open until three a.m. where similar venues closed at one a.m.—and through its promise of attractive black female “taxi dancers” who charged a per-dance fee to dance with the white male patrons. The *Variety* report described the taxi dancing as “a tariff dance idea

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<sup>102</sup> James Berry and Mura Dehn, “Speakeasys,” unpublished manuscript, n/d, Mura Dehn Papers on Afro-American Social Dance, Box 2, Folder 20, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>103</sup> “Webb’s Orchestra is Mainstay of Rose Danceland,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, January 7, 1928, 7.

<sup>104</sup> Maurice Dancer, “Webb’s Harlem Stompers, Sterling New York Band, to Play in ‘Dew Drop Inn,’” *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 23, 1939, A3.

of a dozen crawls for a dollar with an army of 'hostesses' on hand to entertain the visiting fleet."<sup>105</sup> The presence of taxi dancing facilitated mixed race social dancing without integrating the venue. So long as black women's bodies remained ostensible commodities to be rented for entertainment, this risqué, ostensibly dangerous, and subversive interracial contact posed no genuine threat to white supremacy within America's social order.

However, while black female cabaret and taxi dancers may have performed as commodities for white male pleasure, this performance served their own ends as well. Even when enacted through a gestural vocabulary built from primitivist stereotypes, such performances functioned discursively as critiques of Harlem's normative moral values and class hierarchy.<sup>106</sup> As Shane Vogel argues, black female performers in Harlem's cabaret scene were "cultural workers" who "used the cabaret to critique the racial and sexual normativity of uplift ideology and to imagine alternative narratives of sexual and racial selfhood."<sup>107</sup> While working under the white male gaze, such dancers were simultaneously contesting the black middle class gaze by offering alternatives to the conservative articulation of bodily comportment with moral value that dominated

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<sup>105</sup> "Webb's Orchestra is Mainstay," 7.

<sup>106</sup> Jayna Brown argues that through such "racialized gestural vocabularies," black female dancers could "shape and redefine their bodies as modern." Though I generally agree with Brown's argument, I do want to read her idea of "racialized gestural vocabularies" through Sherrie Tucker's observation that white performers often operated with a "working vocabulary of blackness." The performative tropes that black women performers deployed in cabarets likely both expanded and was also shaped by a racialized "working vocabulary of blackness" that affirmed white customers' expectations and satisfied their desires. As cabaret performers and taxi dancers deployed these signifiers in a professional context, the language "working vocabulary" is particularly apt. See Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 3 and Sherrie Tucker, "Beyond the Brass Ceiling: Dolly Jones Trumpets Modernity in Oscar Micheaux's *Swing!*," *Jazz Perspectives* 3, no.1 (2009): 18.

<sup>107</sup> Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009), 3.



public sphere discourse in Harlem.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, like the black male bouncers and other service workers whose actual labor—and enactment of a servant identity—affirmed white desire and white dominance, black women working as dancers also profited financially from this industry and through it found an alternative to other forms of service work that rendered them invisible support structures within white society. By manipulating and reshaping white constructions of black female bodies, cabaret performers and taxi dancers shaped the corporeal conversations through which systems of exchange, power, and representation were negotiated within Harlem’s “creep joints.”

As the house band, Webb’s ensemble provided the soundscape that bolstered the Rose-Danceland’s polysemic economy of signs. *Variety* described this 11-piece iteration of Webb’s group as “the best colored dance band in New York” and emphasized that the Rose-Danceland was a “common dance hall” whose success could be credited to Webb’s orchestra. They praised Webb’s band for “playing the colored man’s jazz az iz[sic]. It’s the Caucasian element that knows jazz as iz that has converted an impossible loft into a shrewd moneymaker.”<sup>109</sup> This review emphasizes the aesthetic paradigm that drove black performances for white male audiences at the time. Webb learned, as did Duke Ellington in developing his “jungle style,” and as did Harry Pace and Fletcher Henderson at *Black Swan Records*, that for white audiences, black music’s appeal was based on an authenticity built through the sonic and corporeal performance of difference. By emphasizing sonic otherness through exotic harmonies, rough timbres, and syncopated

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>109</sup> “Webb’s Orchestra is Mainstay,” 7.

rhythms, black musicians like Webb sonically constructed a racial distance that established in the minds of white patrons a sense of undiluted, authentic blackness. This was the colored man's music in its pure and primitive form untouched by the elite trappings of white culture; this was "jazz az iz." However, this aesthetic stance maintained white control of black culture by requiring the discriminating white audience member to validate black culture's unmediated racial authenticity. In the role of subversive discoverer, white audience members became characters as well, performing a sense of progressive taste and adventurous spirit by seeking out, recognizing, and protecting the music. For what would be its significance without "the Caucasian element that knows jazz az iz"?

In mid-1929, Webb's band managed what seemed like an upgrade from the Rose Danceland when they took over for Duke Ellington as the house band at the Cotton Club.<sup>110</sup> The Cotton Club, at Lennox Avenue and 142<sup>nd</sup> Street, was the most famous and iconic segregated venue in Harlem. In 1925, it adopted a similar whites-only policy to its chief competitor Connie's Inn, the club that initiated the practice of building Harlem nightclubs to appeal to downtown visitors. In taking over for Ellington at the Cotton Club, Webb stepped into the same role through which Ellington had launched his career with colorful, exotic compositions to accompany the club's salacious floor shows. The style now remembered through compositions like "East St. Louis Toodle-OO" and "Black Beauty" took on the moniker "jungle music" to emphasize its titillating alterity. The title also signified the exoticization of those scantily clad black bodies whose otherness and consummability the music helped construct.

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<sup>110</sup> Ernest Varlack, "Theatre Gossip," *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 13, 1929, 5.

Musicians were but one part of a broader system of African-American labor that produced this “jungle” image. Through this construct, black residents formed a system of cultural brokerage through which many, musicians included, profited from their roles in curating this fantasy space. White visitors even booked local tour guides to give themselves a taste of “authentic” low culture while still maintaining the distance between the consuming patron and the objects of their racial fantasy.<sup>111</sup> Berry recalls this dynamic, claiming that “doormen, chauffeurs, guides used to get rich taking people around, mostly people from Europe. They were shown the spots and they came back all the time because they enjoyed themselves.”<sup>112</sup> As an economic force, this image and the industry it supported infused money into the neighborhood, leveraging the clandestine bacchanalia brought on by the economic boom of the 1920s and the resultant demand for extra-legal social spaces spurred by prohibition. The performances in Jungle Alley nightclubs thus constructed race spatially by creating separation through the logics of consumer culture. In effect, the clear distinction between white patrons and black musicians, dancers, bouncers, and waiters extended the dynamics of staged performance off the stage itself, creating a kind of racial proscenium; even when clientele literally touched black bodies, as in the case of taxi dancing, the racial distance was maintained through the performance of clear distinctions between the consumer and the consumed.

The exotic and nostalgic enactments of blackness upon which this proscenium rested were encoded in the Cotton Club’s décor and architecture, which blurred the

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<sup>111</sup> Wilson, *Boondoggles, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 25-26.

<sup>112</sup> Berry and Dehn, “Speakeasys.”

lines between a plantation fantasy and an African one. As such, the jungle style birthed by Ellington and replicated by other bands similarly encodes and produces the racial spatiality of Jungle Alley. In the music that emerged from these clubs, we hear traces of specific spatial dynamics; to borrow the apropos title of an Ellington piece, we hear “Echoes of Harlem.” Specifically, we hear echoes of a soundscape that indexed “Africa” as a racialized primitive trope through what Kimberly Hannon Teal describes as a series of “imagined rather than discovered musical signifiers” including intensely inflected tones by wind players—screeching woodwinds or vocal-sounding plunger muted brass, for instance—heavy, often low-pitched percussion, and a strong emphasis on blues-derived language” as well as “drones, open fifths, pentatonic or non-western scales, folk-like melodic simplicity, extreme registers, dissonance, ostinato, and a general tendency toward minor keys.”<sup>113</sup> As Teal points out, this musical style came together from elements Ellington and his bandmates developed years before their residency began at the Cotton Club. However, it was within this particular venue and its specific performance context that this sound palette was articulated to the club’s assemblage of spatial practices. As the soundtrack to Cotton Club floorshows for white patrons, Bubber Miley’s trumpet growls paint the contours of the dancing bodies of high yellow chorus girls and a plantation-themed nostalgic landscape. Likely, this was the same musical style the aforementioned *Variety* reporter identified in Webb’s music as “jazz az iz.”

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<sup>113</sup> Kimberley Hannon Teal, “Beyond the Cotton Club: The Persistence of Duke Ellington’s Jungle Style,” *Jazz Perspectives* 6, nos. 1-2 (2012): 128, 130.

Indeed, Webb's earliest surviving recording serves as evidence of his engagement with Ellington's "jungle music" style. In October 1929, Webb and his band, under the moniker "The Jungle Band," recorded two sides for Brunswick: the up-tempo Charleston tune "Dog Bottom" and the slower "Jungle Mama." The latter recording contains many sonic signifiers of Ellington's jungle style. Its most prominent jungle signifier is the extended trumpet solo by Ward Pinkett (0:14-1:02) in which he displays the pitch bending, growling effects, and muted timbres popularized by the Ellington band's Bubber Miley. In fact, "Jungle Mama's" introduction and opening series of trumpet choruses mirror the formal plan of Ellington's most famous vehicle for Miley's playing "East St. Louis Toodle-Oo." In both pieces, an eight-bar ensemble introduction creates an *ostinato* that subsequently supports a two-chorus trumpet solo. "Jungle Mama's" tempo and persistent, steady guitar strumming are virtually identical to Ellington's 1931 recording "Echoes of the Jungle," and the ensemble's riffs and interaction with the trumpet soloists are also extremely similar.

The B-side of this record, however, exhibits another musical personality entirely, evoking a wholly different Harlem soundscape with its own intersections of physical spaces, spatial practices, and racial discourse. The upbeat "Dog Bottom" echoes the popular style of Fletcher Henderson's Orchestra, a paragon of race pride in Harlem during the late 1920s. Henderson's style of popular dance music adapted the intricate scoring practices of Paul Whiteman's orchestra with the signifiers of "hot" rhythm and black popular music Henderson acquired during his time as music director for Black Swan Records and as Ma Rainey's accompanist. The Henderson band molded such signifiers into an "elevated" form of intricately and cleverly scored music that projected,

for black audiences, the ideology of racial uplift and race pride. Henderson's band did not have the same kind of associations with exotic sexuality upon which Ellington's reputation was built, but they nevertheless built their success upon engagement with segregated white culture. In the late 1920s, they had a long-standing engagement at the midtown Roseland Ballroom, which served as a central site to channel white youth's thirst for exciting entertainment into respectable, upper-class venues replete with crystal chandeliers and other major signifiers of wealth and status. Even as he played for segregated audiences, Henderson's association with this venue and its elite status reflected his and other African American musicians' emerging upwardly mobile identities.

Echoing this sonic enactment of uplift discourse, Webb's "Dog Bottom" moves quickly from a Whiteman-esque, step-wise descending introduction to sixteen bars featuring a wind trio that reflected Don Redman's innovative arranging style for the Henderson band. This interweaving of instrumental combinations of various sizes with full ensemble passages and brief solos was the hallmark of Redman's style, and it projected an air of sophistication, cleverness, professionalism, and most importantly *literacy* that drove the reconciliation in the mid- and late-1920s in Harlem between popular "race music" and the ideology of racial uplift.<sup>114</sup>

For many Harlem residents, their neighborhood was to be a model of middle-class respectability and the realization of upward mobility for black Americans. A swelling population brought a plethora of skilled and unskilled workers to the

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<sup>114</sup> Jeffrey Magee, *Fletcher Henderson: The Uncrowned King of Swing* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2005).

neighborhood as well as many well-educated or otherwise elite African Americans. In one sense, Harlem became a kind of perpetual group performance of middle- and upper-class aspirations and of a people striving to improve their own conditions through perpetual striving. One could see this dynamic in the name “striver’s row”, which was given to the stretch of houses on West 138th and West 139th between Seventh and Eighth Avenues that was populated by Harlem’s more upwardly mobile residents; Webb and his wife Sally were among this neighborhood’s residents. Harlemites took pride in building the social and economic infrastructure that the broader culture denied them: hospitals, churches, schools, social and fraternal organizations, and successful businesses. Harlem, as such, became the national paragon of “racial uplift”, an ideology that encouraged African Americans to project an image of hard work, high achievement, and respectability.

However, while African-American values projected upward mobility, African-Americans still found themselves far worse off economically than white Americans. While blacks moved to Harlem seeking opportunity and a chance to participate in the thriving industrial culture of metropolitan New York, they faced severely limited economic and vocational opportunities due to the harsh impacts of segregation. Segregated policies denied black Harlemites access to the type of skilled training that would lead to genuine economic advancement, and discrimination compounded the problem by inflating housing costs. Most Harlem residents lived in overcrowded, substandard housing units, and those with jobs experienced very little job security and even less opportunity for advancement. As Cheryl Greenburg puts it, “Harlem crumbled into a slum while optimists noticed only advancement. It lived in depression before the

Depression.”<sup>115</sup> She argues that blacks were, in economic terms, a homogenous class as well as a race at the bottom rung of New York City’s economic ladder, “Blacks fared worse than any other group in the labor force. Opportunities for advancement were few and earnings low. Both employers and unions continued to maintain racial barriers to mobility.”<sup>116</sup>

The concept of class culture thus functioned in black communities during this time as a measure of performance and comportment more than of actual material wealth. As sociologist Benjamin Bowser outlines this phenomenon, the black middle class had economic parity, roughly, with the white working and lower class. However, their middle-class identity was derived through a matrix of social comportment and cultural affiliations. Often, this comportment diverged sharply from African Americans’ material circumstances or place on the scale of labor status.<sup>117</sup> Bowser’s concept is critical to understanding the cultural dynamics of class and class performance in Harlem at this time. An analysis that treats different venues or styles of music as belonging to discrete social classes with discrete membership would fail to recognize the possibilities for fluidity within a class system oriented around cultural signifiers and performance. This model offers a way to view social class as created through everyday movements within representational spaces.

Malcolm X took a cynical view of this phenomenon, arguing in his autobiography that African Americans refashioned their job titles to add layers of prestige beyond the

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<sup>115</sup> Greenburg, 15.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. 18.

<sup>117</sup> Benjamin P. Bowser, *The Black Middle Class: Social Mobility and Vulnerability* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2008), 64-66.



reality of their circumstances and that such performance was tantamount to delusion. This social performance concerned X largely because he thought it distracted African Americans from making radical pushes for equality that would make upward mobility tangibly possible rather than simply donning its trappings. Participation in civic organizations, one's manner of dress and comportment, and respectable engagement with the fine arts and literature were of massive significance to this emerging identity of black middle- and upper-class respectability, and they came to define the persona Alain Locke labeled "the new Negro." This "new negro" went to church, owned a business, was either well-educated or pursuing further education, and served as an exemplar for what all African Americans could become.

Musicians were negotiating these two conflicting visions and living in both worlds. On the one hand, successful swing musicians like Webb, Duke Ellington, and Fletcher Henderson were major public icons of black success whose prominence as successful bandleaders symbolized the potential for African Americans to make unique and valuable contributions to America by working hard, developing specialized skills, and contributing the uniquely valuable expressive voice of African American expressive culture. Many prominent musicians' the kinds of elite educational backgrounds that represented W.E.B. DuBois' "Talented Tenth." Jimmy Lunceford received his education at Fisk University in Tennessee and for a time was engaged to DuBois' daughter. His band emerged from his experience as a collegiate musician and validated the success of black institutions in producing new generations of increasingly successful and upwardly mobile graduates. Fletcher Henderson, a classically trained pianist, came to Harlem with a degree in chemistry from DuBois' Atlanta University. His emphasis on

tightly woven written arrangements and on precise execution helped inspire a push towards stronger musical literacy in Harlem. During his band's most popular period in the late 1920s, Harlem musicians took it upon themselves to learn to sight read western notation with extreme precision and reliability. This emphasis reflected a broader cultural drive to position Harlem's population as skilled, professional, and literate.<sup>118</sup> Duke Ellington, while not himself a college graduate, came from the upper middle class of Washington, D.C. and knew how to negotiate the expectations of the black elite. With his band the Washingtonians, he created an image of respectability and professionalism, and expressed admiration for prominent classically-trained white musicians, chief among them Paul Whiteman. Through his perpetual creativity and prolific output, Ellington moved even beyond the role of "arranger" to identify as a prominent American "composer", the highest possible calling for an elite, creative intellectual in the realm of music.

Webb was an exception to this trend, as he was a non-reading musician and remained such throughout his career. He continued to work by ear and to lead his band through intuitive expressions rather than through the emerging push within Harlem for European notions of technique and literacy. However, as a bandleader, he gravitated sharply towards the expectations of Harlem's elite, outsourcing those musical tasks that required formal education and music literacy to capable personnel.<sup>119</sup> Webb hired

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<sup>118</sup> Magee, 29-30.

<sup>119</sup> According to Garvin Bushell, who played with Webb in the late 1930s, Webb was not only musically illiterate, but could not read or write at all. He could, however, recall an arrangement from memory after a single hearing and was able to direct his arrangers orally to make changes when they rehearsed his band. Garvin Bushell and Mark Tucker, *Jazz From the Beginning* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 101-103. Cliff Leeman, a drummer with Artie Shaw's band, affirms this dynamic, recalling that Webb would make precise comments about dynamics and texture to his brass and reed sections during

other musicians to arrange for the band, to rehearse the band, and even hired a tall, attractive, charismatic man to “front” the band while he remained contently behind his drum set. Furthermore, what biographical details we have suggest he came from very little wealth or material comfort. Reportedly, Webb’s family could not afford the drumset doctors recommended as a tool to help him build physical strength, and he bought his first drums with money he earned himself on a paper route.<sup>120</sup> However, despite his illiteracy and beginnings as a paper boy, Webb’s social status rose through his success as a musician. Even when playing “jungle music” for segregated white audiences, his name appeared in the social pages of the *Baltimore Afro-American*, which noted his attendance at brunches, dinner parties, and other society events in Baltimore and New York.<sup>121</sup> Through his music, Webb sonically projected Bowser’s model of class culture in Harlem; his background, formal education, and even his material circumstances were insignificant, because his band produced the sonic profile of racial uplift and middle class success as authentically as bands fronted by men with university training who could read the notes.

While musicians participated actively in, and were icons of, Harlem’s culture of upward mobility, they plied their trade within the exoticized and segregated spaces this culture ostensibly rejected. Musicians thus lived within a world of cognitive dissonance produced by the irony of their circumstance: their places within Harlem’s class culture

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rehearsals Leeman observed in 1938. Dick Vance and Webb’s bass player Beverly Peer also confirm Webb’s complete mental retention of arrangements after a single run-through. All quoted in Korall, *Drummin’ Men*, 27, 32-33. Dancers Frank Manning and Norma Miller, Drummer Eddie Jenkins, and arranger Van Alexander all independently confirmed to me that Webb would have individual arrangers rehearse his band and would interject his aesthetic comments and adjustments as needed.

<sup>120</sup> Korall, *Drummin’ Men*, 11.

<sup>121</sup> “Jazz War to be Staged at Savoy,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 2, 1927, 7.

and their stature as models of racial uplift rested upon their success at providing the soundtrack for a consumer culture that affirmed white supremacy. Just like the Cotton Club's showgirls or the Rose-Danceland's taxi dancers—or for that matter any number of cooks and janitors—musicians could exist within segregated nightclubs so long as they maintained their roles as laborers producing black exoticism. As such, black nightclub performers rendered culturally subversive behavior as a pre-packaged commodity to be controlled and consumed by white audiences.

In the late 1920s, African Americans found ways to bypass segregated cultural spaces by constructing their own comparable institutions, and it was out of this independent striving that the Savoy Ballroom was opened in 1926. The Savoy was to serve as a kind of uptown Roseland that contested its downtown counterpart's segregated policies by offering a vision of utopian integration where people of all races and circumstances were welcomed. Early announcements in the *New York Amsterdam News* before the Savoy's March 1926 opening emphasized that the architects behind downtown dance palaces like the Roseland and Arcadia were overseeing the new ballroom's construction and decoration and that "thousands of dollars have been expended in interior decorations."<sup>122</sup> Despite such expenditures, the Savoy would charge the relatively low admittance fee of fifty cents. However, it still offered the kinds of material trappings that signified wealth and elite achievement at downtown dance palaces like the Roseland, and its décor was "laid out in a manner which holds good

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<sup>122</sup> "New Savoy Throws Open its Doors to Public in March" *New York Amsterdam News*, February 24, 1926, 5.

only in the most expensive places on Broadway.”<sup>123</sup> It boasted “ornate French mirrors, varicolored electric lights, and a reception room with costly rugs” in addition to a full staff of trained hostesses to entertain crowds.<sup>124</sup> These hostesses, along with the rest of the Savoy’s all-black staff, attended a twice-weekly “School of Courtesy” to ensure that “patrons will find themselves in an environment of refinement as well as beauty second to none.”<sup>125</sup>

At the Savoy, black patrons would have the opportunity to “sit at one of the many tables behind the highly polished rail and be served refreshments furnished by the most up-to-date caterers.”<sup>126</sup> The Savoy also gave black bands a space to play for integrated, though majority black, audiences in a respectable atmosphere. In its advertising, the Savoy emphasized that it would offer black patrons comparable entertainment to the white dance palaces in Harlem and downtown to which they did not have access.

Thousands have found enjoyment at the Savoy since it has been opened, and to the credit of the management be it said that they have always tried to please and hold their large patronage by offering things not to be found at any other place of its kind in the city catering to Negroes.<sup>127</sup>

The *Amsterdam News* hoped the ballroom would “fill a long-felt want and supply that something lacking elsewhere.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> “Thousands Storm New Savoy at Big Opening Friday Night, March 12,” *New York Amsterdam News* March 17, 1926, 5.

<sup>124</sup> “Largest Ballroom to Open Saturday,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 13, 1926, 4.

<sup>125</sup> “Savoy Ballroom Now Has School of Courtesy for its Employees,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 26, 1926, 5.

<sup>126</sup> “New Savoy Throws Open its Doors to Public in March,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 24, 1926, 5.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

Indeed, this “long-felt” want was so strong that the paper encouraged its audiences to actively support the Savoy and its promise of an upscale integrated venue, and it used the specter of the segregated Connie’s Inn to motivate Harlemites to validate the Savoy’s business model through their patronage. When the Connie’s Inn Revue was to be featured at the Savoy for a special Easter celebration, the *Amsterdam News* wrote,

Many colored people have not had the opportunity to see this revue in its own habitat, for few of the better class care to risk being elbowed aside by the whites patronizing the Inn and making it plain that it is a place run almost exclusively for the entertainment of others than those in the neighborhood. The Savoy is being run for the entertainment of colored people until such time when they fail to come out in large enough numbers to warrant the management discontinuing the laudable policy with which they started.<sup>129</sup>

The concern was actually well-founded; while it remains famous as Harlem’s first major whites-only cabaret and as the venue upon which the Cotton Club modeled their business, Connie’s Inn opened in 1923 as an integrated venue, its advertisements in black papers emphasizing in capital letters that “ALL ARE WELCOME.”<sup>130</sup> However, these ads disappeared only four months after the club opened, and its management ultimately found that segregation increased its appeal to free spending whites and strengthened its bottom line.

The Savoy Ballroom’s opening night featured Fletcher Henderson’s orchestra, then a darling of the Roseland, alongside Fess Williams’ Savoy Bearcats, one of the Savoy’s first house bands. The *New York Amsterdam News*’ first mention of Webb’s band came in a February 1927 advertisement for the Savoy. Webb’s “Harlem Stompers” received second billing after Fess Williams’ band, and the ad enticed the dancing public

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<sup>129</sup> “Easter to Be Fittingly Celebrated at the Savoy,” *New York Amsterdam News*, March 31, 1926, 5.

<sup>130</sup> Advertisements featuring this phrase ran weekly on page 5 of the *New York Amsterdam News* from August 5–September 26, 1923.

with “a thousand new features with many alluring surprises that will tickle you silly.”<sup>131</sup> Despite scant press coverage to that point, music columnist Eva Jessye reported in July that Webb’s Harlem Stompers at the Savoy were “the hottest 8-piece band in the country.”<sup>132</sup> Webb and his Harlem Stompers played there regularly during most of 1927 and returned in July 1928 after an eight-month absence, presumably while the band was in residence at Rose-Danceland.<sup>133</sup> In contrast to the primitivist discourse surrounding the Cotton Club, the Savoy praised its dance bands as disciplined and orderly, offering audiences a chance to “trip the light fantastic to the melodious strains emanating from a highly trained orchestra.”<sup>134</sup>

The Savoy’s marketing of its musicians reflected a larger strategy of projecting racial uplift. Manager Charles Buchanan promoted the ballroom as a wholesome environment. In response to criticism that the Savoy was too strict, Buchanan made a public statement articulating the Savoy’s philosophy.

Some folks have gotten the idea that the Savoy is too strict. They say that because we won’t stand for a lot of necking, indecent mooch dancing and the like that you can’t have a good time here. We want to tell you right now that it’s a lot of applesauce. We know and so do you that the Savoy is not a fly-by-night venture, but is intended to remain here for many years to come. We just feel it’s a lot nicer to live in a clean house than a dirty one and we know and so do you, nothing that isn’t on the level can survive for long.

You wouldn’t let your sister go to a place with indecent environment. You wouldn’t want your mother to know you go there. We realize how true that is, thus we conduct the Savoy along lines that will

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<sup>131</sup> Advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News*, February 2, 1927, 11.

<sup>132</sup> Eva Jessye, “Around New York,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 2, 1927, 9.

<sup>133</sup> “Amateur Gives ‘Kongo-King’,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 21, 1928, 9.

<sup>134</sup> “New Savoy Throws Open its Doors to Public in March,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 24, 1926, 5.

please your mother, your sister, and you. And believe us, you can have a mighty good time here.<sup>135</sup>

In addition to emphasizing orderly comportment and upstanding citizenship, the Savoy boasted of its employee compensation, claiming it paid each married male employee no less than \$40 per week and that musicians averaged \$75 per week, roughly three times the average salary for men in Harlem.<sup>136</sup>

On the one hand, the Savoy as a venue drifted away from the subversive and informal nature of black social spaces Hazzard-Gordon identifies as central to a *jook* environment. However, the Savoy restored a crucial element missing from segregated downtown ballrooms and Jungle Alley nightclubs by providing avenue for black participation.<sup>137</sup> I highlight participation here to emphasize within black social spaces the instability of strict distinctions between performers and audiences. In contrast to the Cotton Club and Rose-Danceland, the Savoy offered patrons a space with a porous or non-existent “proscenium” as audience members participated with the band and constructed space actively through their own movements as dancers.

Webb’s band also performed with massive stage reviews designed for black audiences. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, they performed especially frequently at the Lafayette Theatre, which billed itself as “America’s Leading Colored Theatre.” The Lafayette became a trailblazing success in Harlem when it came under new management in 1925. Its new white manager, Frank Schiffman, made it his goal to

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<sup>135</sup> Charles Buchanan, public statement quoted in “Savoy Takes Over New Alhambra Ballroom,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 14, 1929, A3.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin’*, 145.



restore the theater to greatness by marketing elaborate stage shows to a high-class black clientele. His theater promised a unique new format that combined top bands with comedy teams and novelty eccentric dance acts, attractive chorus lines, and new motion pictures with sound starring well-known black actors and actresses. At the Lafayette, Webb performed nightly in mammoth stage productions whose casts regularly totaled more than fifty and featured a variety of dance acts and comedians; advertising indicates the productions were always paired with one or two film screenings. His first Lafayette revue, 1928's "Let's Dance" included comedians Emmet Anthony and Sledge & Sledge alongside dance acts including Edna Barr and SH Dudley's Dancing Girls. In 1929, just two months after he began his Cotton Club engagement, Chick Webb and his "Night Club Band" accompanied the Lafayette's "Hallowe'en Fantasy" Revue.

THE WORLD'S GREATEST  
COLORED MUSICAL COMEDIES AND TALKING PICTURES

DON'T  
MISS  
THIS

AMERICA'S LEADING COLORED THEATRE

# LAFAYETTE

7-10 E. 42<sup>ND</sup> ST.

DON'T  
MISS  
THIS

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Now Showing --- On Stage and Screen  
 Billy Cumby --- Houseley's Ebony Knights  
 Geo. Crawford --- Edna Barr --- Johnny Alexander  
 Chick Webb's Night Club Band  
*in the fast and funny revue*

## Hallowe'en Fantasy

*Beautiful --- Funny --- Snappy*

Also the Talking Photoplay Sensation

## "WONDER OF WOMEN"

With LEWIS STONE and PEGGY WOOD

Figure 2.1. Lafayette Theatre "Hallowe'en Fantasy" Advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News*, September 18, 1929, 9.

The Lafayette's revues reveal a space that adopted the clear division between performers and audience members yet also diverged from the racialized aesthetics and segregated business models of Jungle Alley clubs. As a theater, and especially as a motion picture theater, where blacks could occupy any of the available seating, the Lafayette stood in direct contrast to the image of "Nigger Heaven" outlined by Carl Van Vechten in his novel. Van Vechten locates "Nigger Heaven" in the crowded upper balconies populated by black audiences in theaters with segregated seating plans. As Sydney H. Bremmer suggests, these balcony spaces represented Harlem as a whole: a contained area for black cultural life where crowding was a fundamental source of both joy and sorrow in community life: "Enforced crowding: that was the prison in which the Harlem Renaissance paraded its colors and music, the ghetto that was the 'Negro Capital' of America, the source of the tears in Harlemites' laughter."<sup>138</sup> The Lafayette, however, contested this sense of crowding by giving black patrons access to every seat in the theater.

The Lafayette thus articulated a vision of social life in Harlem beyond the stereotyped view of lascivious nightlife within an overcrowded ghetto. In a 1924 essay pushing against such characterizations, James Weldon Johnson highlighted the Lafayette as a positive example of cultural heft within Harlem's nightlife.

It is this quality of spontaneous, easy joy permeating the colored section of the city that makes it seem so colorful and exotic to white visitors. That is true of the night life of Harlem as well. There are a number of movie houses and theaters, of which the Lafayette has the distinction of producing the well known Lafayette

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<sup>138</sup> Sidney H. Bremmer. "Home in Harlem, New York: Lessons from the Harlem Renaissance Writers," *PMLA* 105, no.1 (January, 1990): 51.

players and of being a trial ground for some of the colored musical comedies that have taken Broadway by storm over the last few years.<sup>139</sup>

In the following paragraph, Johnson expands his defense of Harlem's cultural life, contesting white stereotypes with a vision of Harlem's cultural life as more similar to the "downtown" world than different from it, arguing that this Harlem was largely invisible to white tourists.

Not all of Harlem's life is visible to the visitor who views it from the sidewalk...for Harlem has a life of its own, it is a well-organized city and has its inner circles of cultured, well-educated and charming people, with as elaborate a social life as that of any group in the country. Its doctors and lawyers, its business men, politicians, writers, clergymen form a community that exercises an influence not only in Harlem and on the city, but on the entire Negro population of this hemisphere.<sup>140</sup>

Accompanying up-and-coming black entertainers for crowds of such "well-educated and charming people," Webb's band's music at the Lafayette advanced an image of blackness as potent as the Cotton Club's primitivism but that located racial difference of exceptionalism rather than exoticism. At the Lafayette, Webb played for an audience who saw themselves worthy to occupy the entire theater rather than be crowded to its margins. As African Americans sought to reclaim both the image of their neighborhood and its physical spaces, they would, ironically, be aided by the same economic phenomenon that also plunged the neighborhood further into economic distress.

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<sup>139</sup> James Weldon Johnson, "'Harlem is Capitol of the Negro World, Says Johnson,'" *Pittsburgh Courier* [reproduced from the *New York Evening World*], October 18, 1924, 3.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

## Harlem after the Crash

The onset of the Great Depression hit communities throughout the United States hard, but it hit Harlem and other black neighborhoods even harder. Compared with 10% nationwide and roughly 17% in New York City, Harlem's unemployment lingered around 25% in 1930 and mushroomed to 50% by 1933.<sup>141</sup> Those residents lucky enough to find work generally found positions well below their levels of experience or education and were earning only 50-80% of white salaries for similar positions and were working significantly longer work weeks.<sup>142</sup> Frustration and desperation made Harlem a much more dangerous place to live as its already high murder rate more than tripled. Harlem was still better off than many black communities nationwide, yet this further compounded the neighborhood's overpopulation problem as still more desperate migrants flooded the area. The increasing demand for housing causing a further spike in rental prices for what were still substandard dwellings.<sup>143</sup>

While musicians began to feel the pinch, Webb expressed significant confidence publicly during the early years of the depression. He was one of the bandleaders interviewed by the *Chicago Defender* in late 1931 as worsening conditions impacted black people in all professions. Webb's response highlighted his band's attitude of perseverance.

The young musical hounds who constitute the Chicks are not at all frightened by the tenseness of the situation, especially in the orchestral field, and we are confident in our ability to weather the storm with perfect ease. That is a

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<sup>141</sup> Greenburg, 45.

<sup>142</sup> Gill, 283, 292.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid. 284-5.

characteristic of ours, and we are by no means intending to be different now. We will blow our way to the top!<sup>144</sup>

While Webb's boasting may have been more about publicity than substance—we cannot confirm whether Webb actually said this—his confidence turned out to be prophetic. Webb's popularity and his financial success did steadily increase throughout the 1930s as his band worked regularly at Harlem's theaters and ballrooms, recorded prolifically for the Decca label, and was among the first black dance bands with significant national radio exposure. He managed to achieve success during an economic downturn by adapting skillfully to shifting demands and conditions as the Great Depression's impact on Harlem restructured the institutional dynamics of public performance. By adapting to changing racial policies/politics, engaging new patronage systems, working within new labor structures, and seizing new performance opportunities, Webb's band managed to thrive. Negotiating these new landscapes required musical sensitivity as well, and Webb's band's relative success highlights his musical versatility and sensitivity to audience and context. Accounts of the band and its recorded output reveal musicians capable of fluidly traversing the boundaries between "sweet" and "hot" popular music, and their coverage and reception in the black press during this time highlights the band's capability to accommodate its circumstances and to thoroughly integrate itself into the social life of Harlem's community. The reputation the band built as Harlem's finest also laid the groundwork for its emerging "crossover" success with white audiences and later as a national phenomenon.

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<sup>144</sup> Chick Webb, quoted in Andy [no last name given], "Depression Does Not Worry Orchestra Men," *Chicago Defender*, October 31, 1931.

As community needs increased during the depression, African-Americans continued the practice of creating the public and social infrastructure denied them by a city government relatively unconcerned with Harlem's significant needs. Social services were routed through churches and fraternities, which provided aid to residents. The civic life of Harlem's social elite was thus more than cosmetic and served to create a highly interdependent, self-contained community network upon which residents depended not only for the social validation of their upwardly mobile aspirations, but also for those vital services necessary to simply survive. Social clubs took on an even more active role in sponsoring dances and other events in the 1930s, and Webb's band performed much more frequently at dances sponsored by different types of Harlem clubs.

Webb spent the bulk of 1930 in residence at the Alhambra Ballroom, which frequently put on dances sponsored by the plethora of clubs ubiquitous to Harlem's social culture at the time. Owned by the Keith-Albee Vaudeville monopoly, the Alhambra was the Million Dollar Ballroom until it was renamed and reopened in 1928 after a significant refurbishing and rebranding to model itself after the success of the Savoy. It functioned largely as a venue for society functions and basketball games, though it closed its doors before the year's end. In July 1929, the Savoy Ballroom's management leased the Alhambra from Keith-Albee and reopened it as a venue that exclusively courted business from social clubs.<sup>145</sup> The Savoy's management took out weekly ads claiming the Alhambra "is destined to be the pronounced favorite of the

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<sup>145</sup> "Savoy Management Takes Over Alhambra Ballroom," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 24, 1929, 13.

Smartest and most Exclusive clubs and fraternal organizations.”<sup>146</sup> When they came on board in January 1930, Webb’s band was included as part of a rental package for society parties and social functions.<sup>147</sup>

Groups often held such functions annually, or with much greater frequency, as a core piece of their contribution to social life in Harlem. While some of these events were simply formal or informal dances, others took the form of “gala” festivals complete with floorshows and elaborate decorations. One of Webb’s earliest gigs at the Alhambra was a dance given by the Debutante Club, “one of New York’s exclusive younger girls clubs,” at which invited guests wore formal evening gowns and members performed classical ballet at intermission.<sup>148</sup> Featuring Webb at their formal “dance and sip” event, the Phi Beta Sigma fraternity covered the ballroom in streamers representing their club colors, and “an avalanche of balloons–Sigma colors also, and autographed by the frat, rained down on the dancers.”<sup>149</sup> The all-male Alwyns Club, for their spring dance, brought in E. Ronald Eason, a decorator from Chicago to elaborately transform the ballroom.

The entire scheme of decoration was that of a beautiful English garden and was built around a beautiful fountain topped by a marble faun. A profusion of palms and shrubbery, with garden seats here and there, together with the aid of soft, shimmering lights, made the illusion complete.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News* July 31, 1929, 13.

<sup>147</sup> Advertisements for this arrangement ran weekly in the *New York Amsterdam News* on page 9 from September 17–October 1, 1930 and on page 11 on October 8, 1930.

<sup>148</sup> “Tid-Bits of New York Society,” *Chicago Defender*, January 18, 1930, 5; “New York,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, January 25, 1930, 5.

<sup>149</sup> “Jerry,” “The Social Whirl,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 3, 1930, 7.

<sup>150</sup> “Alwyns Club Sponsors Dance: E.R. Eason Supervises Unique Decoration of Ballroom,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 30, 1930, 6.

In addition to Webb's music, the affair included an interpretive dancer and a performance by students from the Ann Johnson Dancing School. The Alhambra provided a strong venue for these sorts of affairs as its infrastructure, on which the Savoy reportedly spent \$50,000, lent itself to both social dancing and the performance of high society galas.<sup>151</sup> It was decorated in gold and Nile green and had palm trees lining the entrance to the dance floor.<sup>152</sup> For most of these dances, one could purchase admission for a dollar, but one could also pay five dollars for one of the "reserve boxes" that ran in a ring around the dance floor from the ballroom's mezzanine level.<sup>153</sup> Considering Bowser's model of class performance, the Alhambra's interior space bolstered the same class performance Webb's tightly arranged music enacted sonically by offering the "trappings" of middle- and upper-class respectability to Harlem's social club while simultaneously offering clubs patways to shore up their economic foundations, which had no doubt been rocked by the depression.

Just as Harlemites went to great lengths to re-fashion ballrooms' interior spaces into projections of success, progress, and elite achievement, so too did they mold their bodies into projections of the same. The aforementioned Ann Johnson Dancing School was one of many such establishments that offered Harlemites rigorous instruction in classical ballet and formal European ballroom dancing. A 1936 WPA report on Harlem dance schools noted that for most, this training was intensely rigorous yet still avocational.

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<sup>151</sup> "Alhambra Now Open for Booking," *New York Amsterdam News*, August 21, 1929, 8.

<sup>152</sup> "Alhambra Ballroom has Grand Opening," *Chicago Defender*, September 21, 1929, 11.

<sup>153</sup> Numerous advertisements and announcements cited in this dissertation indicate the Alhambra's pricing structure for club dances was uniform or at least consistent.



...owing to the fact that the chances for them to appear on the Stage and Screen are so limited, the majority of them take these courses simply to develop their physical culture, poise, grace and beauty, and most of all because they like it. Several of the girls and boys who attend these schools are students attending Elementary School, High School and College; and some of them are employed in some way or trying to make a livelihood. It is nothing unusual to see them coming straight from these institutions and work places to the Dancing Schools where they are trying to adapt themselves to this art with as much determination and satisfaction as if they were preparing for a professional career.<sup>154</sup>

While classical dance training may not have promised professional success, it did offer a path to a sense of belonging and the acquisition of prized social capital through building “physical culture.”

A precursor to modern bodybuilding, “physical culture” proposed that one had autonomy over one’s body and could reshape and transform it through effort and discipline. The concept held particular appeal for African Americans because it resisted the discourses of biological determinism that validated their marginalization. As Mark Whalan explains, discourses of physical culture “take on a very different status when appropriated by racial groups whose bodies had been overdetermined by white racist discourse, and this applied especially to African Americans” because they “offered their consumers a particular agency over the constitution of their identity. Put in simpler terms, physical culture promised its customers that building the body built the man.”<sup>155</sup> Building one’s physical culture was necessary to participate fully in the dances held by social clubs, which typically called for formalwear, sometimes including a theme like

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<sup>154</sup> Louis B. Bryan, “The Theatrical Schools of the Negro in New York: Their History and Development,” draft of report for the WPA Writers Project, 1936, Writer’s Program, New York City: Negroes of New York Collection, reel 2, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

<sup>155</sup> Mark Whalan, “Taking Myself in Hand: Jean Toomer and Physical Culture,” *Modernism/Modernity* 10 no.4 (November 2003): 597, 604.

black and white gowns or floral colors. Along with an evening of social dancing, the affairs often included a group sing-a-long of the club's anthem and a grand march or waltz reserved for the club's members to parade with their escorts before hundreds or thousands of guests. Clubs thus leveraged the aristocratic associations of European ballroom dancing to craft public spectacles wholly different from the floorshows of Jungle Alley. As they held each other in the erect posture of the Viennese Waltz, Harlem's social climbers projected their own image of race pride, moving their properly adorned bodies through properly adorned spaces as models of respectability and achievement.

While Webb is most often remembered and celebrated for his hard-driving swing arrangements, the ones that would lead white critics to praise the band's authentic presentation of hot rhythm, black newspapers indicate that Webb's band in the early 1930s had a strong reputation for playing "sweet music," more soft, possibly saccharine, pop arrangements that were far more commercially popular hot swing music at the time. During a visit to the Savoy in 1930, *Baltimore Afro-American* reporter George Tyler noted that while Andy Kirk's band supplied the "dizzying" hot music for lindy hoppers, Webb's band offered a much softer vibe.

Soft lights over head, on the side lines of the walls, and at our feet, behind the orchestra floats grey clouds, the moon is in evidence, there is the soft tantalizing waltz strains by Chick Webb and his Chicks, to add a breath of romance to the evening.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> George D. Tyler, "Harlem Rambles: Tyler Gets Lowdown on Savoy Hostesses," *Baltimore Afro-American*, December 6, 1930, 9.

Several years later, even when his reputation hinged on driving “hot rhythm” at the Savoy Ballroom, a *Melody Maker* critic noted that the band always ended its evenings with a beautifully executed waltz.

Finally, Chick Webb drifts into the nightly strains of *Home Sweet Home*. It has been said that to talk of a “swing waltz” is equivalent to asking for a blue piece of red chalk. Those who would care to realise the falsity of this simile should hear Chick playing 3/4 time.<sup>157</sup>

Webb’s band’s soft romantic music, the upright comportment of waltzing club members, and the elaborate ballroom decorations represent an assemblage of spatial practices through which musicians and patrons rendered the Alhambra as a representational space that bolstered the discourse of racial uplift. Expanding the term from its original usage, all the spatial practices—musical, decorative, architectural, and corporeal—within this space crafted a “physical culture” through which Harlem residents, even during economic depression, claimed access to the cultural capital afforded elite European class signifiers by decoupling it from the financial capital to which they had far more limited access.

The Alhambra’s management facilitated the venue’s transition into a space for social club culture to flourish by offering a safe and attractive financial incentive to social clubs seeking to minimize expenditures given the tightening financial climate. Under the management of Buchanan protégé Harold Parker, the Alhambra ran advertisements in the *New York Amsterdam News* throughout 1930 offering Webb’s band as part of a money saving package for social clubs, who could use such events as profitable fundraisers. As it was under the same management, the Alhambra’s

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<sup>157</sup> “Stompin’ at the Savoy with Chick Webb and his Band,” *Melody Maker*, June 20, 1936, 2.

arrangements with clubs were likely modeled on the Savoy's innovative financial guarantee. The Savoy had appealed to society clubs since its opening by guaranteeing returns and protecting club members from financial risk. A 1926 bulletin spelled out the Savoy's new program.

[Clubs] find it unnecessary (due to our unique profit sharing plan) to worry about what music to engage, or the various other complications required to prepare an evening's entertainment for a large crowd. We have systematized the entire procedure so that members of your organization can concentrate their entire time and attention on whatever means are employed to draw a large attendance for the dance. Above all--no one is compelled to obligate themselves with guarantees--you have that feeling of relief knowing that you have no bills to meet for music, rentals, advertising, etc. IN FACT--ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS TELL YOUR FRIENDS YOU ARE CONDUCTING A DANCE AT THE SAVOY--URGE THEM TO COME--AND WHEN THE DANCE IS OVER COME INTO OUR BUSINESS OFFICE AND COLLECT YOUR SHARE OF THE RECEIPTS.<sup>158</sup>

With the onset of the depression, the Savoy's ability to absorb financial risk made its arrangements even more popular with society clubs.

After he left the Alhambra, Webb began a consistent residence at the Savoy that would define his career throughout the mid- and late 1930s when he became the Savoy's most famous "house band." Throughout his time at the Savoy, Webb continued performing for the types of society functions for which he had performed at the Alhambra. A 1933 report in the *New York Amsterdam News* indicates the Savoy diversified its offerings by adding "hot floor shows" like the Lafayette and by continuing and extending its business with social clubs.

Fighting against the wave of depression that has carried other places of its kind under, the Savoy has instituted an elastic policy, which will permit clubs, especially the long established organizations, to secure the place without the least chance of losing in the arrangement of their affairs.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Savoy Ballroom, "A Message to All Members," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 19, 1936, 3.

<sup>159</sup> "Revues Topped at Dance Hall," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 17, 1933, 8.

In 1935, the band played alongside Fess Williams' orchestra for the formal spring dances of the Brooklyn Phi Beta Sigma chapter and the Happy Hour Social Club.<sup>160</sup> The following year, the group played for a spike of spring club events. The Polyana club insisted on a strict black and white dress code for their invite-only affair, and the Savoy's bouncers both scrutinized invitations and turned away anyone otherwise attired.<sup>161</sup> These parties included the "syncopated dance music" Webb's band enshrined on record, but also a wider variety of music for two-steps and waltzes. Indeed most club dances included at least one "featured waltz" exclusively for club members and their dates.<sup>162</sup>

While some clubs used these events to raise funds for their own club functions, others used them to advance agendas of economic empowerment, social uplift, and charitable giving. In 1930, Webb played for an Alhambra function sponsored by the students at Harlem's Lincoln Secretarial School. The dance was a platform for the trade school's white President, Gilby Robinson, to announce plans to open a department store "as a means of combating the discrimination of race as it is practiced by the leading white concerns."<sup>163</sup> Charitable work for the band would pick up during the Christmas season. Webb returned to the Lafayette Theatre for a midnight benefit show sponsored by the local Elks Lodge (Imperial Lodge no. 127) alongside the cast of the revue from Small's Paradise, to bolster "the Imperial Lodge's efforts to obtain funds for feeding as

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<sup>160</sup> "700 Members at Spring Formal," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 18, 1935, 6.

<sup>161</sup> "Polyana Club Has Black and White Formal," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 16, 1936, 6.

<sup>162</sup> For one example of this format, see "Papillons Stage Savoy Dansante," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 9, 1936, 6.

<sup>163</sup> "Club Sponsors Informal Dance," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 16, 1930, 7.

many as apply on Christmas Day at the home.”<sup>164</sup> Webb also joined an interracial fundraiser at the Roseland Ballroom where his was one of 22 bands, among them Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington, that joined MC Rudee Valee for a Christmas relief benefit.<sup>165</sup>

Webb’s involvement with both charitable and political fundraisers continued throughout the early and mid-1930s. In early 1932, the Emergency Unemployment Relief Committee’s Harlem division staged a “Jobless Benefit” at the Lafayette, which featured a plethora of bands and dance acts including Don Redman and Cab Calloway’s bands and eccentric dancer Earl “Snakehips” Tucker; the Lenox Club, Small’s Paradise, Connie’s Inn, and the Cotton Club all lent out their current bands and show casts to contribute.<sup>166</sup> In 1934, he played for the Negro members of the Knott Hotel Employees Benevolent Association and also joined Al Jolson, Bill Robinson, Ethel Waters, and Willie Bryant’s Orchestra at the Apollo for a summer benefit for the Harlem Children’s Fresh Air Fund, through which the Mahopac Democratic Club sought to “send many of the Harlem youngsters to camp during the hot weather.”<sup>167</sup>

In 1935, his band furnished the music for a Savoy Ballroom fundraiser for the defendants of the Scottsboro Trial, which was sponsored by the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners.<sup>168</sup> Also at the Savoy, they joined Duke Ellington and Claude Hopkins’ orchestras along with dance acts including Buck and Bubbles and the

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<sup>164</sup> “Imperial Lodge Benefit Next Week a Big One,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 10, 1930, 5.

<sup>165</sup> “Gulf Coast Four Stopping in City,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 20, 1930, 1.

<sup>166</sup> “Posner to Stage Jobless Benefit,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 30, 1931, 10.

<sup>167</sup> “Many Stars Carded for Apollo Benefit Show,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 30, 1934, 6.

<sup>168</sup> “Huey Master of Ceremonies at Savoy Scottsboro Ball,” *New York Amsterdam News*, March 2, 1935, 10.

Mills Brothers to help the Frederick Douglass chapter of the John Brown Memorial Association raise funds to erect a John Brown statue in Harlem. Local churches were also asked to hold special sermons and direct parishioners to the event.<sup>169</sup> This type of charitable engagement became a pattern for Webb, who in 1936 donated personal funds to flood relief and offered to play for any function nationwide benefitting victims of widespread flooding.<sup>170</sup>

Webb's enthusiasm for charity work and benefit gigs extended his reach and visibility with white audiences including the upper reaches of New York society. He appeared on stage at the Metropolitan Opera House in April 1935 as a surprise act for the Met's annual fundraiser benefitting its maintenance fund. The event, honoring the retirement of manager Giulio Gatti-Casazza, included a revue titled "Opera-tunities" featuring Lily Pons, Laurence Tibett, and lyrics by Deems Taylor. Webb's participation received significant coverage in the black press, for, as the *New York Amsterdam News* put it, "the fact that Chick Webb of Harlem stepped out in such famous company made this section of the community raise its eyebrows."<sup>171</sup> With this event, Webb's was the first black band to ever perform at the Metropolitan.<sup>172</sup> Shortly following his appearance at the Met, Webb's band was tapped by the musician's union for a city-wide benefit where orchestras toured through ballrooms all over the New York City. The one-night circuit included other prominent black bands such as Claude Hopkins' and Don

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<sup>169</sup> "John Brown League to Present Benefit," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 29, 1934, 13.

<sup>170</sup> "Offers Aid to Flood Victims," *Atlanta Daily World*, March 25, 1936, 1.

<sup>171</sup> "Chick Webb Gets Spot on the Metropolitan Benefit," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 6, 1935, 10. This story ran concurrently in the *Chicago Defender*, *Baltimore Afro-American*, and *Atlanta Daily World*.

<sup>172</sup> Rollo S. Vest, "The Lowdown," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 9, 1935, 3.

Redman's, but it also included the most prominent white orchestras at the time—Paul Whiteman's and Guy Lombardo's.<sup>173</sup>

Webb's active involvement with the musicians' union local 802 also reflects his increasing savvy regarding the band's professional representation. As working professionals in Harlem, dance musicians sought increasingly to improve their circumstances through collective action. His prolific appearances in stage and nightclub reviews were likely linked to his membership in the Rhythm Club, an organization that aided black bandleaders finding work. Founded in 1927 by Chicago musician Bert Hall on 132<sup>nd</sup> street, the Rhythm Club functioned as a nightclub and musicians' hangout but more importantly as a collective self-help organization for black musicians. Hall's club was part of a wave of similar organizations that sought to combat structural discrimination through mutual aid and organized collective advocacy. In 1930, Harlem grocers founded the Colored Merchants Association to negotiate collectively with wholesalers and otherwise improve their business models through cooperative initiatives.<sup>174</sup> The Harlem Business Men's Club formed due to segregated policies that excluded black business owners from the Harlem Board of Commerce.<sup>175</sup> Hall also had a strong model for this type of organization within Harlem as James Reese Europe's Clef Club had similarly organized black musicians two decades prior and had expanded their placement at theaters and ballrooms through the organization's collective reputation for professionalism and excellence. By 1933, the Rhythm Club had over 1,500 members

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<sup>173</sup> "Chick Webb Continues to Hold the Spotlight," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 20, 1935, 10.

<sup>174</sup> Greenburg, 61.

<sup>175</sup> "Harlemites Invading 125<sup>th</sup> St.," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 11, 1933, 2.



and boasted on its rolls “the names of most of the leading Negro artists in America.”<sup>176</sup> In addition to its President Teddy Hill—who would later famously manage Minton’s Playhouse—the Rhythm Club counted among its members Webb, Fletcher Henderson, “Fess” Williams, and Claude Hopkins, all of whom were featured regularly in both ballrooms and large reviews.<sup>177</sup> Before his death in 1933, Hall had used his successful efforts with the Rhythm Club to expand black participation in the musicians’ union, Local 802. Webb’s band also became represented by Associated Colored Orchestras management, who helped him secure bookings both locally and nationally. Most major black bands in New York aligned themselves with the ACO including Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Fess Williams, Vernon Andrade, and Mills Blue Rhythm Boys. The ACO also succeeded at increasing black bands’ access to the radio airwaves, and Webb took particularly strong advantage of this opportunity. By 1931, ACO bands were featured regularly on two radio stations: WMCA and WPCB. These stations were owned by Donald Flamm, the press agent and publisher behind the *Theatre Guide* magazine that promoted Broadway entertainment, and he was a strong proponent of featuring black entertainment on his stations.<sup>178</sup> Their vision fit the demands of radio as a medium, which sought both to fill massive amounts of airtime with programming and to diversify that program to reach as many demographics of listeners as possible. As the *Pittsburgh Courier* explained the medium’s potential:

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<sup>176</sup> “Bert Hall Rhythm Club Has Memorial,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 25, 1933, 8.

<sup>177</sup> “Shrine to Musicians Erected,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 18, 1933, A6.

<sup>178</sup> “New York is Home of Big Time Radio Acts,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 3, 1931.

In view of the fact that radio has universalized its programs with a view to catering to every group, class, and variety of its gigantic audience, the Negro has played his rightful part in every parity or significant designation.<sup>179</sup>

While other orchestras made only periodic appearances, Webb proved to have significant staying power on the airwaves. The same month as the aforementioned piece ran in the *Courier*, the *Chicago Defender* reported that Webb “is the only leader whose band can be heard over the radio nightly. Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Blue Rhythm and the rest have all ceased playing over the air, but Webb remains.”<sup>180</sup> By integrating his band into the realms of institutional advocacy and benevolent fundraising, Webb participated actively in the growing culture of local institution building through which Harlemites responded to the declining economy and to relative indifference from the official engines of public relief.

### **The Brief Life of the Dixie Ballroom: Race and the Battle for 125<sup>th</sup> Street**

In early 1933, Webb left the Savoy management’s umbrella to take up residence at the new Dixie Ballroom, a grand reimagining of the segregated Rose-Danceland where he played in 1928, newly re-designed as an upscale integrated ballroom to rival the Savoy. Within a month, Webb’s band left the Dixie after management failed to compensate them.<sup>181</sup> By May, Webb’s band was back at the Savoy playing opposite Fess Williams.<sup>182</sup> By any reasonable measure, the Dixie Ballroom was a complete flop, yet the

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> “Keeps Place on Radio,” *Chicago Defender*, October 24, 1931, 5.

<sup>181</sup> Maurice Dancer, “Harlem By Night,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 25, 1933, A9.

<sup>182</sup> Advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News*, May 3, 1933, 8.

circumstances and rhetoric surrounding its brief life reveal crucial shifts in the social, economic, and racial dynamics of Harlem's nightlife that had far-reaching impacts throughout the 1930s on Webb's career and on Harlem's cultural and political life more broadly. Specifically, the Dixie Ballroom offers a window into both the erosion of white "slumming" culture and a resultant push for more integration as well as a crescendo of anger and frustration surrounding the persistent, racially-driven economic oppression along Harlem's main commercial thoroughfare of 125<sup>th</sup> street.

For all the damage the depression wrought on Harlem's community, it did force the entertainment industry to refocus their efforts on black audiences. The economic impact on middle- and upper-class whites prompted a change in social behavior as former Harlem "slummers" saw their budgets for leisure spending evaporate. Yet, the erosion of segregated business at the onset of the depression seems strange in light of the fact that the black entertainment business managed to thrive. Since black Harlem suffered economically to a more significant extent than the rest of the city, one would assume their patronage of lavish nightspots like the Savoy and the Lafayette would similarly drop off. However, the reverse proved to be true as the surviving venues were those that stuck with or bolstered the role of black patronage in their business models. I suggest two explanations for this phenomenon. First, while Harlem's black population suffered disproportionate impacts economically, the shift in their circumstances was one of degree rather than of kind. As Greenburg articulates, Harlem like most black communities experienced a "depression before the Depression," and thus black nightlife and entertainment had already thrived in an atmosphere of high unemployment and low wages throughout the 1920s. While the 1929 crash radically altered the life

circumstances, outlooks and spending patterns of those who had prospered during the “roaring 20s,” as Savoy Ballroom dancer Frankie Manning put it, the depression years “didn’t make that much difference to my family since we were poor anyway.”<sup>183</sup> Or, as the housekeeper of sociologist E. Franklin Frazier reportedly said, “I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no Depression, I ain’t seen nuthin’ but hard times all my life.”<sup>184</sup> The Savoy Ballroom thus continued drawing robust crowds, for as Manning elaborates, “dancing was an outlet for people because there wasn’t much else they could do. We all stayed in Harlem, but you could find someplace to step out every night of the week. Going to a ballroom became our social life.”<sup>185</sup> While the depression may have killed the trend of exotic slumming for wealthy whites, for them Harlem nightlife was a subversive luxury good. For black Harlem residents, ballrooms and entertainment venues were vital elements of public culture and community life.

Owing to the Savoy’s continuing success, other venues turned their attention towards young black clientele. In early 1933, the Rose-Danceland, the “creep joint” where Webb played in 1928, dropped its segregated policies and completely recast itself as an integrated dance palace to rival the Savoy. Seeking to capitalize on and replicate the Savoy’s successful operations, they brought in Harold Parker as ballroom manager, a longtime Savoy assistant who had managed the Savoy for a year in Charles Buchannan’s absence. Parker oversaw a complete refurbishing and redecoration of the dance hall in an effort to rival the splash made by the Savoy’s opening seven years

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<sup>183</sup> Frankie Manning and Cynthia Millman, *Frankie Manning: Ambassador of Lindy Hop* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008), 67.

<sup>184</sup> Quoted in Gill, 282.

<sup>185</sup> Manning and Millman, *Ambassador of Lindy Hop*, 67.

prior.<sup>186</sup> In early press releases about the change, Parker announced that Webb's orchestra would serve as the ballroom's stable house band as they had come off a successful run in this capacity at the Savoy during 1932 and at the Savoy-run Alhambra in 1930 when Parker was manager there. The *Chicago Defender* reported that the "news of the new pleasure palace has caused great comment from the younger set in Harlem. Up to now the Savoy has held the attention of the hopping crowd. Now it is expected that the floors of the Dixie will rebound to the leaping of the sheiks and the ladies."<sup>187</sup> Early press announcements routinely referred to the Savoy as the Dixie's model, and Parker's strategy seems to have been to set admission price points even below the Savoy's already low fees. This advertisement shows a Savoy breakfast dance billed at 85¢ and immediately below it an ad for the Dixie Ballroom, featuring Teddy Hill and Chick Webb, for 35¢ men and 25¢ women.

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<sup>186</sup> "Dixie Ballroom in Splendid Bow," *New York Amsterdam News*, March 8, 1933, 5.

<sup>187</sup> "Roseland Dance Hall is Harlem's Latest Fun Place," *Chicago Defender*, March 4, 1933, 5.

AMUSEMENTS.

Savoy's Anniversary

SAT. **BREAKFAST DANCE** 85c MAR. 11

CELEBRATING!!  
7 Years of the Finest  
Entertainment Ever Presented  
in HARLEM

This Coming Saturday, Mar. 11  
**Breakfast Dance**

Featuring  
**Fletcher Henderson**  
**Luis Russell**  
SAVOY COTTON PICKERS  
CLARK'S MISSOURIANS

4 - STAR BANDS - 4  
DANCE 9 P. M. to 8 A. M.  
ADMISSION 85c

**S**AVOY  
LENOX AVE.  
140-141st STS. **BALLROOM**

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Harlem's Most Beautiful Ballroom  
**DIXIE BALLROOM**  
125th St., Cor. 7th Ave., N. Y.

DANCING NIGHTLY and SUNDAY MATINEE

**TEDDY HILL AND HIS ORCHESTRA**  
**CHICK WEBB AND HIS CHICKS**

Admission Ladies 25c Gentlemen 35c

NO EXTRA CHARGE FOR DANCING  
SOMETHING NEW EVERY NIGHT

**Figure 2.2. Advertisements for the Savoy Ballroom and Dixie Ballroom, *New York Amsterdam News*, March 8, 1933, 8.**

The ballroom's opening placed pressure on the Savoy to lower its prices, and the *Amsterdam News* alluded they were feeling the pressure, reporting that "the opening of the new place has already brought about competition in Harlem Ballrooms, and prices have been lowered at one of the older places."<sup>188</sup>

<sup>188</sup> "Parker Manager of New Dixie Ballroom," *New York Amsterdam News*, March 1, 1933, 8.

As the *Chicago Defender* noted, the new dance palace was especially promising given its location on 125<sup>th</sup> street and Seventh Avenue. As this street was both Harlem's most segregated and symbolically important thoroughfare, the Dixie powerfully represented "the first step taken by Negroes to occupy space on West 125<sup>th</sup> street." As the *Defender* further observed in celebrating the Dixie's opening, "More employment is offered. Race people and the community rejoices."<sup>189</sup> The ballroom thus marked racial progress against both cultural and economic segregation as it represented a push into Harlem's central thoroughfare, a street whose segregated spaces would drive the frustration behind race riots only two years later. Indeed, according to 1931 figures, blacks owned less than 20% of Central Harlem businesses.<sup>190</sup> The *Pittsburgh Courier* emphasized the event's potential significance both temporally and spatially. Temporally, they noted that "for the first time since the Negro invaded Harlem nearly 20 years ago, the race has moved into 125<sup>th</sup> street."<sup>191</sup> Spatially, they verbally mapped the segregated landscape surrounding the Dixie on West 125<sup>th</sup>.

Just across the street from the "Dixie" ballroom is the Theresa Hotel, which does not admit colored guests. The Harlem Board of Commerce would not admit Negro members, which resulted in the organization of the Harlem Business Men's Club. Next door to the "Dixie" ballroom is a restaurant which does not serve colored.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> "Dixie Ballroom in Splendid Bow," 5.

<sup>190</sup> Greenburg, 61.

<sup>191</sup> "Harlemites Invading 125<sup>th</sup> st.," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 11, 1933, 2.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

The article acknowledged that the depression was altering the financial landscape and that the eroding influx of white patronage was forcing businesses to yield to a more porous color line.

Whites have long resisted the Negro's invasion of 125<sup>th</sup> street. Some years ago the Alhambra theatre, 126<sup>th</sup> street and Seventh Avenue, had a policy of segregation which finally resulted in the house going colored. Next it was Loew's Victoria on 125<sup>th</sup> street just around the corner from the Alhambra, but the depression caused all theaters in the neighborhood to let down the color bar.<sup>193</sup>

The Dixie Ballroom's opening night was promising; it featured three bands led by Chick Webb, Teddy Hill, and Claude Hopkins and included a slate of VIP guests from Harlem's entertainment industry including Kaiser Marshall, Lillian Cowan, and other "stars from Connie's Inn, the Radium Club, and other Harlem hot spots."<sup>194</sup> The opening night crowd reportedly numbered over 2,000 and packed the ballroom to its capacity. Maurice Dancer gave an account of the scene for his "Harlem By Night" column in the *Pittsburgh Courier*.

Thursday nite, one of the largest crowds we've witnessed of late trying to gain entrance to the lately turned from white to colored Dixie Ballroom...smuggled through the rear door, we find Harold Parker, former manager of the Savoy Ballroom, actually turning them away...packed like sardines on the dance floor, they attempt to shuffle to those Teddy Hill and Chick Webb hot tunes.<sup>195</sup>

Noting the array of young patrons dancing the lindy hop and the waltz, the *New York Amsterdam News* encouragingly projected tremendous success for the ballroom, offering the following assessment: "Most artistically arranged, one of America's finest

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<sup>193</sup> "Harlemites Invading 125<sup>th</sup> st.," 2.

<sup>194</sup> "Dixie Ballroom in Splendid Bow," 5.

<sup>195</sup> Dancer, "Harlem By Night," March 11, 1933, A6.



ballrooms will continue to present, as it did on its opening night, entertainment, music and sizzling programs that will thrill you.”<sup>196</sup>

The *Amsterdam News*’ hopeful prediction, however, never came to fruition. Despite the hopes of replicating or surpassing the Savoy’s success on 125<sup>th</sup> Street, the ballroom closed after only two months, citing lagging attendance and a resultant inability to pay its musicians. The Dixie switched from a two-band to single band format featuring Kaiser Marshall, yet still failed to draw a sufficient audience to sustain the business.<sup>197</sup> Though the Dixie’s opening was met with optimistic, uplift-driven rhetoric, only two months later the *Amsterdam News* offered a more cynical view of the motivations behind its efforts. “Despite the growth of Negro families in the community, the Dixie [as Rose-Danceland] continued to cater to whites only until forced by changing conditions to make an appeal for the darker trade. ...the Dixie installed the Savoy policy, but business never picked up.”<sup>198</sup> That the Dixie failed to adapt does not invalidate what its attempts make plain: that the erosion of white leisure capital had clearly challenged the viability of formerly successful segregated venues in Harlem, as the Rose-Danceland had once been.

The Dixie’s closing affirmed the Savoy’s dominance as a uniquely popular and successful space regarded as the most prominent and popular entertainment venue for blacks in Harlem. The *New York Amsterdam News* write up on the Dixie’s closure has a sub-headline that further drives home this point: “Savoy Remains as Only One of its

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<sup>196</sup> “Dixe Ballroom in Splendid Bow,” 5.

<sup>197</sup> “Lack of Patronage Forces Dance Hall to Close,” *New York Amsterdam News*, March 3, 1933, 8.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

Kind Catering to Negroes.”<sup>199</sup> Though Buchanan claimed the Dixie’s run had no impact on the Savoy, they did adjust their already low prices further downwards. An advertisement that ran on the same newspaper page as the aforementioned article about the Dixie’s closure advertised the Savoy’s new reduced entry fees for Saturday evenings at 65¢ for men and 35¢ for women and Sunday matinees for 50¢.<sup>200</sup>



**Figure 2.3. “Reduced Prices” Advertisement for the Savoy Ballroom, *New York Amsterdam News*, May 3, 1933, 8.**

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News*, May 3, 1933, 8.

While the Dixie Ballroom was clearly a failed effort that never had a significant impact on the Harlem ballroom scene, the logic and strategies behind its creation as well as the newspaper rhetoric surrounding its brief run at the Savoy yield important information about the ballroom landscape in Harlem and the Depression's impact on it. Emphasis on the Dixie's efforts to ape the Savoy Ballroom's upscale décor and integrated format bolster the evidence that the Savoy was uniquely able to sustain its business amid the shifting economic landscape. The Dixie's attempts, however, to challenge the Savoy validate the exceptional nature of its business model yet also suggest that other ballrooms failed to generate sufficient demand to expand it. More significantly, the failure, coupled with its 125<sup>th</sup> Street location, foreshadowed a powder keg of socioeconomic frustration among black Harlemites that would soon explode.

### **The Riots of 1935: Racial Anger and the Harvest Moon Ball as “Social Insurance”**

The rhetoric surrounding the Dixie Ballroom's promise to reform 125<sup>th</sup> street reflected a broader frustration with 125<sup>th</sup> street's racial contradiction: it was the symbolic and practical nerve center of Harlem, a neighborhood proud of its self-sufficiency and promise of a better future for the race, yet it was among Harlem's most segregated places with significant white business ownership and limited work opportunities for non-whites. As worsening economic conditions channeled Harlemites' attention into increasingly vocal political activism and agitation, such frustration birthed the 1933 and 1934 “don't buy where you can't work” boycotts of 125<sup>th</sup> street's white-owned businesses. These movements, inspired by a national trend of similar boycotts in African American communities nationwide, exposed the frustrating

contradiction of discriminatory hiring practices within businesses that relied on black patronage, especially considering the dire need for employment in Harlem during the early 1930s. Indeed, the broader economic crisis flooded Caucasian workers into service roles previously occupied primarily by African Americans, creating further tension among Italian, Jewish, and black residents.<sup>201</sup> A 1934 essay in the *Atlanta Daily World* is indicative of the ramped up rhetoric urging blacks nationwide to assert political pressure collectively through their economic might as consumers.

The Negro does not use the weapon of the boycott. He is that strange animal that will lick the hand that smites him. A store clerk can slap the face of a Negro woman, and after loudmouthed babbling and senseless petition signing, he will go right back to that store and trade. Despite the fact that he is not allowed to go behind the counter and sell goods to Negro consumers, he will starve out his merchants just across the streets by his patronage of the places that owe him no respect and give him no place in the distribution of opportunities.<sup>202</sup>

The boycotts, while at times successful, were ultimately tenuous because of a fundamentally de-stabilizing contradiction: the most successful campaigns enjoyed strong united coalitions between Harlem's upper- and lower-class residents and organizations, yet the positive outcomes of such efforts disproportionately benefitted "elite" blacks with more social capital, which further exacerbated internal class tensions in black communities.<sup>203</sup>

For whatever class tensions the boycotts caused among blacks, the racial tensions they sparked between blacks and other ethnic groups were more significant

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<sup>201</sup> Ralph L. Crowder, "'Don't Buy Where You Can't Work': An Investigation of the Political Forces and Social Conflict Within the Harlem Boycott," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 15 no.2 (July, 1991): 9-11.

<sup>202</sup> "How the Negro Battles Insecurity," *Atlanta Daily World*, February 2, 1934, 2.

<sup>203</sup> Crowder, "Don't Buy," 11.

due to the prevalence of Jewish business ownership along 125<sup>th</sup> street. These tensions ultimately resulted in a significant race riot in 1935 sparked by public perception (later proved incorrect) of police brutality towards a young Latino male accused of shoplifting. The riot's rapid escalation suggested that this sparking incident merely ignited the existing tension and increasingly public articulations of anger over social and economic injustices exacerbated by race.

While frustration over racial discrimination was at the heart of the riots, they were, at the time, exceptional in that they lacked specific violent clashes between races. Indeed, sociologist Allen D. Grimshaw marked the 1935 Harlem riot as indicative of a new type of modern race riot, because it primarily targeted property. Harlemites directed their anger against physical spaces, because the systems of oppression targeting African Americans were fundamentally spatial in nature. In public discourse in the riot's aftermath, it became clear the two issues primarily responsible for the riot, and for the poor conditions in Harlem, were the discriminatory hiring practices of businesses like the Kress Department Store and the vastly inflated rates Harlem residents paid—on average 40% of their income—for substandard tenement housing.<sup>204</sup> As with the balconies of segregated theaters, Harlem's overcrowding could be felt tangibly in both its cramped housing spaces and the increasing desperation of citizens in public spaces. Channing Tobias' essay on Harlem unemployment outlined the problem's dynamics spatially, articulating the institutions and attitudes that outsourced opportunity and kept capital flowing out of Harlem.

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<sup>204</sup> "High Rentals, Landlords Hit at Harlem Probe," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 13, 1935, 1.

There were and still are thousands of Negroes standing in enforced idleness on the street corners of Harlem with no prospect of employment while the more favored of their Negro neighbors are compelled to spend their money with business houses largely directed by absolute white owners who employ white workers imported from every part of the city. It is true that after a hard struggle a few Negroes have been given clerkships in the stores on 125<sup>th</sup> street, but the attitude of most managers has been that of tolerance under pressure rather than sympathetic cooperation. The whole idea seems to be that it is the God-given right of white business men to reap the profits and the humble responsibility of Negro patrons uncomplainingly to spend the money with which to enrich the owners and provide work for white employees.<sup>205</sup>

Another antidote to the “enforced idleness” Tobias identifies was the social culture of Harlem’s nightclubs and ballrooms. Lacking other meaningful work or productive ways to spend time and energy, social culture took on new importance as an arena for the expression of identity and the enactment of meaningful cultural work, albeit unpaid. The physical and emotional catharsis that social dancing offered became a kind of release valve on the pressure created by Harlem’s tangible and intangible “overcrowding.”

Owners and managers of integrated venues understood their venues’ function in providing this kind of release as they provided somewhere for the mass of unemployed bodies to congregate other than street corners. Frank Schiffman explained the Lafayette theatre’s continued success during the 1930s as the product of hot music’s function as “social insurance” or a release valve for frustration and a means of providing relief.

Hot music is a form of social insurance and has proved a wonderful sedative for society during the depression. It is the extra hot notes that give the emotional release so necessary to individuals weighted down with almost unbearable troubles.

When people are out of a job, getting half enough to eat, and can scrape together only enough extra money to see a show once a week, are suddenly seemingly wafted away into a magical world, the sheer ecstasy they get in this

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<sup>205</sup> Channing Tobias, “Behind the Scenes of that Harlem Riot,” *Chicago Defender*, April 6, 1935, 12.

brief moment justifies all the clowning, sweating, yelling and gyrations of the bandmaster and his breathless workers.

On leaving the theatre, the experience has renewed or remade the downcast individual. He is back to normal. Yes, the end of “Torrid Rhythm” easily justifies the means required to produce it.<sup>206</sup>

While Schiffman’s stance may seem patronizing or simplistic, his theater’s continued ability to thrive speaks to his ability to on some level understand his marketplace and its demands and desires. By contrast, the Harlem riots further eroded the business of Harlem’s remaining segregated nightclubs. The Cotton Club was reportedly “crying on everyone’s shoulders...the riot has driven most of the ofay [white] trade away from local clubs.”<sup>207</sup>

Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and his staff leveraged the “social insurance” that nightlife culture offered as one means of tempering escalating rhetoric and frustration, which persisted through rounds of commissions and investigations in the months following the riot. He worked with the *New York Daily News* to engineer the “Harvest Moon Ball,” a new city-wide dance competition designed to engage young people from diverse backgrounds and ethnic groups. Preliminary contests were held at ballrooms around the city, including the Savoy Ballroom which represented Harlem, before a planned outdoor final round in Central Park on August 14<sup>th</sup>. When crowds for the finals exceeded the outdoor venue’s capacity, the event was rescheduled for August 29<sup>th</sup> at Madison Square Garden, where 19,000 attended and 20,000 more were turned away.

While Fletcher Henderson’s Roseland Ballroom orchestra played for the lindy hoppers at the contest finals, Webb’s band played for the preliminary contest at the

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<sup>206</sup> Frank Schiffman quoted in “Hot Music Called ‘Social Insurance’ by Manager,” *Baltimore Afro-American* April 13, 1935, 8.

<sup>207</sup> “Browsing About,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 13, 1935, 9.

Savoy. As lindy hop dancer Norma Miller recalls, “The contest was held in front of the band shell. The band on the stage was the mighty Chick Webb Band and this was what they had been waiting for. Here the music would swing, at last they could pull out the stops and let it rip.”<sup>208</sup> Webb’s band was more than capable of “letting it rip” for the lindy hop dancers, and by Miller’s account they did so at the Savoy’s preliminaries. However, as his work at the Alhambra, Lafayette, and other venues makes clear, Webb was capable of playing softer, sweeter styles of music as well, which he likely did that night to accompany preliminary contests for the more formal ballroom dances. However, if the band gave more effort to supporting the lindy hop dancers, it would have been an explicit part of the Savoy management’s strategy to feature the lindy hop dancers, who went on to sweep the lindy hop division at the downtown contest.

Frankie Manning, who took second place with partner Maggie McMillan, explained that the Savoy’s dancers were unconcerned about individual prizes, but that it was highly important that the Savoy sweep the lindy hop division and publicly claim supremacy as lindy hop dancers.<sup>209</sup>

It’s a funny thing, but I never felt sorry for myself. The Harvest Moon Ball was just a contest that we needed to win for the Savoy, and we got the three top spots. It didn’t faze me that someone else won first place. You see, to me, the Savoy Ballroom...that was the world. I was considered pretty good there, so it didn’t matter what anybody else thought. As long as the Savoy thought I was good, nothing else counted.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Norma Miller with Evette Jensen, *Swingin’ at the Savoy: The Memoir of a Jazz Dancer* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

<sup>209</sup> The first place team was Leon James and Edith Matthews, and the third place team was Norma Miller and “Stompin’” Billy Hill. Miller and Jensen, 69-82.

<sup>210</sup> Manning and Millman, *Ambassador of Lindy Hop*, 90.



For the Savoy lindy hoppers, the Harvest Moon Ball represented an opportunity to publicly assert ownership over Harlem's cultural space, and this mission was clearly articulated by Herbert White, the Savoy bouncer who coached the ballroom's best lindy hop dancers and ultimately managed their professional careers. According to Miller, White offered the dancers the following "pep talk" before the Madison Square Garden contest emphasizing that it was crucial they sweep the lindy category.

You are the flag bearers of the Savoy, and you know what we expect you to do tonight. GO out there and let 'em know who we are. Let the *Daily News* report that we took it all, first, second, and third! We want all three. Remember, we don't take out any other prizes. All we got is the Lindy Hop so you better make sure it belongs to us. Do you dig?<sup>211</sup>

What Miller and the other Savoy dancers "dug" was that lindy hop, and by proxy the Savoy represented black ownership of black popular culture.<sup>212</sup> While frustration built over an inability to control segregated opportunity on 125<sup>th</sup> street or the price gauging in over-crowded tenements, black dancers could claim the lindy hop, which was emerging as the popular dance most closely associated with swing music, as *their* corporeal territory.

Thus, we can see the Harvest Moon Ball and the Harlem Riots as different enactments of spatial practice seeking to assert power and agency within an increasingly powerless set of circumstances. A literal assault on 125<sup>th</sup> street's white-owned property, the riots provoked a more rigorous and urgent public discourse about race and its role in the increasingly frustrating circumstances of Harlem's residents. The Harvest Moon Ball, and its preliminary contest at the Savoy, became spaces to enact a

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<sup>211</sup> As recalled by Miller, *Swingin' at the Savoy*, 79.

<sup>212</sup> The Savoy Ballroom was, of course, owned by a white man, but many Harlemites who frequented the ballroom, including Manning and Miller, claimed the space as "theirs."

different type of assault, which claimed space for black social practices within New York City's ballroom culture. Just as James Berry could resist the Cotton Club's dominion over Harlem nightlife by arguing that "the real down-to-earth dancing was in them Smoke Joints", the Savoy's dominance as a space for lindy hop dancing and for swing music similarly deflated the power of segregation in the city's other major ballrooms. Frankie Manning's recollection of a trip to the Roseland in preparation for the Harvest Moon Ball emphasizes this resistance tactic.

When we got there the doorman told us we couldn't go in. We asked why not, but he just kept repeating himself. We got very indignant, but it was one of *those things*, so we said, "We don't have to come in here anyway, we can go back on up to the Savoy." We just wanted to go where we could dance without anybody saying anything about whether it was with a white person, a black person, a green person, or what! The Savoy was ours, *ours*, and we felt that our place was better anyway.<sup>213</sup>

If the Savoy was the best place to dance and to hear the best swing bands, a representational space of black exceptionalism, segregation in other spaces had limited power to hurt. Thus, by representing the Savoy as superior through direct competition with other ballrooms, its dancers actively claimed social space as the Savoy became a release valve on Harlem's literal and figurative overcrowding—a place where the unemployed and underemployed, by enacting the spatial practices that made the Savoy the envy of other dance palaces, could escape Harlem street corners' "enforced idleness."

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<sup>213</sup> Manning and Millman, *Ambassador of Lindy Hop*, 89.

## **The Savoy Ballroom and Heterogeneous Class Performance**

By 1935, the lindy hop was an accepted and highly valued element of the Savoy Ballroom's culture, which was in sharp contrast to owner Moe Gale and manager Charles Buchanan's original vision of a dance palace geared towards high-class nightlife. Throughout the early 1930s, the Savoy's patrons found means to resist and subvert the ballroom's rigid policies. Despite the Savoy management's initial reservations, the ballroom ultimately became a hub of popular dance and was central to the development of the lindy hop. This dance form attracted young Harlem residents who exaggerated the holds and conventions of more traditional ballroom dances, infusing them with athletic, improvisational movement. The Savoy's most famous dancer in its early years and purported inventor of the lindy hop, George "Shorty" Snowden, recounted to jazz dance historian Marshall Stearns that he invented a traveling step to evade the ballroom's bouncers when they gave chase. He claims he developed his renowned foot speed through these involuntary "dances" with the ballroom's enforcers. While Buchanan initially rejected Snowden to preserve the Savoy's "high class" ideals, Snowden's innovative moves became so popular that Buchanan ultimately recognized the dancer's enormous popularity and gave him a gilded lifetime pass to the ballroom.<sup>214</sup> The lindy hop, which came to dominate the Savoy Ballroom, was a corporeal statement of participation, of agency, and of self-expression; it afforded Harlem youth otherwise marginalized within exploitive labor conditions or absorbed into essentialist constructions of their neighborhood a chance to be seen and heard in

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<sup>214</sup> Marshall Stearns, notes from interview with George "Shorty" Snowden, December 17, 1959, Marshall Winslow Stearns Collection, Box 7, Folder 22, Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University Libraries.

public space by their peers and on their own terms. Catering to a lindy hopping public ultimately became a financial necessity for ballrooms. As one unsympathetic reporter noted, the dance “has developed into such a pest that some halls advertise No Lindy Hop allowed here. The result is a loss of business.”<sup>215</sup>

The Savoy also became a space for working class blacks, especially those employed in industrial and domestic labor, to experience the social opportunities enjoyed by those they served. Among the Savoy’s most popular functions was its Thursday evening “Kitchen Mechanics Night,” which catered to the domestic laborers, most of them female, who spent their weekends working downtown in white homes. For them, Thursday night was a time for release before a weekend of staid servitude and their one night for high-class leisure and recreation. So popular was this Thursday evening dance that the Savoy’s management had to quickly restore it after attempting to shift their Thursday night programming, because the “Kitchen Mechanics Night” crowd would simply show up en masse and claim the space.<sup>216</sup> By showing up, Harlemites staked a claim for self-definition and ownership of community spaces and culture.

Over time, the vibrancy of this emerging popular dance culture shifted the Savoy’s ethos away from its reproduction of downtown elitism. Russian choreographer/scholar Mura Dehn observed this change firsthand:

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<sup>215</sup> Wilbur Young, “Dances Originating in Harlem,” unpublished draft of a report for the WPA Writers Project, Writers Program New York City: Negroes of New York Collection, Reel 2, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.

<sup>216</sup> Terry Monaghan and Karen Hubbard, “Negotiating compromise on a Burnished Wood Floor: Social Dancing at the Savoy” in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, ed. Julie Malnig (Urbana, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 130-131.

In the mid-thirties, the ballroom was invaded by youth. Gone the evening gowns, the formal dress, the grown up sophistication. Jitterbugs made their debut. Thick-rimmed glasses, thick-soled sneakers, sport jackets, sweaters. Girls in bobby socks, flaring skirts, skull caps with a long feather. Ballroom bubbling with energy.<sup>217</sup>

As the ballroom continued to grow in popularity, young Harlemites forged a sense of style that was neither the image of middle class upward mobility their parents wished for them nor the exotic stereotypes held by white slummers. Rather, they enacted an aesthetic that expressed their own experiences and desires while signifying on both of these aforementioned fantasies. Symbols of elite, upper-class culture became repurposed as outlandish, individual fashion statements. Legendary Savoy lindy hopper Al Minns recalled his future collaborator Leon James' outfit the night they met. At the time, James was already a local star, having recently performed in the Marx Brothers 1936 film *A Day at the Races*.

This night Leon came in [wearing] champagne-colored riding trousers with the full legs, high boots; champagne-colored dress shirt shot with threads of iridescent burgundy color; wore a big blue ascot. Carried a riding crop, which he flicked casually. ... He really made an entrance. If he never makes another one, he made one then.<sup>218</sup>

Al, by contrast, preferred starched collars and dark suits "like a businessman."<sup>219</sup> The public physical comportment that marked respectability was transformed into "struttin'" or a more extroverted and highly stylized public performance of smoothness

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<sup>217</sup> Mura Dehn, "Jazz Dance," unpublished manuscript [nd], Mura Dehn Papers on Afro-American Social Dance Box 1 Folder 5, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>218</sup> Marshall Stearns, notes from interview with Al Minns, 1960, Marshall Winslow Stearns Collection, Box 7, Folder 3, Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University Libraries.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

and excellence. Dehn articulates this juxtaposition in Alfred Liegens' dancing in the early 1930s.

He danced triumphantly erect, always ready, in case the English King should visit The Track: 'My posture is perfect: I don't have to alter a step, just bend my head in greeting.' And suddenly he would break into a slide-sweep – the body down to his knees and up in a cascade of rhythms and African arm movements like ribbons in the air.<sup>220</sup>

Within this space, Harlem youth like Liegens aestheticized and reclaimed expectations of social conformity, rerouting them through their own expressive creativity.

As Liegens brought a regal bearing to the Savoy's more populist evenings, the Savoy's society parties opened up into free spaces where dancers could enjoy more autonomy and fluidity in their comportment as clear demarcations of class and class performance merged and blended. In 1935, the Comus Club held its 11<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Christmas Formal at the Savoy, and the *New York Amsterdam News* noted that while "society turned out in full fashion" for the event, they welcomed more stylistic diversity on their dance cards:

Never before had so many guests been bidden to this formal event; never before have the attendants had such freedom in their choice of dances. Yes, the current rage of truckin' was almost as much in evidence as the Lindy Hop, waltz and two-step—and everybody liked that freedom.<sup>221</sup>

Re-energizing the term from Harlem's socialite scene, dance in Harlem served to create and develop a new "physical culture" that opened up space for a range of expressions of blackness from the social clubs' grand waltzes to the whirling leg kicks of exuberant

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<sup>220</sup> Dehn, "Jazz Dance."

<sup>221</sup> "Comus Club Gives Eleventh Christmas Formal at Savoy," *New York Amsterdam News*, Jan 4, 1936, 6.

jitterbugs. This heterogeneity of embodied performance actively structured and restructured Harlem's diverse social spaces.

Just as Savoy patrons expressed a wide range of class identities, the ballroom structured its weekly schedule to cater to Harlem's diverse population and to Harlemites' divergent reasons for going dancing.

Monday, a bad evening for business, became a free night for ladies. Men were charged forty cents for admission. In time it became the most popular night. Tuesday was established as the 400 club night, when a group of dance lovers who attend regularly, receive rebate on admissions. This serves also as a meeting night for the club at which dance contests are held and new members are ceremoniously inducted. Wednesday has been reserved for social and fraternal affairs of Harlem's upper class. Thursdays attract the domestic workers who are usually at liberty on this night. Friday is also a night for social and fraternal organizations. Saturdays and Sundays attract the most cosmopolitan groups, catering largely to the visitors from other parts of the country.<sup>222</sup>

Within Harlem's mutable class structure, one could enjoy the "low down" partying on Thursday and then waltz at an upscale fraternal social on Friday. One's class performance could thus be malleable, creating opportunities for a thoroughly heterogeneous presentation of social class not only within groups, but also within individual dancers.

As the Savoy's house band throughout the mid-1930s, Webb's orchestra relied on the heterogeneous stylistic palette it forged throughout its performances in diverse Harlem spaces to help construct the Savoy's spatial heterogeneity. By the time of Webb's extended residency there, the period for which the band is best known and celebrated, they were already well-versed in the spatial dialects that flavored the

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<sup>222</sup> Arthur Cary, "Savoy Ballroom," unpublished draft of a report for the WPA Writer's Project, August 7, 1936, Writers Program, New York City: Negroes of New York Collection, reel 2, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.

Savoy's various nights of the week, and accounts suggest that, like the Savoy's dancers, the band built their celebrated sound by creating a sonic fluidity to match the dancers' pastiches of class signifiers. When the band found success on national radio as the first black band with a sustaining gig, *Baltimore Afro-American* columnist Allan McMillan attributed Webb's radio breakthrough to his band's pioneering ability to balance the stylistic elements of sweet and hot jazz.

There is much talk this week along Tin Pan Alley and Broadway concerning the little half-pint orchestra leader Chick Webb, who seems to have started something new so far as an innovation in music is concerned, among the sepia orchestras. He and his musical organization mix smooth syncopation and super torrid rhythm to good advantage.<sup>223</sup>

Other columnists echoed this praise for Webb's stylistic synthesis during his tenure at the Savoy. In an article for the *Pittsburgh Courier* entitled "Chick Webb likes his music 'sweet,' but he can dish it up plenty 'hot,'" Floyd J. Calvin situated this quality as a product of Webb's sensitivity to pleasing an audience.

Naturally, Chick's first interest is music. He likes his scintillating melody soft and sweet, but he admits willingly that he can dish it out plenty hot, as hot as the hottest hotcha fans like it. Yes, Chick is one guy who gives the public what it wants.<sup>224</sup>

At the Savoy, it seems the dancing public wanted everything Webb and his band had to offer. As his music continued to push lindy hop dancers to new heights throughout the 1930s, his band became synonymous with the Savoy as a space, an articulation that remains perhaps the defining feature of Webb's legacy. The longer tale of Webb's musical life in Harlem, however, demonstrates the depth of this connection as the

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<sup>223</sup> Allan McMillan, "Theater Chat," *Baltimore Afro-American*, September 1, 1934, 8.

<sup>224</sup> Floyd J. Calvin, "Chick Webb likes his music 'sweet,' but he can dish it up plenty 'hot,'" *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 9, 1933, A9.



Savoy's particular assemblage of spatial practices emerged from the same complex social interweavings through which Webb's band built its voice.

### **Conclusion—Webb's Nimble Musicianship as Spatial Practice**

Navigating Harlem's shifting socio-political, economic, and discursive landscapes, Webb and his band managed to integrate themselves thoroughly into Harlem's social life, becoming a functioning piece of Harlem's evolving "black public sphere." Their ability to thrive and thoroughly succeed within perpetually shifting assemblages of venues, events, and patrons highlights the versatility, professionalism, and sensitivity to audience and context that black musicians needed in order to be successful. Whether as the Jungle Band, the Harlem Stompers, or even the Roseland Orchestra, Webb's band provided the soundtrack for venues from the exoticized Cotton Club and the raucous Rose-Danceland to the dignified Alhambra Ballroom and the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House. The music they played stretched well beyond dance music both hot and sweet to regal waltzes for society club members and accompaniment for diverse theatrical revues.

While Webb's band's sustained and increasing popularity suggests they were excellent in this regard, it by no means indicates they were unique. Rather, this study of Webb's trek through Harlem's nightlife scene should highlight the expectations that Harlem's other successful black bands met as well. Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Cab Calloway, Claude Hopkins, Fess Williams, and Willie Bryant played at most of the same venues and were also successful to varying degrees. Ultimately, the canonization of some of these figures as artists and the focus on highlights from their recorded

material may emphasize those unique stylistic features that marked each band's contributions at its musical best, but it also obscures the versatility that the day-to-day grind of professional musicianship required. I thus identify Webb's career in Harlem as *spatial practice* and his band's sound(s) as constructed dialogically with the surrounding community. This nimble, flexible musicianship—adapting sound to context and playing whatever the occasion called for—was a core piece of dance band competency, especially for black bands in Harlem. While this may not have been the “jazz az iz” that projected musical blackness to segregated audiences at the Rose-Danceland or Cotton Club, sweet popular music for relaxed, romantic dancing was a significant part of musical life in Harlem, and it could mix seamlessly with uptempo swing music when the occasion and audience called for it.

At the same time, the band did prove exceptional in its emerging national reach. Webb expanded his presence on the radio and solidified his spot at the Savoy by aligning his band with Savoy Ballroom owner Moe Gale, who became Webb's manager at some point in the early 1930s.<sup>225</sup> Under Gale's umbrella, Webb not only returned to the Savoy Ballroom, but also achieved prominence on national radio to an extent heretofore unheard of for black Harlem bands. In August 1934, Webb secured a thrice-weekly sustaining coast-to-coast broadcast on NBC's radio network, the first African American bandleader to do so.<sup>226</sup> Gale's significant contacts in radio helped Webb

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<sup>225</sup> While it is unclear precisely when Webb came under the umbrella of the Gale Agency, his tenure at the Alhambra in 1930, then under Savoy management, and regular position at the Savoy in 1932 suggest an alignment with Gale at that time as Gale was already managing artists including Cab Calloway. However, Webb's early 1933 tenure at the competing Dixie Ballroom suggests there may have been some kind of split and subsequent return to Gale's management somewhere between mid 1933 and early 1934 preceding Webb's major penetration into national radio.

<sup>226</sup> “Chick Webb Now on NBC Network,” *Atlanta Daily World*, August 29, 1934, 3.

secure the booking, but as Allen McMillan argued in the *Afro-American*, he sustained it through his band's appealing blend of "smooth syncopation" and "super torrid rhythm." While Webb's sound has always been associated with Harlem's ballrooms, it is generally only the "super torrid rhythm" for which he was recognized in the white press. McMillan's assessment not only indicates that Webb's sound was indeed tied to the spatial movements and flows of Harlem's nightlife spaces, but also hints at the versatility and fluidity such a sonic articulation implies. As Webb continued to expand his band's reach and success, his diverse musical palette functioned as a spatial practice that both helped forge and molded itself to the physical, social, and economic contours of Harlem's diverse and evolving sites of performance, sociality, ideology, and discourse. From the exoticized racial proscenium that accompanied Jungle Alley nightlife to the uplift-generating waltzes of Harlem's social clubs, Webb's music developed, innovated, and found its voice not through its esoteric individuality, but as a collective spatial practice embedded in the sonic firmament of Harlem's physical culture.

### Chapter 3: “Lindy Hopper’s Delight”: Dancing to Webb’s Music

*Yet as I watch and listen, my earlier mobility is curtailed by fascination with yours, my resentment abates by degrees; or rather it is caught up and transformed in my kinetic response to the infectiousness of the implied dance. The fast, precise, complex gestures of your hands, my gradually elevated heart rate, become through sheer momentum their own reverie. I am summoned to a dancerly embodiment; my pacing becomes lightly rhythmicized. As it does for the rustics who have been politely waiting in the wings of this pastoral, dance permits me to forget.*

–Elisabeth Le Guin

*If you've ever lindy-hopped, you'll know what I'm talking about.*

–Malcolm X

While Webb was a versatile musician who could adapt his band to a plethora of contexts, playing music for audiences of social dancers became the core of his professional life from 1934 until his death in 1939. His focus on dance music prompted British bandleader and critic Spike Hughes, a great admirer of Webb’s, to note that “In the eight or nine years of my experience of Chick there was never a time when his band tried to do more than fulfill the primary function of jazz: play music for dancing.”<sup>227</sup> To interpret Hughes’ claim as insulting or dismissive would be a historical error, for at the time, facilitating social dancing was jazz’s primary function, and it was a charge Webb

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<sup>227</sup> “Mike” [Spike Hughes, pseud.], “Our Critic-At-Large Declares a Truce,” *Melody Maker*, July 1, 1939, 5.

approached with significant zeal and attention. His reputation as a dancer's musician was such that Duke Ellington's recollections of Webb in his autobiography focus primarily on Webb's sensitivity to the Savoy's dancing public.

The reason why Chick Webb had such control, such command of his audiences at the Savoy ballroom, was because he was always in communication with the dancers and felt it the way they did. And that is probably the biggest reason why he could cut all the other bands that went in there.<sup>228</sup>

Ellington's perspective reinforces the most significant piece of Webb's legacy according to his peers: that his band was the best at playing for dancers. Furthermore, Ellington's choice of words is significant: not that Webb *heard* the music the way they did, but that he *felt* it. While we are used to discussing music as something heard and dance as something seen, emphasizing feeling suggests that the common plane on which musicians and dancers could communicate was kinesthetic engagement; dancing and playing music are both, at their core, specific, cultivated acts of movement. Just as Webb felt the dancers' energy, they felt his band's music.

As Webb, and other bandleaders were certainly aware, ballroom patrons voted with their feet, and musicians unable to routinely "send" the crowd and keep them lindy hopping would not last long in Harlem's ballroom scene. As lindy hop dancer Norma Miller recalled of bands at the Savoy, "They catered to us in the ballroom. If they did not, if the dancers did not like that band, that band would not be back."<sup>229</sup> Swing bands understood that drawing and maintaining crowds of dancing patrons was vital to continued employment in Harlem's ballrooms; a reputation for successful engagement

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<sup>228</sup> Duke Ellington, *Music is my Mistress* (New York: Da Capo, 1973), 100.

<sup>229</sup> Norma Miller, conversation with the author, Herräng, Sweden, July, 2011.

with dancers meant consistent work. Success in ballrooms was thus defined by one's ability to keep the dancers on the floor, to construct a rhythmic and musical space that sparked their energies and inspired their steps, spins, and improvisations.

While many bands played primarily for dancers, Webb's group forged a uniquely potent connection with lindy hoppers as the Savoy Ballroom's primary house band from 1934-1939. This connection occurred in social contexts, during formal and informal competitions, and through collaboration on commercial performances for stage and screen, thus running the gamut of what dance revivalist and historian Terry Monaghan has identified as the lindy hop's three distinct yet interlocking forms: social, competition, and performance.<sup>230</sup> Webb played nightly for the Savoy's social dances, which ran from early evening until 2 AM or later, and his band was tasked with keeping the ballroom's massive block-length dance floor full and with motivating crowds to return nightly. On Saturday nights, his band played for energetic competitions where the ballroom's most skilled dancers pushed the extremes of their ability. Finally, Webb's band accompanied the lindy hop's transition into a form of professional stage dance as the ballroom's owner Moe Gale frequently packaged Webb's band with the Savoy's top lindy hoppers for shows at the Apollo and Paramount theaters and to tour on a Northeastern circuit known as "the round robin."<sup>231</sup> Thus, Webb's playing had to communicate with dancers on multiple levels. On the "macro" level, he was responsible for maintaining the dancing energy of the entire ballroom space as he played in concert

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<sup>230</sup> Terry Monaghan and Karen Hubbard, "Negotiating Compromise on a Burnished Wood Floor: Social Dancing at the Savoy" in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, edited by Julie Malnig (Urbana, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 129.

<sup>231</sup> Miller, interview with author.

with the movements of thousands of dancing bodies. On the “micro” level, he forged close one-on-one connections with those few dancers who pushed the lindy hop to new creative heights.

In Harlem ballrooms, swing was a music processed and evaluated kinesthetically through active, spontaneous participation as dancers individually and collectively responded to the music with a constant flow of ever-changing moves, rhythmic variations, and even new dance styles. In this context, musicians and dancers forged within the ballroom a participatory, dialogic space where, locked in a perpetual game of cat-and-mouse, dancers and musicians tried to “catch” each other’s rhythms and feelings and to transform them through a process of perpetual variation. Dance musicians, therefore, recognized their role within a ballroom landscape that included, in fact depended on, active contributions from dancers. The music was thus one part of a full social event that involved the enthusiastic participation of dancing audiences. Through this mutual exchange, musicians and dancing audiences became co-creators of dynamic soundscapes where participating bodies negotiated social dynamics to forge spaces for communication, collaboration, and catharsis.

Exploring this multi-layered collaborative relationship between Webb and his dancing audiences presents a series of challenging research questions. Most obviously, it requires that one make claims about live musical performances not captured on record and how they interacted with social dancing not captured on film. As such, this chapter relies on traces of evidence from a range of sources to interrogate the band’s interactions with dancers. Recollections from bandleaders, side men, critics, and dancing audience members affirm the necessity of understanding Webb’s music

through dance, yet these accounts leave much to be explored if one seeks to delve deeper into the rich corporeal experience their words only hint at. What did it feel like to dance to Webb's music? How did dancers listen with and through their bodies? What creative movement did they contribute to the ballroom soundscape and how might it have influenced what the band created? What would an active, dance-oriented analytic lens tell us about this music that a sedentary analysis leaves out? Answering these questions requires a multi-layered, creative "fleshing out" of accounts from the historical record.

### **An Imperfect Artifact: Fleshing Out "Let's Get Together"**

My fleshy analysis in this chapter animates a single skeletal frame: Webb's 1934 studio recording of "Let's Get Together," an Edgar Sampson arrangement the band recorded for Columbia on January 15, 1934.<sup>232</sup> In social, competition, and performance contexts, accounts indicate that Webb's theme song "Let's Get Together" was a tune he played frequently to accompany dancers. Both Frankie Manning and Norma Miller, Savoy Ballroom regulars who ultimately became professional lindy hoppers, independently cited this tune when indicating to me the type of song Webb would likely play to accompany their performances. Furthermore, *Melody Maker's* account of the Savoy's Saturday night dance contests indicates that participants requested this tune nearly exclusively.

Usually there are about a dozen couples altogether, each of which in turn is called up to the bandstand and asked to select a number to accompany the

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<sup>232</sup> Chick Webb and his Orchestra, "Let's Get Together," arr. Edgar Sampson, Columbia Records, recorded January 15, 1934, New York City, Columbia 152687-2; J. Wilfred Johnson, *Ella Fitzgerald: An Annotated Discography; Including a Complete Discography of Chick Webb* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), 22.



dance. Nine out of ten are too excited to give the matter any consideration, and the first item which naturally enters their heads is Chick Webb's signature tune, *Get Together*. The dance lasts for about two choruses, or until the couple have gone through their paces to everyone's satisfaction. It is not uncommon to hear *Get Together* played ten or eleven times in rapid succession, though the fascinating counterpoint of the first chorus never palls.<sup>233</sup>

That this tune naturally entered dancers' heads speaks to both its popularity and its ubiquity. As the "theme song" or sonic calling card for Webb's band, "Let's Get Together" would have been performed nightly at a minimum, and, as the *Melody Maker* indicates, nearly *ad infinitum* during competitions.

However, to my ear, 1934's "Let's Get Together" is far from Webb's best recording, and I have often wondered how *this* could be the band's signature song, the one that everybody requested. Recalling Taylor's account of Webb's band playing for radio, a studio space was not where the band did "what we can really do." If one wishes to understand what made Webb popular with dancers or why this specific song was so frequently requested, the studio recording of "Let's Get Together" is an imperfect artifact produced outside the specific live performance context this chapter seeks to penetrate. Indeed, when heard through the context of numerous historical accounts of Webb's live performances, the many ways it does *not* match up are as important as the concordances.

Essentially, I aim to deploy this studio recording as a tool to excavate Webb's style when performing live for dancers. This mode of listening to a recording is akin to what Spike Hughes describes as he explains to his readers why his appraisals of Chick Webb recordings often differ so sharply from theirs:

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<sup>233</sup> "Stompin' at the Savoy with Chick Webb and his Band," *Melody Maker*, June 20, 1936, 2.

The other evening I stayed home to listen to an opera on the radio. It was a work I had not heard before, and I had no score to follow it with. The result was that I heard about half of what I guessed to be going on. I had no means of supplying the deficiencies in the music caused by broadcasting. If I had heard it in the flesh before my ears would have remedied things—by association. If I had had a score my eyes would have aided me. If it had been the work of a composer whose style I knew it would have been easier. I should have known what was going on—from experience. So I wonder what jazz means to the majority of you—for the same reason? No wonder you think Chick Webb over-rated when you have only heard Armstrong, Ellington, and Calloway over here in the flesh. Most of you have probably thought the critics crazy for cracking up Fletcher Henderson. And I'll bet half of you didn't know what on earth Hawkins was for until he came to England. Association plays an enormous part in the enjoyment of mechanically reproduced music and one doesn't honestly enjoy records or radio until one has heard the original. Nobody would think the Mona Lisa stirring from a photograph, but once you have seen it, the photograph—like other foolish things—will remind you of it.<sup>234</sup>

Hughes hears Webb's recordings, such as "Let's Get Together," by acting upon them with a context he builds from memory of the social dancing and ambiance at the Savoy Ballroom where he heard the songs performed live. While contemporary researchers lack Hughes' personal experience of the Savoy, there are other tools at our disposal to at least partially reconstruct this soundscape. Thus, I use this recording as much to reveal what it does not show as what it does. As voices and bodies past and present evoke a range of dynamic layers of interaction between dancers and musicians, we can begin hearing this recording as a window not into lived memories of the Savoy Ballroom, but into a world of possibilities for what Webb's live performances *might* have sounded like and felt like to dance to. "Let's Get Together" is thus here a sonic skeleton to be fleshed out with viscera built through a dialogue between historical research, music analysis, kinesthetic theory, and contemporary dance praxis.

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<sup>234</sup> "Mike" [Spike Hughes, pseud.], "Our Critic-At-Large on Sayings of the Weak," *Melody Maker*, April 10, 1937, 5.

This hybrid analytical framework seeks to offer one window into the engagement between dancers and musicians by treating their dynamic as a specific listening practice or what ethnomusicologist Judith Becker terms a *habitus of listening*. Adapting Bourdieu's concept, Becker uses the term to describe "different stances of listening in relation to the musical event."<sup>235</sup> Emphasizing the communication among bodies, movements, images, feelings, and sounds, my analysis argues that the Savoy Ballroom's *habitus* is a form of interconnected, intercorporeal listening driven by the dynamic exchange and collapse of boundaries between discrete subjects, objects, and media. While keeping the empirical in close contact with the imaginative, the foreground of this analysis moves gradually from the former towards the latter through four sections. First, I discuss Webb's tempi by reading radio transcriptions and studio recordings through accounts of the dancers and critics who heard him play live. Second I read the song's form and phrase structure through the lindy hop's divergent modes of organizing time. Third, I highlight the layered practice of playful melodic and rhythmic exchange through which musicians and dancers might have co-constructed their individual "solos." Finally, I complicate the listeners' subjectivities by reading dancers' reflections and my own lived experience through developments in embodiment theory that emphasize intersubjectivity and intercorporeality. Like musicologist Elisabeth Le Guin's narration of an imagined subject's experience of Haydn's *Piano Sonata no.33 in C Minor*, I explore "Let's Get Together" in its time and place by constructing a "Perfect

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<sup>235</sup> Judith Becker, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 11.

Listener.”<sup>236</sup> However, as this chapter’s perpetual emphasis on communication and interaction reveals, swing music’s Perfect Listener is only articulable *relationally* and can only be constructed through imagining an intercorporeal network rather than an individual listening subject. As such, the song’s title “Let’s Get Together” foreshadows the co-creative, collective listening practice I seek to excavate.

### **A “Kicking-the-Ass-Beat”: Recovering Webb’s “Savoy Tempo”**

The studio recording of “Let’s Get Together” has an average beats per minute (bpm) of 204—on the fast side, but well within a comfortable dancing range. While it is the only complete recording of the tune, as this was the Webb band’s theme song, they did use it as a brief “intro” and “outro” for live broadcasts, a couple of which have survived from the year 1939. One surviving excerpt is from the Coconut Grove room at the Park Central Hotel in downtown Manhattan. In this recording, the band plays the song’s first 24 bars at 210 bpm, roughly maintaining the studio record’s tempo. However, in another such “intro” from Boston’s Southland Ballroom, we hear about 20 bars at 235 bpm and a 16 bar “outro” at the same tempo. This 25-bpm disparity is significant in a dancing context, and these radio artifacts suggest that Webb’s live tempos were variable and context-dependent.

For dance bands, sensitive manipulation of tempo was crucial to successful playing for dancers. When Count Basie adjusted to playing the Savoy regularly, there was a “feeling out” period for his band to adjust their style. Absent clear directions from

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<sup>236</sup> Elisabeth Le Guin, *Boccherini’s Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 258-270.

the ballroom's management, they were left to "feel out" the ballroom's rhythms directly through the kinesthetic feedback they received from the crowd.

You never had to worry about the manager telling you that you were playing too fast or too slow or could you bring it down a little. You played what you played ... And those dancers were right there waiting for whatever you wanted to play. At first they were just standing around there, just listening and waiting to find out where you were, and then they got on it. Meanwhile, Big 'Un [singer Jimmy Rushing] and I were feeling them out too. It was sort of like playing checkers.<sup>237</sup>

What Basie describes as a game, I would call a dance where, like with a new partner, a band and a crowd connect and feel each other out. Basie recalls that he was able to make this a successful partnership by accessing the sensitive control of speed and pacing he learned on the road with the Bennie Moten Orchestra: "Getting on to the dancers is a very important part of being a bandleader. I had learned a lot about that from Bennie Moten back when we were playing those ballrooms out in the territory. So it wasn't really hard for me, because Bennie was a master of tempo."<sup>238</sup> As Basie observes, both his own and Moten's success with dancers stemmed from a skillful manipulation of speed and pacing to keep dancers' feet on the floor and their bodies activated.

By most accounts, Webb shared Moten's mastery of tempo, and Webb's palette for pacing was thoroughly locked in to the specific flows and desires of the Savoy Ballroom's lindy hopping public. When Webb famously battled Benny Goodman's Orchestra at the Savoy Ballroom in 1937, Helen Oakley wrote that Webb "had the edge on Benny in the fact that he provided the dancers with 'those right tempos' and due to

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<sup>237</sup> Count Basie with Albert Murray, *Good Morning Blues: The Autobiography of Count Basie* (New York: Da Capo, 2002), 202.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*

previous experience in battling bands, he knew just how to call his sets and what to feed those people.”<sup>239</sup> Doc Cheatham, who played trumpet with Webb’s band, noted that the drummer constantly adapted his arrangements and tempos to suit the preferences of his dancing audience.

Chick’s band had the right style that suited the dancers at the Savoy. His tempos were right for them—not too fast or too slow. Remember, those lindy hoppers had a lot to do with the bands that succeeded at that place. Who was booked and who stayed on depended on them.<sup>240</sup>

At the Savoy Ballroom, Webb became, in Norma Miller’s words, a “master of tempo” who learned how to push his band’s speed to enliven his dancing audiences. As Miller elaborates, “No one could push a band quite like Chick Webb could, he had what was called a kicking-the-ass-beat. The Lindy Hop was developed to his music.”<sup>241</sup> Echoing Miller’s perspective, Spike Hughes associated Webb’s music with what he termed “Savoy tempo,” an elastic and energetic intermingling of sonic forces that could be felt and recognized by those who experienced it, but not easily defined: “In musical terms it is a tempo, a tone colour, a swing, above all an atmosphere captured in wax only by those who have ever deserved to play there.”<sup>242</sup> In synthesizing Hughes’ explication of “Savoy Tempo” with Miller’s “kicking-the-ass beat”, I arrive at two general conclusions about Webb’s approach to tempo in live performance for dancers: Webb’s tempi were relatively fast, and his tempo choices reflect close communication with dancers.

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<sup>239</sup> Helen Oakley, “Webb Wins the Title ‘King of Swing’,” *Metronome*, May 1937, 1.

<sup>240</sup> Doc Cheatham in Bert Korrall, *Drummin’ Men—The Heartbeat of Jazz: The Swing Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 19.

<sup>241</sup> Norma Miller with Evette Jensen, *Swingin’ at the Savoy: The Memoir of a Jazz Dancer* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 69.

<sup>242</sup> “Mike” [Spike Hughes, pseud.], “What is Savoy Tempo?,” *Melody Maker*, March 16, 1935, 6.

When Webb's band played "Let's Get Together" at the Savoy, the tempo was likely closer to the Southland broadcast's 235 bpm than the slower tempi on the studio record and Park Central Hotel broadcast. During their broadcasts from the Park Central, they were only the second black band to regularly play the venue and the first in several years.<sup>243</sup> Ever sensitive to context and audiences, in this case upper-class white audiences and commercial radio, Webb likely played a version more in line with what commercially successful white bands played. As *Metronome* critic George T. Simon critically notes of Webb's tenure at the Park Central,

His band is now ensconsed[sic] in a pretty commercial white spot (Park Central Hotel), where it's in the process of trying to decide whether to play as it wants to play; as it thinks it should play, or as the customers think it should play. Unfortunately, Chick's outfit had chosen the latter course for the past year and a half or so, and just as unfortunately had taken a pretty nose-dive so far as dishing out honest-to-goodness swing is concerned.<sup>244</sup>

While Simon's appraisal reproduces problematic tropes of authenticity and racial essentialism (essentially a "jazz az iz" criticism), in general, downtown hotel spaces were thoroughly different venues than Harlem ballrooms like the Savoy and neither encouraged, nor often permitted, the type of excited athletic lindy hop dancing that accompanied Webb's Harlem performances in the late 1930s. By contrast, reports indicate Webb's Southland Ballroom tenure was primarily about activating and energizing young dancers. As *Metronome's* Boston correspondent indicates, "although Chick Webb and Ella Fitzgerald did not break any attendance records at Southland, they were a real draw and a place for the jitterbugs to hang out."<sup>245</sup> Furthermore, when he

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<sup>243</sup> "Chick Webb is Signed for Park Central Job," *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 5, 1938, 20.

<sup>244</sup> George T. Simon, "A Chippier Chick Webb?," *Metronome*, March 1939, 21.

<sup>245</sup> N.K., "Boston," *Metronome*, June 1939, 8.

took up residence at the Southland, Webb was succeeding Louis Armstrong who had been “intoxicating the rug cutters here at Boston’s sparkling Southland.”<sup>246</sup> This elevated tempo likely reflected Webb’s style at the Savoy Ballroom. By Miller’s recollection, “‘Let’s Get Together’, his theme, that was one of the big numbers, and he did it up in tempo.”<sup>247</sup> In RS Porter’s thick description of Harlem nightlife for the *Melody Maker*’s British audiences, he offers the following observations about Savoy tempos during Webb’s tenure as leader of the house band.

Two bands play for half-anhour[sic] each, and the most popular type of music is the very quick fox-trot. The only other tempos played are medium foxtrot blues and rumba. The number composed by one of Chick Webb’s boys, *Stomping at the Savoy*, is typical of the type of tune one might hear on entering the Savoy.<sup>248</sup>

Quicker than average tempos became a part of regular practice during Webb’s tenure as he, in conjunction with the ballroom’s dancers, pushed tempos slightly beyond typical expectations for dance music.

By Miller’s account, Webb’s mastery of tempo came from his ability to set a tempo aggressively, to push his band towards a “kicking-the-ass beat.” As French critic Hughes Pannasié described the phenomenon, the band locked in with the tempo Webb selected after the song had begun.

He is the only one who can use the ‘high hat’ cymbal and still please me. And the way he uses the other cymbals is wonderful. When, after a first chorus, he sets the tempo on the big cymbal, he starts swinging in such a way that all the audience at the Savoy screams with joy.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> “Chick Webb and Ella to Boston Spot,” *Chicago Defender*, April 22, 1939, 21.

<sup>247</sup> Miller, interview with author.

<sup>248</sup> R.S. Porter, “What it Costs,” *Melody Maker*, December 12, 1936, 2.

<sup>249</sup> Hughes Pannasié, “Impressions of America December 38-February 39,” *Jazz Hot* 31, April-May 1939, 11.



Pannasié's account indicates that Webb could shift the tempo during the song, which would create a more dynamic and variable effect than the relatively consistent tempi we hear on recordings. Indeed, it was precisely this quality for which John Hammond criticized Webb, arguing his tempi were both too fast and inconsistent: "In dance halls, he is given to another fault, that of playing tune after tune at a tempo which is fast enough to start with and increases right along, making dancing all but impossible."<sup>250</sup>

In fact, Webb's band's tempo choices were uniquely locked in with the Savoy Ballroom's atmosphere and the corporeal preferences of its dancing public. As Miller recalled, "And there go Chick, upping the tempo all of the time. ...We could [dance] faster than most people, and that was Chick Webb, because the dancers loved his tempos."<sup>251</sup> His tempi pushed the ballroom's rhythmic energy to a pace short of frenetic but slightly beyond comfortable. Webb's penchant for fast tempi at the Savoy demonstrated his understanding of what the dancers were capable of, which is made further apparent by Miller's recollection of Webb's penchant for "hazing" the ballroom's best dancers during professional performances. Miller recalls that Webb would push her troupe of elite professional dancers beyond their capabilities in professional performance contexts to get under their skin.

We worked with him, and we'd do a twelve o'clock show, he'd hit us with a tempo that we weren't ready for half the time, he was that mean, he did it deliberately, he did shit to you that [pauses] but he was a genius, have you ever known a genius that wasn't a pain in the ass? It goes with the territory.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> John Hammond, "Chick Webb's Standard of Musicianship Too Low," *Downbeat*, November, 1937, 3.

<sup>251</sup> Miller, interview with author.

<sup>252</sup> Miller, interview with author.

Miller's account of such sonic hazing does reveal Webb's awareness of dancers' capabilities, suggesting that Webb knew dancers' expectations and the threshold of their temporal "comfort zones" and could thus push them to the edge or beyond.

Further emphasizing Webb's tempo manipulation as rooted in connections to a particular space and audience, Spike Hughes identified mastery of tempo as Webb's strongest quality and the core of his connection with dancers at the Savoy. Hughes wrote at length throughout his appraisals of Webb in the 1930s of his mastery of "Savoy Tempo." While Hughes never defined "Savoy Tempo" precisely, he did identify it on Fletcher Henderson's recording of "Hocus Pocus", which he reviewed in 1935.

The tempo is good swinging Savoy tempo, with a lift and ease, which you will understand even if you have never been fortunate enough to hear the Savoy tempo first hand. The Savoy tempo is elastic. It swings only at certain metronomic points of *Andante*, *Moderato*, and *Allegro ma non troppo*. But once having heard it you cannot explain it. You can only tell instinctively when it is being played and when not.<sup>253</sup>

One can hear this elastic tempo in Webb's 1935 recording of "Don't Be That Way," in which Hughes identifies Savoy Tempo.<sup>254</sup> This recording opens at 216 beats per minute during the opening ensemble chorus, yet relaxes to a bpm from 203-206 during individual musicians' solos, climbing again to 216 near the end when the full ensemble returns. While not a live recording, this elasticity gives the piece a sense of both anticipatory excitement and a settled, "in the pocket" groove. While "Savoy Tempo" was variable, "Let's Get Together" as Webb's theme song was one of the band's "flag wavers," up-tempo numbers designed to maximize excitement by pushing dancers to the brink. Recalling a 1934 battle of the bands, Rosenkrantz recalled "the roar that split

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<sup>253</sup> "Mike" [Spike Hughes, pseud.], "Hot Records Reviewed," *Melody Maker*, January 5, 1935, 5.

<sup>254</sup> "Mike" [Spike Hughes, pseud.], "Hot Records Reviewed," *Melody Maker*, July 13, 1935.

the eardrums when Chick Webb took the stand and flashed into his special groove on 'Let's Get Together.'"<sup>255</sup>

Whatever the specific speed or degree of elasticity, Webb's sensitive manipulation of musical time was crucial to his appeal to dancers, and he developed it in close communication with them. According to Manning, "Chick Webb's band was really a band that knew what the dancers wanted when they was out there on the floor. He knew the tempos and what kind of music they liked to dance to, so he could keep the floor crowded."<sup>256</sup> When Whitey's Lindy Hoppers rehearsed in the ballroom, Chick Webb's band was rehearsing as well, and Manning recalls that Webb would occasionally seek their opinions on arrangements, style, and most often on tempo.<sup>257</sup> As it largely defines the speed at which dancers dance, mastery of tempo is crucial to holding a floor full of dancers. An experienced dance band would no doubt understand the tempo preferences of specific audiences through the nightly trial and error of noting when dancers got up to dance and when they sat. As Manning recalled,

He would always want to know, 'hey man, how do you like this tune or how do you like this tempo?' ... But that was also a thing that musicians who worked in the Savoy looked for. They wanted to know if the dancers liked their music, and as long as the dancers liked their music, they were gonna work.<sup>258</sup>

Bands generally vary the speeds at which they play to give dancers variety, as too many fast numbers in a row may prove frustratingly tiring. Miller explains that Webb's tempo choices navigated the ebbs and flows of energy during an evening to keep dancers

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<sup>255</sup> Timme Rosenkrantz, *Harlem Jazz Adventures: A European Baron's Memoir, 1934-1969*, trans. and ed. Fradley Hamilton Garner (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2012), 21.

<sup>256</sup> Frankie Manning, phone conversation with the author, November 2008.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

motivated and on the floor without overwhelming or exhausting them: “Listen, he was king of the ballroom, he knew how to standardize his [music] so that we could dance, and so that we could rest the next number.”<sup>259</sup> The processes through which Webb adapted his tempos to the Savoy’s dancers and through which they then learned to push their dancing to match his “kicking-the-ass beat” represents a negotiated process Becker identifies as “rhythmic entrainment,” which occurs when “two or more seemingly independent processes mutually influence each other to converge in a common pattern.”<sup>260</sup>

While his tempos were often fast and pushed both his band and the ballroom’s dancers, whatever speed Webb selected was a calculated choice made in close consultation—whether verbally during rehearsal or energetically during live performance—with the ballroom’s dancers. Surviving evidence suggests that as a “flag waiver” at the Savoy Ballroom, Webb’s “Let’s Get Together” would take a pace closer to the Southland broadcast than the studio record. However, regardless of speed, Webb’s “Savoy Tempo” locates his music’s speed and rhythmic character in the rhythmically entrained coordination between musicians on the stage and dancers on the ballroom floor. As a collaborative phenomenon derived from the venue’s rhythms and flows, perhaps any tempo Webb chose for “Let’s Get Together” would be always already a “Savoy Ballroom Tempo.”

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<sup>259</sup> Miller, interview with author.

<sup>260</sup> Becker, *Deep Listeners*, 127.

### **Form and Phrasing: “Let’s Get Together” as Participatory Framework**

In playing to keep dancers on the floor, Webb’s band created music for dancers to participate kinesthetically and to add their own layers of improvisation. This characteristic was, for Hughes, part of what made Webb’s music fundamentally special. He wrote of a Webb radio broadcast in 1937 that,

There is no ‘secret’ about this sort of music except that it is first, last and always dance music. ... As Chick Webb played it, the tune [“Honeysuckle Rose”] was allowed to speak for itself; a bare minimum allowing a maximum of scope for the band to make it a dancing thing.<sup>261</sup>

For Hughes, the band’s propensity for simplicity, sparseness, repetitiveness, and reliable rhythmic drive yielded a musical container that encouraged audiences to get on their feet and move along with the band. What Hughes observed in Harlem ballrooms was the musical dynamic of a group that recognized its own sonic output not only as content, but also as context for layers of creative engagement through movement that did not survive through recorded sound media.

To further interrogate “Let’s Get Together” as a container for social dance improvisation, I want to activate and expand Ingrid Monson’s approach to communicative dynamics in jazz bands, in which she employs the linguistic concept of “participant frameworks.” In Monson’s model, the band creates conversation through the roles of different instruments and sections in perpetual dialogue with each other.<sup>262</sup> Including dancers in the crowd as generative agents in the musical experience expands Monson’s model off the edge of the bandstand and through the entire ballroom, where

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<sup>261</sup> “Mike” [Spike Hughes, pseud.], “‘Mike’ Takes the Blame,” *Melody Maker*, February 27, 1937, 5.

<sup>262</sup> Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 81-82.

dancing audiences both join and help to shape this participatory framework and the highly interactive experiences that occur within it. Thus, what Hughes saw as “danceableness” in Webb’s music I read as a well-constructed, multi-layered participatory framework that invited audience movement and creative physical engagement.

Viewed through Monson’s model, an entire dance band’s relationship to dancers is akin to the role she articulates for rhythm sections in small jazz combos, which is to create a stable timeline against which solo improvisation can take place. Monson praises the role of repetition and consistency in rhythm sections as it yields “a participatory musical framework against which highly idiosyncratic and innovative improvisation can take place.”<sup>263</sup> Expanded to a ballroom context, creating this “idiosyncratic improvisation” is a role musicians share with, and often cede to, dancing audience members whose own additions co-create the artistic experience within the ballroom space. This “participatory framework” yields multiple conversations within the ballroom including those between band members, between the band and dancers, and between dancing partners. Creating space allows others to contribute to the dialogue, and in some ways the dance band’s role is that of conversational facilitator as it motivates and inspires dancers’ movements. At the Savoy Ballroom such facilitation and other dance venues, Webb’s bands’ fundamental role.

At the level of individual beats, the music’s rhythmically entrained tempo created a tangible pulse felt and expressed both in the musicians’ playing and in the dancers’ movements. The lindy hop, unlike some previous popular dances, has a strong

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid. 89.

four-to-the-bar pulse where the dancers move at relatively the same rate of motion as the pulse of a four-four measure. Musicologist Howard Spring emphasizes this distinction, noting its appearance on film in 1929's *After Seben*, and also observes it in the accelerated rate of shifting movement outlined in Choreologist Nadia Chilkovsky's labanotation transcriptions of lindy movements. Chilkovsky's transcriptions echo a sentiment found in dance magazines from the late 1920s, which note that the lindy is danced at twice the rate of the fox trot, where the "slow" steps each occupy a half-bar to lindy steps' quarter-bar.<sup>264</sup> As Spring observes, this shifting pattern coincided with a strong shift in the late 1920s and early 1930s towards "four on the floor" walking basslines that similarly articulated the pulse of 4/4 measures at the quarter note level.<sup>265</sup> Choreographer and jazz dance historian Mura Dehn—who worked extensively with dancers at the Savoy—also suggests that, despite significant rhythmic departures and phrasal variations, lindy hop dancers observed a fundamental on-beat "pulse" that kept their bodies locked in with the music. "In the most classical of jazz dance, the Lindy Hop, there is an underlying pulse, a bounce-to keep the single beat. On top of it is the off-beat, generally expressed in a dip of the knees, the syncopation. On the base of bounce and syncope steps begin to form."<sup>266</sup> Here, Dehn articulates this pulse as a layered phenomenon where dancers enact polyrhythmic syncopation within their bodies. This kind of multilayered pulse creates an active and dynamic yet consistent grounding—another layer of participatory framework—that maintains a strong

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<sup>264</sup> Spring, Howard Spring, "Swing and the Lindy Hop: Dance, Venue, Media, and Tradition," *American Music* 15, no.2 (Summer, 1997): 188.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Dehn, "Jazz Dance," 4.

connection between dancers and musicians at the base level of individual rhythmic pulses. As Dehn articulates, this shared rhythmic ground is the basis upon which divergences, variations, and departures are built. This pulse was one of the first things I learned as a dancer, and as I have observed it in my own dancing, I see that it remains there at different tempos and within different moods and styles.

While Dehn felt and saw it primarily in the knees, I find a degree of play and autonomy in where and to what degree I express this pulse by emphasizing it in different parts of my body. Sometimes it is a highly observable “bounce” articulated by my ankles and/or knees. Other times, it is more of a “felt” pulse within my torso while my dancing remains more upright and/or smooth. I feel this pulse as a rolling rhythm throughout the body that functions more as a fluid wave—riding the swing syncopation—rather than as a static marker of individual beats. Making this pulse feel natural took some time and practice, though I found that it only really came to me when I did not focus my attention on it. Eventually, it became such an ingrained part of my dancing that it now functions as the unconscious baseline that maintains my connection to the music. Yet, when I direct my attention to it for analytical purposes, I notice that absent a good pulse feeling, I do not feel that connection. When it is there, no matter what variations I do or style I dance, I feel “locked in” with the music, which is the foundation of my sense of freedom to move.

When dancers lock in with the rhythm’s stabilizing pulse, they create a sense of play and adventure by slipping in and out of line with the music’s metric and phrase structures. The lindy hop facilitates play at this level because it lacks a regular duration for dance patterns or “moves.” Some figures take eight beats, others take six, and still



others take ten, five, or two beats to complete. Each new figure is punctuated by a “rock-step” where each person rocks backwards onto one leg before propelling forward on the other to launch into a new figure, and this rock-step can lead to “irregular” re-readings of the musical form and phrasing.<sup>267</sup> In recalling the beginning of his professional career, Manning explains that the lindy hop developed without inculcation into the type of formal musical training through which one would acquire working knowledge of concepts like a 32-bar chorus.

At that time I didn’t know anything about counting. We were used to working with bands that played the Savoy, like Chick Webb. When they started playing, we started dancing, and we knew that they would stop when we finished. We were always with the beat and always danced with the music, and if someone said do this step so many times it would always come out with the phrasing, but we didn’t have any time limits or sense the natural end of a chorus. We might start in the middle of a chorus and finish up before the song ended.<sup>268</sup>

Rather than being intentionally crafted based upon symmetrical structures, the lindy hop developed through the meeting of intuition, innovation, deep listening, and cultural memory. Since steps can take different amounts of time to complete, the rock-step falls at different points during the musical measure depending on the choices the dancers have made. Since the rock-step punctuates the dance figures in much the same way a downbeat possesses the principal stress in a musical measure, I believe that the metric irregularity of lindy hop steps has a significant impact on the way dancers experience swing music. The dancer can effectively place a “downbeat” at any point in the musical

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<sup>267</sup> I place scare quotes around the term irregular here to emphasize that dancers’ engagement with musical structure is only irregular if we assume that musicians’ experiences and the constructs of Western music theory are the superior, and therefore “correct,” epistemological framework through which to consider musical form.

<sup>268</sup> Frankie Manning and Cynthia R. Millman, *Frankie Manning: Ambassador of Lindy Hop* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 95.

measure, creating both tension with the structure of the music itself and giving a different, irregular structural reading of the music.

Indeed, there's a certain gamesmanship in moving in and out of the arrangement's phrase structure, which Mura Dehn articulates in reference to dancer Leon James:

Leon James (originally from the Savoy Ballroom) is a master of unpronounced movements. In withholding the actual step there is an implied rhythmic communication – a teasing, a humorous suspense (if you don't share this understanding you can't be a jazz dancer). Leon often used it in routines clowning out of line, making steps with his face, eyes, hands – and suddenly joining in suddenly proving himself right: on the beat!<sup>269</sup>

James' movements engage the music playfully, leveraging the structural divergence between the two forms to productively juxtapose moments of alignment and misalignment. Reaching far away from the music and then coming in "on the beat" at exactly the right moment highlights and emphasizes any cathartic, cadential impact that the "right" moment in the music might have.

This type of inside/outside rhythmic play with the musical framework, however, requires a steady pulse and a reasonably regular structure from the music in order to facilitate and ground dancers' excursions. Famed tap dancer James Berry, of the Berry Brothers, described this aspect of lindy hopping in "Jazz Profound," an essay composed collaboratively with Dehn in the 1970s.

The rhythmic motion on the beat with the music has something. You feel free to do what you want and you can't get lost, because you can always come in, you can dance with abandon but still you are encased within the

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<sup>269</sup> Mura Dehn, ""The ABCs or the Fundamentals of Jazz," Mura Dehn Papers on Afro-American Social Dance, Box 1 Folder 1, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

beat. That is the heart of dancing. Being capable of coming out and getting in. Even stop and jump in because the rhythmic beat is waiting for you.<sup>270</sup>

Viewed through Monson's model, an entire dance band's relationship to dancers is largely akin to the "participatory framework" that rhythm sections provide in later small combo jazz styles, which is to create a stable timeline to ground adventurous improvisatory excursions. Expanded to a ballroom context, creating such excursions is a role musicians share with dancing audience members whose own additions co-create the artistic experience within the ballroom space.

While this framework's stability occurs at the level of individual pulses, it is especially potent at the macro-level of arrangement and formal structure, which remains relatively static and reliable through multiple iterations in live performance even as solos and tempos vary. This arrangement-level stability only increases as dancers become more familiar with it through repetition. Thus, "Let's Get Together" provides a particularly salient example of a danceable framework, because as Webb's signature tune, the Savoy Ballroom dancers would have heard it nightly during Webb's tenure as house bandleader, ten times in a row during weekly contests.<sup>271</sup> Unlike many of Ellington or Henderson's most celebrated tunes, the formal structure of "Let's Get Together" is a strictly repetitive, four-square series of 32-bar AABA choruses. While we do not have footage of Savoy lindy hoppers dancing to "Let's Get Together," one sees

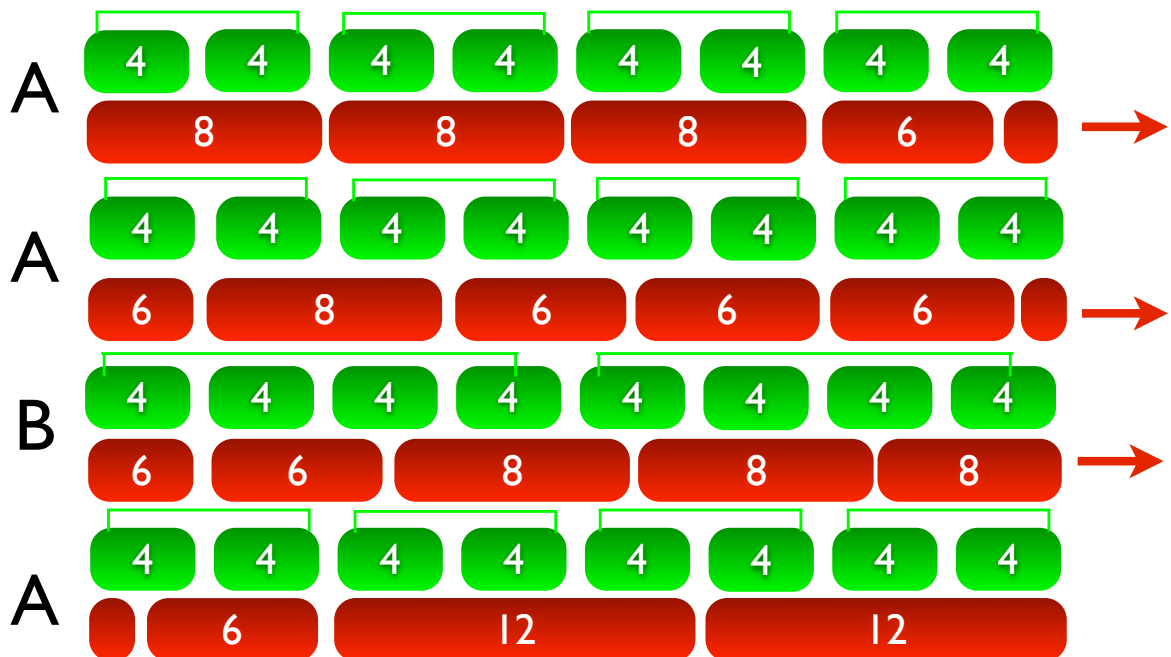
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<sup>270</sup> James Berry, "Jazz Profound." Underlines in the original.

<sup>271</sup> Jocelyn Neal explains that a tune's "danceable" nature functions at the level of pulse, with a hierarchically structured strong-weak pattern. Her explication aligns with Monson's "participant framework" concept to explain how the same dynamics of regular pulse facilitate both musical and dance improvisation. Jocelyn Neal, "The Metric Makings of a Country Hit," in *Reading Country Music: Steel Guitars, Opry Stars, and Country Bars*, ed. Cecilia Tichi (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 328-329.

this irregular metric play in the social dancing of Al Minns, who danced at the Savoy socially and professionally during the 1930s, in a 1984 clip shot in Stockholm. During a residency teaching Swedish lindy hop revivalists, Minns danced with a Swedish partner to the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra’s “Opus One,” an arrangement with a structure nearly identical to “Let’s Get Together.”<sup>272</sup> Its tune even has the same hypermetric organization of two-bar hypermeasures in the A sections and four-bar hypermeasures during the B section.

In the surviving videotape, one sees their figures moving in and out of phase with the musical phrasing. Within the first 32-bar chorus’s AABA form, Minns and his partner restructure the song through their movement patterns. The chart below shows “Opus One’s” musical phrase structure in green and the dancers’ figures in red, and the numbers indicate the number of beats per musical bar or dance figure (fig. 3.1).



<sup>272</sup> Al Minns and unknown partner, “Al Minns,” dancing in Stockholm, Sweden, 1984, YouTube clip, posted by “going2havefun,” June 15, 2007 [[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mr\\_yKGFwCQQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mr_yKGFwCQQ)].

**Figure 3.1. Metric structure for “Opus One” chorus compared with Minns & anon. partner’s dance figures. Musical measures appear in green and bracketed into hypermeasures that reflect the melodic phrasing. Dance figures appear in red, and the arrow marks elision with the next musical phrase.**

Their patterns for the first A section remain largely in two-bar, eight-beat figures until the final phrase, creating a stable, regular layer that maps cleanly onto the music’s phrase structure, which is also organized in two-bar hypermeasures.



**Figure 3.2. Excerpt of fig. 3.1: first A section.**

During this first A section, the pair’s 8-beat patterns align with the tune’s two-bar melodic phrases (fig. 3.3).

**Figure 3.3. Transcription of “Opus One” A section melody alongside Minn’s and anon. partner’s footwork. Couple’s first three figures aligns with the A section’s hypermetric structure.<sup>273</sup>**

<sup>273</sup> I intend these transcriptions to productively elaborate on the work of David F. García and Jocelyn Neal, who each identify and transcribe the “basic” footwork rhythms of in various social dances alongside musical transcriptions. Considering the lindy hop productively complicates this approach because lindy hop figures have multiple common footwork patterns and vary in duration. See Neal, “The Metric Makings,” 328-330 and David F. García, *Arsenio Rodríguez and the Transnational Flows of Latin Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 39-55.

In the section's final two bars (mm 7-8), the dancers do a six-beat "tuck turn" figure, which places them out of phase with the musical phrase structure. Throughout the ensuing second A section, they vary their figure length between six and eight beats to move into and out of alignment with the musical phrases (fig. 3.4).

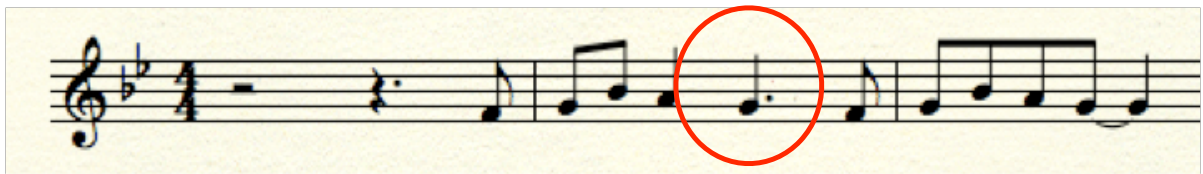


**Figure 3.4. Metric structure for transition from first to second A sections.**

**Figure 3.5. Transcription (melodic reduction) of "Opus One" mm.8-17 (Chorus 1: final 2 bars of A Section 1, full A section 2, first 2 bars of B section) with rhythmic transcription of Minns & anon. partner's footwork. Musical phrases and dance figures are bracketed.**

Minns and his partner use the varying length of lindy hop figures to break up the musical phrasing in disparate ways as movements work both with and against the tune's phrase structure while still reflecting the song's underlying pulse. Their movements dance through and across a highly periodic, repetitive melody to contribute variation where the music seems to lack it. As such, they exploit the negative space in this framework to add new layers of meaning and interpretation. One can see/hear one of these layers purely in the visual rhythms their footwork contributes to the visual/soundscape.

There are even a few places where their choices draw interesting moments from the arrangements or even recast the tune itself. For example, one can see the strongest rhythm in the A section of "Opus One's" tune stressed not on the downbeat but on the third beat of each melodic statement, the tune's longest held note (fig. 3.6).



**Figure 3.6. "Opus One" A Section melody with rhythmically stressed 3<sup>rd</sup> beat circled.**

When one or more six-beat figures place the pair one half-measure out of phase with the music, their rock-step places a structural downbeat on this rhythmically stressed third beat, which further emphasizes its gravity in the tune. This moment occurs twice in this excerpt of Minns and his partner's dance as their rock-steps land on the third beat of measures 13 and 25 (fig. 3.7).



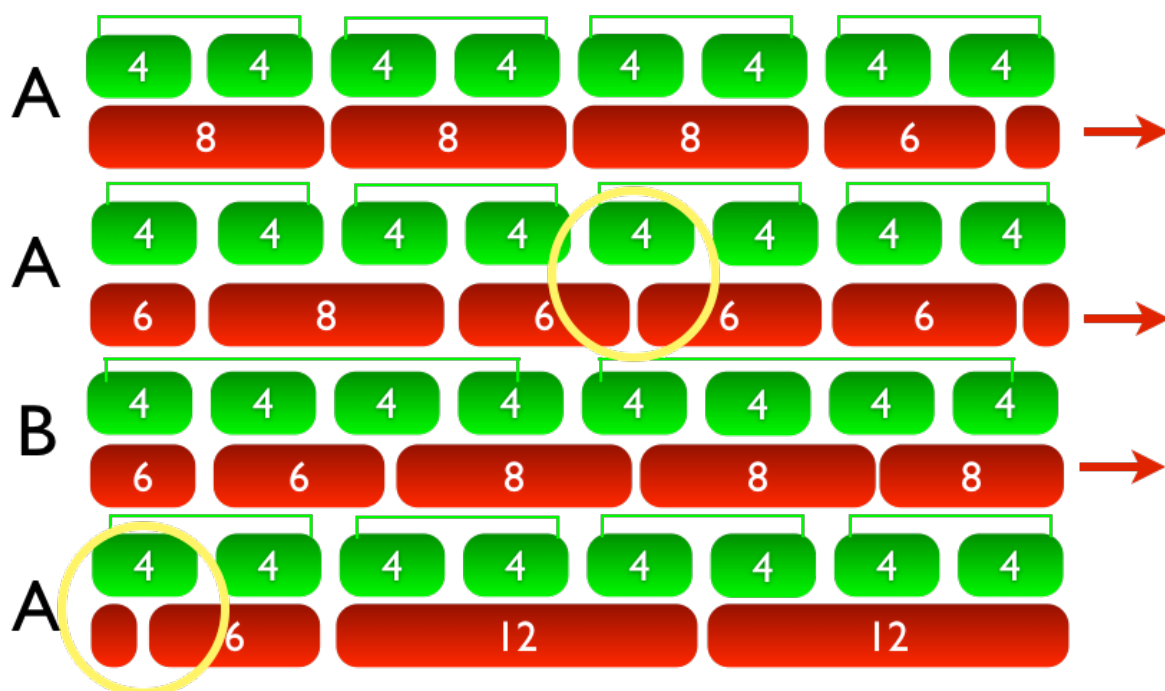


Figure 3.7. Metric structure as in fig. 3.1 with rock-step, stressed 3<sup>rd</sup> beat alignment in m. 13 and m. 25 circled in yellow.

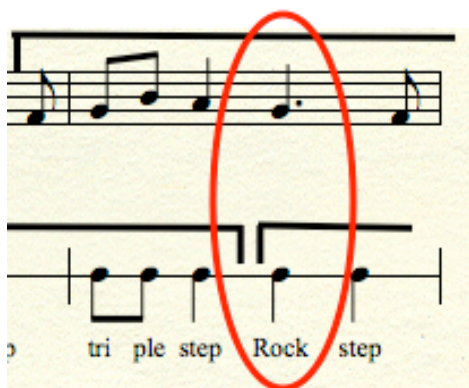


Figure 3.8. Excerpt from fig. 5, m.13. Rock step alignment with beat 3 circled in red.

These moments struck my senses and made me consider whether we could hear the tune as their patterns articulate it, hearing the sustained G as a downbeat (fig.39):

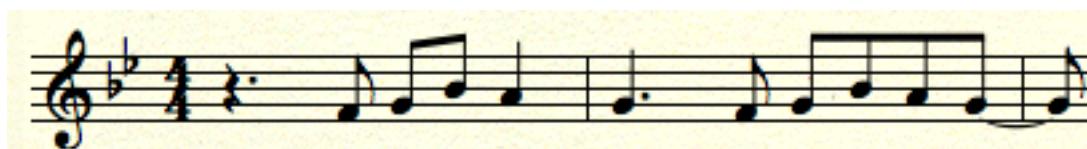
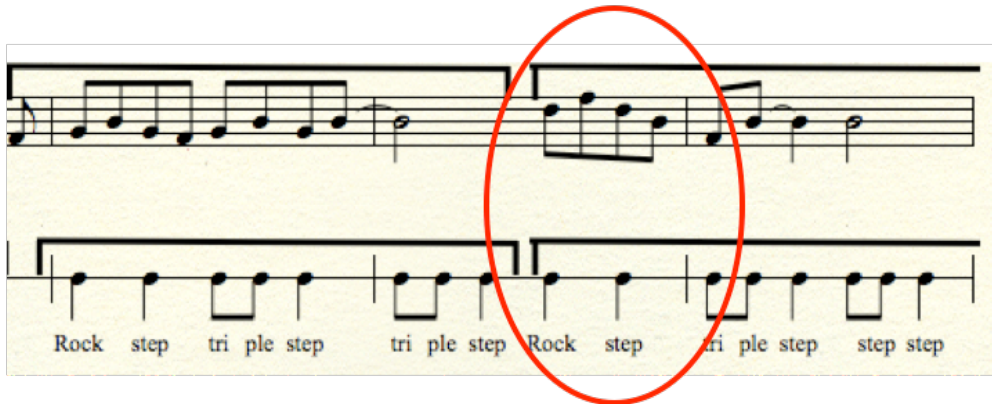


Figure 3.9. "Opus One" melody re-barred with a longer pickup and stressed G as downbeat.

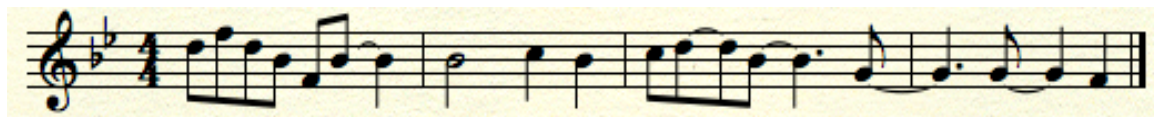


In a similar instance, the couple rock step in line not with the B section's first downbeat, but at the two bar "pickup" where its tune initiates in the A section's closing measure (fig. 3.10).



**Figure 3.10. Excerpt from fig. 3.5, mm.30-33, dancers' alignment with B section pickup circled in red.**

Indeed, absent our expectations of a symmetrically scored and barred song, the tune might make as much sense with the pickup shifted to the next measure (fig. 3.11).



**Figure 3.11. "Opus One" B-section melody (bridge) re-barred with pickup as downbeat.**

Thus, to describe the couple's dance figures as an "irregular" reading of the tune may obscure the ways the song itself works against the metric structure imposed upon it. Absent this construct, the dancers may be articulating the song's structure as they hear it in addition to weaving in and out of it, such that alignment vs. misalignment may itself be a false dichotomy.

Though we lack a similar video of social dancing to Webb's band, one could map this principle onto "Let's Get Together" with its similar repetitive two-bar melodies (four-bar in the B section) and 32-bar AABA structure. Where a seated listener might

hear a repetitive tune, I hear endless possibilities. I have danced to this song many times during the past decade, and each time I hear it completely differently based on what I, and my partner, contribute to the musical experience through our bodies. The song's central melody is this repeating call-and-response phrase:

**Figure 3.12. Transcription of “Let’s Get Together” A section melody.**

Furthermore, the lindy hop's lack of a regular or repetitive phrase structure yields still more possibilities. A pair of lindy hoppers are as likely to begin a new figure in the middle of this phrase as in line with it. If the couple does an eight-count figure, it could occur at the beginning of bar two or in the middle of either bar, recasting the melody's phrasing.



**Figure 3.13. “Let’s Get Together” melody shifted by two beats, four beats, and six beats against basic eight-beat lindy hop footwork.**

Beyond this “basic” 8eighthbeat footwork, different combinations of basic lindy hop steps could interact with this short motive to create a wide variety of polyrhythms. As I demonstrated above with “Opus One,” one might view this layering not as a recasting of the phrasing, but as movement and play that shifts into and out of musical phrases. Such a perspective makes sense given the dynamic range of phrase lengths in lindy hop’s movement vocabulary. A dancer may move out of phrasing sync with the musical structure only to sense the gravity towards especially strong downbeats, like the beginning of a new chorus, and re-enter synchronicity with the music at just the right spot to both ride and push the moment’s structural gravity. Within the context of African American aesthetics, this drift between musical and dance phrasings moves Olly

Wilson's "Heterogeneous Sound Ideal" beyond sound and creates the sense of meaningful play Samuel Floyd describes as "signifyin' on the timeline."<sup>274</sup>

This "timeline-level" displacement invites an expansion of Charles Keil's theory of "participatory discrepancies." According to Keil, the "vital drive" in a piece of music that provokes visceral feeling stems from incongruity at the level of pulse and syncopation, which gets resolved at structurally important moments.<sup>275</sup> With the lindy hop, dancers "lock in" to a stabilizing regular pulse with the music, yet they express departures from the musical structure at the more "macro-level" of phrasing and form. Such an expansion flips Keil's description, where he sees discrepancies that are "in phase, but out of sync," lindy hop dancers' create "vital drive" through movement patterns that are "in sync, but out of phase" with swing music's form.

The playful heterogeneity within the ballroom becomes apparent when one considers the points of slippage, dialogue, and translation between the structural and functional logics of swing music and the lindy hop. Manning highlights that distinction in describing initial professional performances of Whitey's Lindy Hoppers with Chick Webb's orchestra.

When we first started out, we didn't tell Chick what to play and he would play what he wanted to play, but Chick Webb knew what we could dance to...we were so amateurish, all we knew was we knew the rhythm and we knew the timing and what we wanted to do. At that time, it wasn't that anything we did fit the music, but it would fit it *musically*.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Samuel Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 122-124.

<sup>275</sup> See Charles Keil, "Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music," *Cultural Anthropology* 2, no.3 (August 1987): 275-283; see also the thorough discussion of this concept and its critics in Christopher Washburne, "Play it 'Con Filin!': The Swing and Expression of Salsa. *Latin American Music Review/Revista de Música Latinoamericana* 19, no.2 (Autumn-Winter, 1998): 160-185.

<sup>276</sup> Manning, interview with author. The italics represent his inflection.

What does it mean for dancing to not fit the music, but fit it musically? I see Manning's words as an expression of contribution rather than conformity. Lindy hop steps do not "fit" the music in that they do not operate within the same metric structures that define musical order. However, through its own flow of patterns and structures, lindy hop contributes its own logics of meaning and structure to the ballroom, engaging musical sound in dialogue as an equal creative partner. This dynamic is akin to the oppositional play between vocal and instrumental lines that music theorist Jocelyn Neal identifies as generative of meaning and emotion in listeners' experiences of country music.<sup>277</sup> Thus, while on its own "Let's Get Together's" predictable, repetitive formal plan might make it ostensibly musically uninteresting, Hughes praises such straightforward simplicity as the core of Webb's "danceable" style: "As Chick Webb played it the tune was allowed to speak for itself; a bare minimum allowing a maximum of scope for the band to make it a dancing thing."<sup>278</sup> Dancers reflected what they heard in arrangements, and in the process began to build a type of aural-kinetic fluency with swing music's structure that recognized and seized advantage of opportunities to transgress or even restructure musical form, rarely fitting the music, but fleshing out its participatory framework *musically*.

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<sup>277</sup> Jocelyn Neal, "Songwriter's Signature, Artist's Imprint: The Metric Structure of a Country Song," in *Country Music Annual 2000*, eds. Charles K. Wolfe and James A. Akenson, (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2000), 120-122.

<sup>278</sup> "Mike" [Spike Hughes, pseud.], "'Mike' takes the blame," *Melody Maker* (Feb 27, 1937): 5.

## Saying “Gotcha!”: Dialogue, Gamesmanship, and Mirroring

Just as dancers played creatively with the music’s phrase structure, so too did they engage in more “micro-musical” rhythmic and melodic exchanges with individual musicians in the band. Chick Webb and his band members were especially attentive to dancers on the floor, and they reflected dancers’ movements in their playing. As Manning described this dynamic,

Chick Webb would play for us. He played for the dancers. And we had this wonderful communication between the dancer and the band. And you know, like Chick, we, we would get out on the floor and we’d be dancing and you know, Chick Webb would focus on, oh, he’d see somebody out there dancing and they’d be doing this step and he would catch it.”<sup>279</sup>

By closely watching and “catching” dancers’ movements, Webb inspired them to greater virtuosity through an escalating game of call-and-response. Adding another layer to dancers’ engagement with an arrangement’s broader structure, Manning articulates that close one-on-one connections between musicians and dancers occurred during musical solos.

When he’s playing the arrangement, you’ve got to follow the line, ...but when one of the musicians would take a solo and you were dancing, that’s when he would improvise, he’d try to I’m not saying all musicians did that but Taft [Jordan, Webb’s trumpet player] was pretty good at it, he watched the dancers and he’d try to catch what they’d do. It’s like an inspiration to the dancer and it’s also an inspiration to the music. Sometimes maybe he can come up with a little riff or a little cut in the music that he can use.<sup>280</sup>

Such mutual inspiration through live interaction with dancers suggests that musicians’ “solos” were anything but, as they created a space to communicate with dancers that became a fundamental part of the ballroom’s sociality.

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<sup>279</sup> Frank Manning, transcript of interview prepared for Ken Burns, *Jazz*, 1995.  
<[http://www.pbs.org/jazz/about/about\\_transcripts.htm](http://www.pbs.org/jazz/about/about_transcripts.htm)>

<sup>280</sup> Manning, interview with author.

Webb's band formed a particularly close relationship with the Savoy's elite dancers, with whom they would eventually tour as a traveling show, which deepened their connection within the ballroom. In Manning's accounts of his first forays into the Savoy's dance contests, Webb's playing sparked Manning's enthusiasm and creativity, making him feel that Webb was in his corner.

Now, I danced to Chick Webb almost every single night, and we always had a lot of fun with the guys in the band, but this night it felt like they were all saying to me, "Frankie, we're going to play this for you!" Every one of them was really blowing. It was like they were telling the audience: "This is our man. We're gonna swing for this cat."<sup>281</sup>

As Manning described it, Chick Webb played a crucial role in his victory during this battle by supporting his movements and steps with rhythmic figures on the drums and by inviting Manning to choose his own music. Just as in the *Melody Maker* account, Webb had played the same song, Fletcher Henderson's hit song "Christopher Columbus," for each of the previous teams yet gave Manning the option to choose his own song. According to Manning, who chose Henderson's "Down South Camp Meeting," this gesture signified to him that Webb's band saw him as "their man" and was determined to support and push him during the contest. In Manning's vivid description of this passage, he describes in detail Webb's ability to both mimic his steps on the drums and to drive him to new heights of excellence as a dancer.

And then he started swinging that out for me. Boy, and he caught everything I was doing. I'd kick my foot, he'd dip, schoom. She'd twist, he'd say, too-too-too. (CLAPS) Oh, it was great. I hear what he's playing, and what he's playing is like inspiring me to do it better or do it harder or put more into it. When I did the air step, Webb even caught the motion of it as she's coming over my back. He was

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<sup>281</sup> Manning and Millman, 99.

saying te-de-de-de-de-de-de, and when she landed he said, te-de-de-de-de-de-de-bum. I mean, he's playing all this on the drum.<sup>282</sup>

In addition to his description of Webb's facility at mimicking his movements, Manning also describes Webb's ability to drive or push him to dance at a higher level through his playing. In Manning's account of one of the Savoy's weekly dance contests, Webb, trumpeter Taft Jordan, and the other musicians enhanced his presentation by reflecting his and partner Frieda Washington's movements in their playing.

This was one time when we *really* danced to the music, and it seemed like the band was catching everything that we were doing. Every time I kicked my leg out, Chick would say, "DJBOOM!" If I did a little swing-out, Taft Jordan would play, "BEOOOOWWW!" Frieda had one of the greatest twists of any of the girls and she could really show it off. When she was twisting around me, Chick Webb was playing "CHEEE-CHI-CHI, CHEEE-CHI-CHI" on the cymbals, keeping time with her. They'd play a riff behind me, and I'd think: *Yeah, keep up with me, guys!* I was feeling everything that they were doing, and the band was hitting every step that we did.<sup>283</sup>

Manning was dancing not only with Washington, but with the entire band; he experienced their music corporeally and expressed it in movement, in turn supplying the band with still more steps to "catch" and reflect in their playing. This kind of symbiotic conversation encapsulates the relationship between musicians and elite dancers, who fed from each other's virtuosity and created a common kinesthetic language that yielded visual expression from dancers and aural expression from musicians.

This process of catching steps was a particularly important marker of competence of drummers. As Manning recalled,

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<sup>282</sup> Frankie Manning in Jeff Kaufman, *The Savoy King: Chick Webb and the Music that Changed America*, 2012, film.

<sup>283</sup> Manning and Millman, 99.



These drummers had to catch things that dancers did on the dance floor, whether it be a nightclub review or a stage review, they caught what the dancers would do, like if a dancer pointed his hand the drummer was right there with him, and Chick Webb was one of the drummers who could do that because he watched the dancers.<sup>284</sup>

Manning's account suggests that Webb's attentiveness to dancing and dancers came from his background working with dancers and comedians in Vaudeville reviews and nightclub shows. Webb's ability to catch dancers steps in stage shows is echoed by Cliff Leeman's recollection, "Without being able to read music, he managed to catch everything the comics did and underline all the key spots in dance routines. His instincts were almost infallible."<sup>285</sup> Seeking to match Webb's instincts, drummer Eddie Jenkins, who commuted to the Savoy weekly as a teenager to watch Webb play and who toured with Bunny Berrigan's band in the late 1930s, developed a practice rooted in focusing his attention on individual dancers.

Over the years I learned to pick out one team of good dancers and sort of play to them, watch their footwork and throw accents when they'd be swinging the gal out or swinging back. Having played for regular tap dancers, it was fairly easy to pick up on things as they were happening instantaneously. In a ballroom full of dancers, you can single out a good couple, and just make believe you're playing for them only, it helped me learn to play for dancers for sure. ... If you see something in motion, you're throwing accents according to whatever they're doing.<sup>286</sup>

Jenkins, who idolized Webb, relied on dancers' movements to supply him with a rhythmic vocabulary that informed his practice as a rhythmic musician, just as they no doubt relied on his playing as a generative source for their own collaborations.

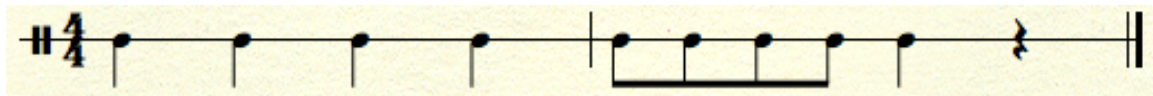
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<sup>284</sup> Manning, interview with author.

<sup>285</sup> Cliff Leeman in Korall, *Drummin' Men*, 27.

<sup>286</sup> Eddie Jenkins, phone conversation with the author, December 2008.

The sonic traces of such collaboration likely continue to exist both on record and in many of the common riffs and licks that comprise jazz musicians' vocabularies just as kinetic traces are no doubt still present in a range of American popular dances. While claiming concordances between these traces is nearly always a conjectural exercise, I have managed to find one: a rhythm Manning scatted to me during an interview that also appears on a radio transcription of a live Webb performance of Count Basie's "One O'Clock Jump": four straight unsyncopated beats stated and then repeated at twice the speed (fig.3.14):



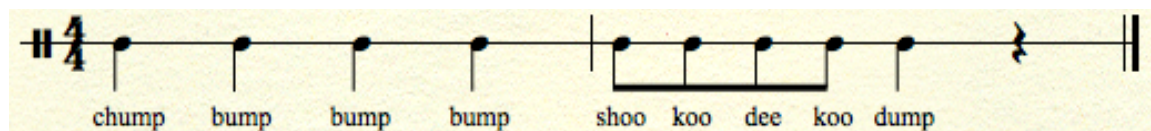
**Figure 3.14. Rhythmic transcription of Webb's "fill" in "One O'Clock Jump", radio transcription from the Southland Ballroom, 1939.**

Webb plays this figure in the closing two bars of a wind trio as an accent preparing the tune's closing series of vibrant shout choruses (02:25-02:28).

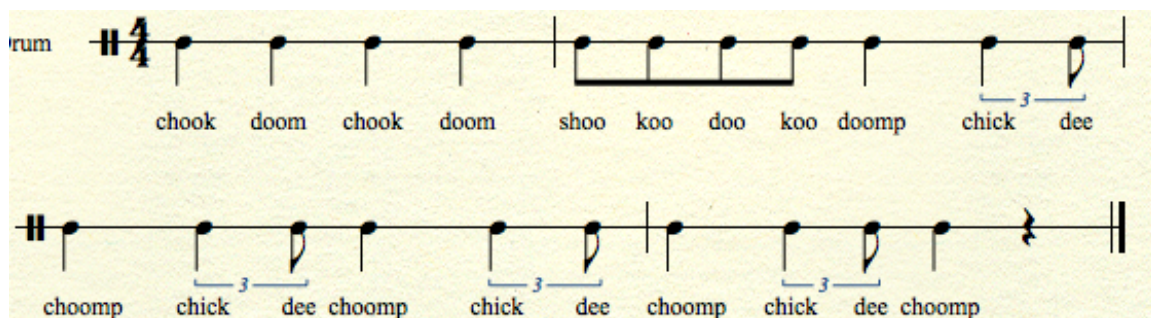
According to Manning, this was the rhythm of a step he struggled to perfect and that Webb "caught" when he finally nailed it during a contest.

I had been trying to learn this step in a rehearsal, and I know the step went something like CHUMP BUMP BUMP BUMP SHOOKOO DEEKOO DUMP, that was the kind of rhythm of the step. Then I got in the contest, and Chick Webb's band would play, and I was trying to do that step, and the first time I kinda messed it up, and then I tried to do it again and when I tried to do it a second time, Chick caught it! 'Cause he would play CHOOK DOOM CHOOK DOOM SHOOKOO DOOKOO DOOMP CHICK-DEE CHOOMP CHICK-DEE CHOOMP CHICK-DEE CHOOMP. I just remember that because, I remember I said "man I can't get this damn thing!" [laughs] And then when I heard Chick doing that, I said "oh wow, yeah!" And I'd look up at him and smile and he'd smile back. He was playing the drums and he just took his hand and pointed it at me when I looked at him, just as to say "gotcha."<sup>287</sup>

<sup>287</sup> Manning, interview with author.



**Figure 3.15. Transcription of Frankie Manning scatting a step rhythm, phone conversation with the author, October 2008.**



**Figure 3.16. Transcription of Frankie Manning scatting Webb's response to his step, phone conversation with the author, October 2008.**

Like a jam session, these catching games foreground music making's sociality, and Manning's description suggests that Webb's success at catching dancers' steps was more than professional competence; it was a means of relating to those dancers, like Manning, for whom he had an affinity and relationship. As "Let's Get Together" was played ubiquitously at contests like the one Manning describes, in live performance its soloists likely produced such rhythmic and melodic figures, informed in the moment by dancers' ever expanding corpus of new steps and variations.

The "breakaway" moments of open posture in the lindy hop especially facilitated this type of extroverted individual expression by giving each partner more literal and haptic space. A common feature of many lindy hop figures, this open posture provides significant space for dancers to improvise and express themselves individually even as they move with their partner. In his unpublished story, "The Lindy Hop," Rudolph Fisher gives voice to this dynamic as well, indicating that the partners used the free

space of the open position for both individual and collective expression before coming back together into a closed embrace.

Each had his own pet variations, which, especially while they were apart, were carried to the energetic extreme. The girl introduced alternately an agitated tap dance and a series of twisting high kicks, while the boy indulged in an elaborate Charleston, enlivened by periodic corkscrew jumps that carried him four feet from the floor. Yet these figures, wanton enough in themselves, were never wholly dissociated from the dance, always served to display either partner as the complement of the other, and so like exhibits of mating birds always drew them together again.<sup>288</sup>

This balance between paired and solo movement led to communication on both visual and kinesthetic levels as partners watched each other's creative expression at arm's length before connecting more solidly with each other's bodies to move as a single unit. James Berry expands on this concept, describing how figures from other dance steps became movements during this two-beat "breakaway" period in lindy hop patterns.

We had a variety [of steps] to choose from because of the eras before us. Each one could break off and dance whatever occurred to them during a break in the Lindy Hop. Then come together on the beat, after two bars. Lindy was called "Breakaway" in the beginning. When you break, you are on your own to dig back.<sup>289</sup>

As Berry explains it, to "dig back" can be read two ways. First, one literally shifts one's weight away from one's partner, moving backwards to create the dance's most extreme moment of dynamic tension in order to yield propulsion forward. This moment is, paradoxically, when one feels one's partner's weight the strongest due to the high degree of tension and also when one is the most "free" to move and express oneself individually. Second, if, as Berry explains, dancers used this space to pull vocabulary

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<sup>288</sup> Rudolph Fisher, "The Lindy Hop," in *The City of Refuge: The Collected Stories of Rudolph Fisher*, ed. John McClusky Jr. (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2008[1932-33]), 296.

<sup>289</sup> James Berry with Mura Dehn, "Jazz Profound," 6-7.

from older dances, then this digging back reanimates the steps of generations past through a corporeal enactment of cultural memory. He lists a number of such steps as he expands this description: “They did all kinds of steps in between. Ida Forsight even did a kazatsky! But back to Charleston you go. They expressed themselves in Boogie-Woogie, Camel walk, Snake Hips, Fish Tail, etc.”<sup>290</sup> Here too we find a productive contradiction as dancers use this space to simultaneously activate older movements—note in Fischer’s account he refers to the Charleston—and to carve a personal style and create new steps through exploration and innovation.

As musicians reflected dancers’ movements in their playing, dancers used their bodies to paint melodic and rhythmic figures from musical solos and from the arrangements themselves. While we have no historical footage of dancers interacting with “Let’s Get Together” specifically, some contemporary footage demonstrates just some of the ways dancers might “paint” the arrangement with their bodies. At the 2010 International Lindy Hop Championships in Washington, DC, dancers Jamie Cameron of London and Heather Ballew were paired randomly in the finals of a “Jack & Jill” competition, and as they prepared for their spotlight dance, the contest DJ chose the 1934 recording of Webb’s “Let’s Get Together”.<sup>291</sup> After taking about two bars to recognize the tune and lock into the beat, the pair launches into their improvised performance. From the outset, their performance mirrors, reflects, and accents the

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<sup>290</sup> Berry and Dehn, “Jazz Profound,” 7.

<sup>291</sup> Heather Ballew and Jamie Cameron, “ILHC 2010 - Advanced Jack & Jill Finals - Jamie Cameron & Heather Ballew,” YouTube clip, posted by LindyLibrary, August 31, 2010. [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N735PITOWi8>] A “Jack & Jill” contest is one where partners are assigned randomly and often rotate several times to display each dancer’s skill as an improvising social dancer.

sounds of Webb’s band. They hit a slide to accent the *tutti* crescendo in the second A section’s last measure (00:35-00:37), a smoother version of the same “paddle-step” movement they employed at the same moment in the previous A section (00:26-00:27). They repeat a three-step “corkscrew” footwork to reflect the busier motion during the ascending wind trio sequence in the B section’s final four measures (00:44-00:46). However, their most striking mirroring of Webb’s arrangement comes through the diverse ways the pair accents the tune’s most ubiquitous and striking musical feature: the recurring syncopated, two-note single-pitch trumpet riff that initiates the call-and-response with the winds in the A sections. This figure accentuates the staccato landing on the downbeat through a syncopated anticipation of the previous measure’s upbeat, inviting a sharp stop on the downbeat. This figure occurs nine times in each of the song’s ensemble “head” choruses, and Cameron and Ballew “hit” eight of them with sharp pauses to reflect the staccato figure. Their physical “hits” occur at various points within a diverse range of dance figures (table 1).

Riff Occurrence (w/timecode)	Move and Placement	Notes
1-00:19	None	These are the song’s first notes; the pair appears to instantly recognize the recording.
2-00:21	Hip shake (n/a)	The pair accent each note with their hips.
3-00:23	Hip shake (n/a)	Following a repeat of the hip movement, the pair move into open position and use paddle kicks to mark time until the next A phrase begins.
4-00:28	1 <sup>st</sup> beat, swingout from open (8 beats).	

5-00:30	8 <sup>th</sup> beat, swingout (8 beats); 1 <sup>st</sup> beat, pause (2 beats)	Ballew sharpens the final two steps of her twisting “triple step” footwork and Cameron varies his footwork with by suspending his right leg for a “kick-ball-change” figure. Their synchronized landing on both feet emphasizes a “pause” outside the expected pattern.
6-00:33	5 <sup>th</sup> beat, circle-from-open (truncated, 6 beats).	Cameron thrusts his right leg forward and breaks frame with his right shoulder to lead Ballew into a “quick stop”, which truncates an 8-beat circle into a 6-beat figure. This is a common figure in Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers ensemble choreographies.
7-00:47	10 <sup>th</sup> beat, extended open breakaway (10 beats); 1 <sup>st</sup> beat, circle (6 beats).	Emphasizing the transition from the B section to the final A section, the pair briefly leap and Cameron performs a heel-click, Ballew lands with an unweighted stomp on her right foot to accent the riff’s first note without placing her weight on the wrong foot for the coming rock step.
8-00:49	3 <sup>rd</sup> beat, tuck turn (6 beats).	Ballew emphasizes the downbeat by accelerating her lean into the compression Cameron offers with his left hand as she plants her feet with knees twisted to the left to create a brief pause.
9-00:51	5 <sup>th</sup> beat, right-side pass	The pair pause at the apex of their tension, Cameron accents the pause by crossing his legs while Ballew raises her right leg and left arm.

**Table 3.1. Ballew and Cameron’s dance movements to reflect the repeating trumpet riff in first chorus of “Let’s Get Together.” Table includes each of the riff’s nine appearances, at what point in a figure the pair reflect it, and more detailed notes on their movements.**

Ballew and Cameron’s particular attention to “stops” and “breaks” in the arrangement reflects dance practices initiated at the Savoy Ballroom where dancers “hit” such moments in well-known arrangements. Manning claims that he enjoyed dancing to Webb’s performances of Fletcher Henderson’s “Down South Camp Meeting”

because “I had found that I could catch all these little breaks in the music.”<sup>292</sup> At least in Henderson’s arrangement, this piece adopts a “theme & variations” principle where the main theme’s restatement becomes more intensively laden with syncopated staccato brass riffs, most pronounced during its final two choruses (01:42-End), which would have provided Manning an increasingly diverse array of breaks to catch. According to Manning, this principle also birthed synchronized lindy hop choreography, which he claims emerged from his experimentations with the extended pauses in Jimmie Lunceford’s “Posin’.”<sup>293</sup>

While the Savoy Ballroom’s dancers were not listening to a static recording of “Let’s Get Together”, they were moving in concert to a stable, predictable arrangement whose initial chorus they had heard with tremendous frequency for years (including, by Porter’s account, ten consecutive performances during contests). Thus, through their familiarity with the particular intricacies of “Let’s Get Together” as a participatory framework, they could certainly have taken advantage of said familiarity to affect a kind of creative corporeal tone-painting similar to that of Cameron and Ballew. Some musicians appreciated seeing their sounds reflected back to them in dancers’ movements. Mura Dehn noted one anonymous musician’s preference for playing for dancers: “When we see what we are doing we feel better and play better. It’s like seeing your music mirrored.”<sup>294</sup> Broadly, musicians depended on this give-and-take between themselves and dancers for validation, inspiration, and visual feedback. Dancers thus

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<sup>292</sup> Manning and Millman, *Ambassador of Lindy Hop*, 99.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid. 104.

<sup>294</sup> Mura Dehn, “A Few Words About Dancing,” *Jazz Record*, February 1947, 23.



listen actively as participants, and the musical sound exists not only to be absorbed, but also to be acted upon in the moment through embodied reflections, embellishments, variations, and interjections.

### **“That Push Pull Suggestion”: Haptic Communication and Intercorporeality**

The previous section’s discussion focused on immediately apparent movements expressed at least in part through the dancers’ footwork, through literal “steps” that have traditionally provided musicologists studying dance an obvious, visually apparent set of rhythms to transcribe and compare. Steps are easy to fit into music transcriptive and analytical modes of thinking because steps have clear points of onset: the contact between foot and floor. However, an over focus on the externally identifiable step patterns obscures both the rest of the body and the haptic and affective dimensions of dancing, those movements within the body that are felt but not easily seen. Lindy hop instructor Steven Mitchell, who studied extensively with Manning, expressed anxiety about obsession with steps in his interviews with Sociologist Black Hawk Hancock.

You have to put the dance on the body, not the feet ...We tend to just count with the feet and not the body; we have to get to where the body counts, how your body moves in rhythm, how your body feels. Because in the end it’s all there...Without that it’s just steps not dancing. For me it’s trying to get people to get that whole package that is the dance.<sup>295</sup>

Getting at Mitchell’s “whole package” means moving beyond the visual into the realms of haptic and affective experience to consider not just how the dancing looks, but how it feels.

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<sup>295</sup> Steven Mitchell, quoted in Black Hawk Hancock, *American Allegory: Lindy Hop and the Racial Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 48.

Returning to Ballew and Cameron's performance, three of their trumpet riff articulations are expressed through pauses. While they read visually as motionless "breaks" in the movement, these are active moments where the dancers counterbalance each other's weight at the height of their tension or compression. Similarly, Mura Dehn's description of Leon James' dancing emphasizes a movement she terms the "jazz pause," which highlights the corporeal activity within ostensible stillness. This pause is a movement that is felt rather than seen, but that can be very densely loaded with layers of kinetic rhythmic meaning.

The pause is a choked movement, thoroughly felt by the dancers, but executed so to say, under the skin. It manifests itself in a pressure of muscles, a hesitation, or a step. The jazz pause is never an empty waiting for time. It is withheld rhythmic energy. It produces anticipation a kinetic excitement. There is a reserve which implies more than it shows.<sup>296</sup>

Here, Dehn highlights the significance of both subtle and even unseen movements to rhythmic articulation within the lindy hop as she foregrounds James' use of subtlety and even non-movement in accomplishing his sophisticated rhythmic interactions. Just as jazz musicians, especially pianists like Count Basie and Thelonious Monk, draw praise for their use of space and for the notes they *don't* play, dancers rely on a shared understanding of common steps, phrasings, vocabulary, rhythms, and movements to register the significance of movements withheld or implied.

Dehn's concept of dancing "under the skin" is vital to understanding the importance of movements felt but not seen, and therefore, to the experience of dancing the lindy hop. Outside observers can catch only some of the rhythms and phrasings a dancer creates and experiences within their body, because many of these rhythmic

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<sup>296</sup> Dehn, "Jazz Dance," 4-5.

nuances are felt internally rather than expressed visually. In addition to the clear movement patterns and footwork variations, dancers experience internalized moments of tension and release with their partners that create their own layer of rhythmic sensation as well as moments of heightened physical awareness. The lindy hop, therefore, is not just about what you can see, as Jaqui Malone termed them the “Visible Rhythms of African-American Dance,” it is also about what you can *feel*. As such, a dancer’s sense of their rhythmic contribution to the dance comes not just from the externally visible rhythms of footwork patterns, spins, or step combinations, but also from the build and release of physical tension and compression between the two partners.

Tension and compression are the fundamental forces through which lindy hop dancers communicate kinesthetically; dancers are perpetually moving towards or away from each other, experiencing those strongest moments of kinesthetic communication and physical tension when the tension creates a stopping point and change of direction through a strong feeling of compression or tension, push or pull. Such moments tend to be weighted towards the first four beats of a figure. In the initial rock-step, the dancers create this energy through either shared or oppositional directional motion. In a closed position, dancers generally rock back together, creating a shared sense of forward motion to launch into the new movement. In the case of an open position, the dancers face each other and rock away in opposite directions, creating the tension that will propel them towards and possibly past each other. For instance, on a swingout, or any other move that begins in the dance’s open “breakaway” position, the initial rock-step between the two partners creates a palpable dynamic, elastic tension as the partners

move away from each other. This step both punctuates the beginning of the figure and feels simultaneously stable and unstable. You are not completely on your own weight; rather, you are sharing with your partner, and the tension at that moment, on the “1,” making you feel you’re about to charge together again. When the dancers release this tension to come together in closed position, it’s less of a coming together than a charging past each other. The dancers charge past each other as the tension from that first rock releases, the leader catching the follower by the small of her back and prepared to slingshot her the other way.<sup>297</sup> This is one space in which the dancers can feel, read, communicate, and contribute to the affect of a song or a melody.

Furthermore, these moments are not really points as such. Rather, they are spaces that can be expanded or contracted. They can feel sharp or they can feel “gushy,” they can feel tight or relaxed.

This tension, being partnered, is also communicative. They are moments negotiated by two dancing partners in concert with the music they hear, the floor they dance on, and the vibe they share with the rest of the ballroom. While one partner hears something and wants to respond with sharp tension, the other may have heard something softer. They may find some middle ground, a shared understanding of the moment, or one may influence the other. Perhaps by hitting the moment sharply or with tons of weight, my partner will use our joint space to show me something in the music I would not have heard on my own, to use our point of physical connection to articulate

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<sup>297</sup> In general, like most partnered dances emerging from the European ballroom tradition, lindy hop has two defined dance roles of “leading” and “following.” While typically men perform the former role and women the latter, I adopt here the contemporary practice of using the terms “leader” and “follower” as men could follow when dancing with other men and women could lead when dancing with other women. However, these terms are not gender neutral but a fundamental articulation of power and control to masculinity via “leading.”

to me what she is hearing. In turn, like any conversation, my response may be a deviation from or variation of what she has given me that will, in some way, modify what she hears. This constant give-and-take between partners creates a space in which musical participation, even listening, become shared activities where partners use the medium of lindy hop to both communicate with each other and to construct a shared interpretation of what they hear.

Lindy hop's communicative dynamics rest on this "push pull" feeling, especially during "breakaway" portions of the dance where the pair abandons their close embrace. These dynamics of tension and compression are, in essence, what Malcolm X describes as the "push pull" feeling between oneself and one's partner in his thick description of dancing with "Laura" at Boston's Roseland Dance Hall.

She and I never before had danced together, but that certainly was no problem. Any two people who can lindy at all can lindy together. We just started out there on the floor among a lot of other couples. It was maybe halfway in the number before I became aware of how she danced. If you've ever lindy-hopped, you'll know what I'm talking about. With most girls, you kind of work opposite them, circling, side-stepping, leading. Whichever arm you lead with is half-bent out there, your hands are giving that little pull, that little push, touching her waist, her shoulders, her arms. She's in, out, turning, whirling, wherever you guide her. With poor partners, you feel their weight. They're slow and heavy. But with really good partners, all you need is just the push-pull suggestion. They guide nearly effortlessly, even off the floor and into the air, and your little solo maneuver is done on the floor before they land, when they join you, whirling, right in step.<sup>298</sup>

A partnered dance is, therefore, a kind of collaborative listening where interpretations and analyses are shared both kinesthetically and visually as two partners perpetually communicate and negotiate a shared interpretation of, and contribution to, the music.

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<sup>298</sup> Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999 [1965]).

Dancers respond to each other as they absorb new input from their partner both kinesthetically and visually. The dynamic upon which this communication relies is the sharing of weight between two partners as the push and pull are formed through the counterbalance when partners move towards and away from each other. Furthermore, note that X describes the particular satisfaction of dancing with Laura as requiring only an extremely light “push-pull *suggestion*.” The haptic communication between dancers can thus be slight enough to only register unconsciously at the affective level where each dancer surrenders just slightly enough of their personal center to feel the “suggestion” of another body’s presence.

This affective counterbalance requires each partner to surrender complete control of their own center of gravity. To varying degrees, they lean into or away from each other such that the points of contact, even if only a few fingers in an open-position handclasp, are capable of carrying massive amounts of information about each partner’s movements and orientation in space. Through counterbalancing, dance partners thus move from a state of autonomous corporeal subjectivity into the realm of a trans-subjective, intercorporeal experience as they become a piece of a physical unit not wholly themselves. As Gail Weiss explains, “To describe embodiment as intercorporeality is to emphasize that the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and nonhuman bodies.”<sup>299</sup> Her concept builds on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “reversibility.” At the macro-level, reversibility examines “an ongoing interaction between the flesh of the body, the flesh of others, and the flesh of the world,

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<sup>299</sup> Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 15.

a process in which corporeal boundaries are simultaneously erected and dismantled.”<sup>300</sup> At the micro-level, lindy hopping partners connect through counterbalance by creating what Hancock describes as an “imaginary center” that “provides a sense of togetherness.”<sup>301</sup> I experience this “imaginary center” as thoroughly intercorporeal as my partner and I create a tangible haptic bond through which we agree to dance and listen as a conjoined unit.

The diminished awareness of a coherent self and increased focus on this conjoined unit works through the productive disruption of individual body schema. As Merleau-Ponty argues, one’s body schema, the functional body as bounded within a constructed physical border between the self and the external world, becomes defined at the meeting point of two haptic experiences: touching and being touched—acting and being acted upon. This intersection becomes the separation point between external and internal due to a third element at this intersection: an invisible, unfillable space he calls *écarte*. This *écarte* creates the “hinge” for bodies to connect and interact in a “chiasmatic” relationship, allowing them to intertwine while still remaining coherently defined wholes.<sup>302</sup> I argue, however, that it is precisely this space that the counterbalanced dancers’ “imaginary center” occupies, thus merging two bodies by filling ostensibly unfillable space. When I feel the best dancing, when I feel truly “locked in,” it comes at the point where this “imaginary center” disrupts my normal sense of body schema, blurring the boundary between touching and touched and thus my sense

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid. 19.

<sup>301</sup> Hancock, *American Allegory*, 52.

<sup>302</sup> Weiss, *Embodiment as Intercorporeality*, 121-123.

of a coherent self as wholly separate and distinct from the flesh of the world around me. My listening experience, my sense of the music's pulse, character, and my own reactions to it, now flow through this imagined center of this newly constituted bicorporeal unit. This singular fissure in my learned, enculturated schema, my sense of self, opens further possibilities for intercorporeal connection. The deeper I find myself sinking into the dance, the more this imaginary center restructures embodied experience through concentric circles that destabilize discrete schematic constructions within the ballroom that separate self from partner, audience from performer, and dance from music.

As a window into these broader schematic disruptions, I want to reflect on a conversation about dancing I had with a "non-dancer." One night while composing this chapter, I described the apex of tension and directional blur I feel when "digging back" into a rock-step to my wife Liza, to which she replied: "oh yeah, I can totally feel that." Coming from another lindy hopper, or from most people, this comment would have been affirming but unremarkable. However, Liza has Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy, a degenerative neuromuscular condition that has left her unable to walk, unable to stand, and with limited use of her upper limbs. As such, she has never performed a rock-step herself, yet she has observed them for years as she's spent countless nights of her life with me at dance events watching others lindy hop. Thus, when she says she can feel what I describe, I take it literally; her response does not merely signal intellectual comprehension, but a sense memory that accesses her body's sympathetic affective response to what she sees. This sensation relies on what philosopher Brian Massumi terms "motion vision," a layer of affective communication no less tangible than tactile,



haptic interaction.<sup>303</sup> Liza's articulation of a sensation triggered through motion vision is germane because of the concordances between her experience of the lindy hop and that of dance band musicians in the 1930s: they had spent many nights for hours at a time intently watching lindy hop dancers from a seated position. Her experience thus helps us see how, for Eddie Jenkins, intently tracking dancers' movements became a core component of his playing style. I offer that his impulses to "catch" dancers' steps, initiates with an affective sensation triggered through motion vision; Jenkins "throws accents" in line with their movements, because he feels them himself.

This affective response through motion vision also accesses what ethnomusicologist and dance scholar Tomie Hahn calls "kinesthetic empathy," where one's visual perception becomes deeply kinesthetic as one instinctively mimics another's movement, feeling it in muscles and joints.<sup>304</sup> It is this process, kinesthetic empathy, through visual observation that accounts for most informal learning of dance. Hahn's analysis reflects the visual step-mimicry Manning describes as "being a thief" in the ballroom: watching other dancers and "catching" their steps. Absent the formal schooling Hahn presents, many dancers in the lindy hop tradition learn primarily through visual transmission as they acquire steps on their own.<sup>305</sup> In Hahn's parlance, Frankie experienced kinesthetic empathy with the dancers around him, feeling their movements and assimilating them into his own dance vocabulary.

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<sup>303</sup> Brian Massumi, *Movement, Affect, Sensation: Parables for the Virtual* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 147-150.

<sup>304</sup> Tomie Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Culture Through Japanese Dance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 83-87.

<sup>305</sup> Manning and Millman, *Ambassador of Lindy Hop*, 64.

Over time, these individual experiences of motion vision become incorporated into one's regular praxis as a musician or as a dancer, and this process of sustained visual learning echoes numerous accounts of the relationship between visual learning and kinesthetic encoding. Michele Kisliuk's account of learning Mabo dancing from the BaAka people involved primarily visual learning as well, since men observed master teachers with rapt attention to learn their movements.<sup>306</sup> In his work on Capoeira in Brazil, Greg Downey argues that students learn steps from other practitioners informally, but also receive both visual and kinesthetic instruction in more formal group training sessions with master practitioners.<sup>307</sup> As he observed his own experience, internalizing his Capoeira, became a "new skin" that one inhabited constantly in all activities.<sup>308</sup>

Capoeira, as a "skin," re-maps the body's relationship to the material world, a mode of moving through the world, which expresses itself in distinct but not discrete aural and visual expressions. Through varying levels of affective communication and bonding, jazz musicians and lindy hop dancers similarly inhabit the same "skin" where music and dance become outward expressions of a shared affective world. Just as counterbalance's "imaginary center" blurs the boundaries between individual dancing subjects, the flows between music and dance within the ballroom frays the boundaries of corporeal schema that encode "music" and "dance" as discrete practices. For Berry, to

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<sup>306</sup> Michelle Kisliuk, *Seize the Dance!: BaAka Musical Life and the Ethnography of Performance*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 30-34, 100-101. Illustrating the importance of articulating one's ethnographic stance, Kisliuk observes that she only received additional aural instruction because she was a foreigner.

<sup>307</sup> Greg Downey, *Learning Capoeira: Lessons in Cunning from an Afro-Brazilian Art*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 24-27.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid. 22-25.

play jazz music is to play for dance, and to be an improvising dancer is to participate in jazz music. "If you don't feel like dancing to Jazz, then it either is not Jazz, or you are not capable of improvising. In other words you are not part of the band."<sup>309</sup> By describing an improvising dancer as "part of the band," Berry's assertion moves beyond a dancer's role as a participatory audience member, positioning dancers as co-creators in the musical sound itself. This echoes Dehn's perspective that dancers function as rhythmic musicians.

The jazz dancer, in a way, is also a musician. He uses his body as an instrument of visible rhythm. His desire to dance is born of a necessity for releasing the rhythmic stirring which jazz music arouses in him. He does not think in patterns of steps, he thinks in patterns of rhythm. And each dance is the solving of a rhythmic puzzle. ...The step expresses the rhythmic pattern which he feels the music demands of him.<sup>310</sup>

Dehn and Berry's language begins to blur the lines between dance and music and between dancer and musician.

As intercorporeality blurs the lines of individual body schemas, so too does it blur the schemas that construct music and dance as distinct and separate phenomena. To illustrate this, I will craft a neologism by deploying intercorporeality to play with language. Specifically I want to completely collapse the dichotomy between performer and audience by interfacing with the umbrella term used to describe most syncopated popular music before 1950: dance music. As individual words in this pairing, "dance" and "music" are coherent wholes, intertwined in a single signifying phrase yet kept coherent through Merleau-Ponty's *écarte*, in this case literally a "space" between them,

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<sup>309</sup> Berry and Dehn, "Jazz Profound," 5.

<sup>310</sup> Dehn, "A Few Words," 22.

the one my right thumb creates by striking my laptop keyboard. If we place the words in counterbalance via compression, we ask them to move towards each other and to create an imaginary center that fills this space: dancemusic. The space collapses and “dance” loses its subordinate function as adjective, becoming an equal part of a newly constituted noun. Dancemusic, this bicorporal *portmanteau*, opens a space to dig “under the skins” of music and dance’s products—sound or moving image—and explore the affective, kinesthetic “shared self” that musicians and dancers create through their interchange.

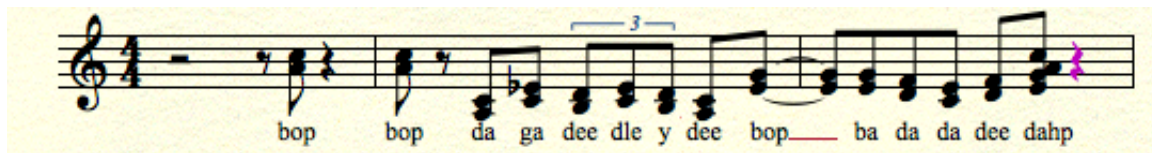
To attempt a dancemusic analysis is to interrogate that body language which dancers and musicians both speak, and I argue that one can glimpse musicians’ and dancers’ “imaginary center” through scat syllables. When recounting steps in interviews, dancers frequently refer to their steps by the rhythms they create through the use of scat syllables; in this chapter, I have frequently quoted Manning engaging in this practice. Similarly, as Monson recounts jazz musicians describing their exchanges with each other, they also employ scat syllables to narrate the content of their sonic interactions.<sup>311</sup> When hearing a dancer scat, one can see the high level of detail with which they are able to express the rhythmic character of their movement not only through the rhythm of their speech but through use of dynamics, accents, and specific syllables. I contend that scat syllables themselves, the relative intensity of percussive consonants and the timbral differences between vowels, express subtle shades of sonic meaning that are apparent to those who have developed some degree of kinesthetic virtuosity through practicing dance and listening through the body. Scat analysis also

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<sup>311</sup> Monson, *Saying Something*, 57, 79.

emphasizes that the lindy hop as a rhythmically driven dance language and scat syllables offer a valuable analytical tool through which to understand the *internalized* sense of rhythm dancers and musicians experience in their dancemusicking. Dehn echoes this perspective, situating lindy hop dancers as rhythmic artists.

For me, scatting can be a tool of translation to articulate my own experience of “Let’s Get Together” on a graphic musical score to articulate the steps, movements, and rhythms I feel in my body. As such, the transcription below includes a line of “auto-transcription” as I narrate the scats I hear and feel, offering a translation that invites readers “under the skin” of my embodied listening experience. The notes here sometimes represent steps I feel my body engaging while others are felt rhythms that anyone observing me dancing would not likely see. First, here’s how I tend to scat this song’s two-bar “tune” (fig.3.17).

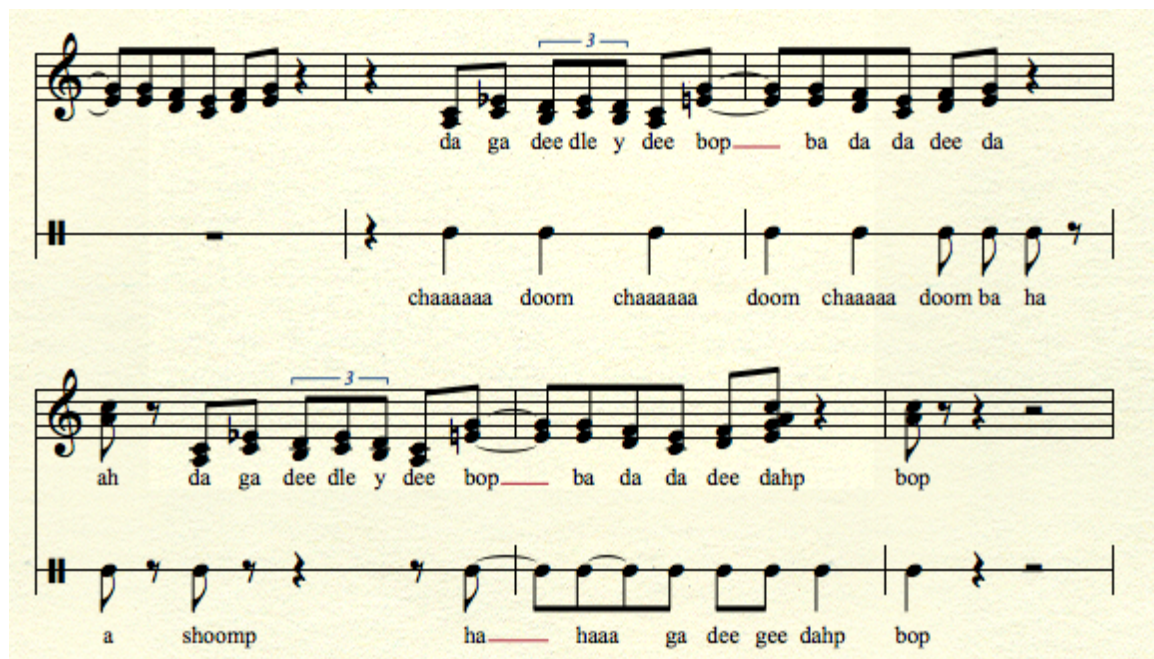


**Figure 3.17 – Transcription of “Let’s Get Together” A section riff with my own “scat” vocables.**

Already some patterns emerge: I use plosive consonants to articulate each onset, but they move closer to the front of the mouth the more rhythmic stress I feel due to metric placement or syncopation. Hence, [g—tongue on soft palate—for the weakest, then [d—tongue against back teeth—in the middle, and [b—lips—for the strongest. I also use a

closed “front” vowel [i] for less stressed sounds and open “back” vowels [a] and [ɔ] for more stressed ones.<sup>312</sup>

However, this is just one layer of my listening that I have to consciously separate from all the rhythms I feel in my body interacting with the sound input. As I listened to my own engagement, as I scatted my kinesthetic empathy, I found a striking and illustrative set of phenomena occurred in my engagement with the transition between the melody’s first and second A sections (fig. 3.18):

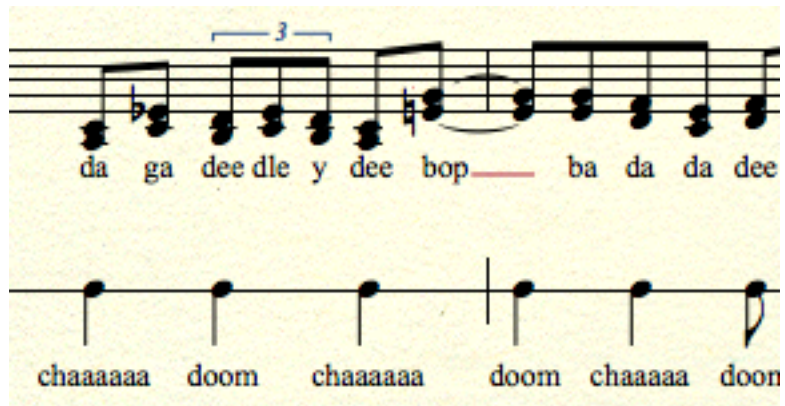


**Figure 3.18. Transcription (melodic reduction) of the Chick Webb Orchestra’s “Let’s Get Together” mm. 30-35 with the author’s “scat vocables” and internal rhythmic response.**

1. The “chaaaaaaaa doom” that accompanies the crescendoing retransition to A is a sliding step I learned from Manning in the first class I took with him, the “chaaaaa” is a gradual sinking of the knees as the unweighted leg fans out to the side and the “doom”

<sup>312</sup> These bracketed letters and symbols come from the International Phonetic Alphabet, which is commonly used within classical singing pedagogy and speech language pathology to express a wide range of specific vocal sounds.

is the sharp drop of the heel on the weighted leg to punctuate the end of the step. This step seems to keep me in the rhythmic background, articulating the song's swinging pulse and making space for the wind trio's riff (fig. 3.19).



**Figure 3.19.** Excerpt from fig. 3.18, mm. 31-32.

2. The “ba ha-a” is my return to rock-step with the trumpets to hit that downbeat hard right alongside them, but I add just a little syncopation of my own: “ha”, to give the moment a bit more flavor (fig. 3.20).



**Figure 3.20.** Excerpt from fig. 3.18, mm. 32-33.

3. The “shoomp” is not really a “step”, it’s an implied rhythm that I feel as a “jazz pause.” As I felt that moment in my body, my knees stiffened, shooting me upward; my chest collapsed as my shoulders hunched forward and my upper torso and arms contracted inwards; and I felt my weight pull backwards as though to engage a





5. I cut what would have been an eight-beat figure to a six-beat figure to again nail a rock-step and “dig back” right in line with the trumpets on the downbeat, my step on the previous upbeat “dahp” following the music’s “dahp” by a half beat, almost as though their “dahp” triggered mine, or perhaps mine echoed theirs.

This is as close as I come to Hughes’ memorial, nostalgic listening posture when interacting with a recording. Even as I sit in a chair, writing and listening to this tune, I feel the tune intertwining with my moving self on the affective plane as it triggers my kinesthetic empathy and my rhythmic entrainment. My vocables here thus represent one possibility among innumerable paths my body could take to contribute my own flesh to this intercorporeal dancemusic. Though illustrative, this transcription requires I take a step back and re-impose schema that create two separate lines. As such it is an imperfect translation meant to fix one piece of a perpetually shifting phenomenon. Hearing “Let’s Get Together” played live in a ballroom, it would no doubt also include what I feel from the band and what my movement evokes in them, what they hear from each other, what I feel from my partner, what I hear *through* my partner and *with* my partner, and what I see and feel everyone else doing. Moving deeper into the dancemusic, these distinct perceptual spaces inform each other so rapidly that articulating them separately or even imposing the construct “I” becomes increasingly difficult as ostensibly discrete subjects, spaces, and media all “get together.”

## **Conclusion**

Last night, I attended a concert by Congolese musician Kanda Bongo Man, one of the Democratic Republic of Congo’s most popular artists. As Kanda Bongo Man

emerged, he immediately encouraged the audience to get up, move to the front of the auditorium and dance, thus transgressing the seated listening posture prescribed by the room's architecture. As I spent the night dancing, I felt my body letting the drum rhythms in until I felt them triggering my movement almost simultaneously and without conscious thought, and I began dancing steps I'd never danced before as I watched the Congolese dancers on stage and let motion vision and kinesthetic empathy lock my movements to theirs. One moment struck me most of all: Kanda Bongo Man began shouting "Pesa, Pesa!," which cued the drummer to initiate a cymbal crash that anticipated the upbeat of alternate measures. Every time this crash came, the band and the Congolese audience members stepped abruptly forward with a thrust of their right shoulder in time with the cymbal. After several repetitions, the entire crowd had "caught" this movement and the entire auditorium repeatedly hit this moment together. For me, this moment encapsulates the participatory dynamics I've outlined in this chapter: a combination of regular "danceable" rhythms and a playful syncopated "catching" game created a sonically, visually, and kinetically linked moment, a moment where everyone "got together." When the event's organizer e-mailed me the next day, she wrote "I'm so glad you stayed the other night - it was a pleasure to watch you lose yourself in the music and dance with such enthusiasm."<sup>313</sup> As I reflected on her words, I realized they were likely more *a propos* than she realized; I did experience "losing myself" precisely because in that moment, I lost my *self* in a moment of intercorporeal listening as musicians danced and dancers musicked. When I chatted with the drummer

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<sup>313</sup> Dr. Chérie Rivers Ndaliko, e-mail correspondence with the author, October 2013.

after the show, bonding over our shared experience of this cymbal moment, it was apparent that, to paraphrase Ellington's appraisal of Webb, he felt it the way I did.

While we cannot reconstruct the sound of Webb's music in live performance nor speak with certainty about the Savoy Ballroom's *habitus of listening*, we can offer some informed conjecture about how listening to such a performance of "Let's Get Together" might differ from listening to the recording. Its elastic, accelerated "Savoy Tempo" would kick your ass a little, pushing you to dance with more energy and at the edge of your ability. The steady pulse of the walking bass-line and the symmetrical 32-bar structure would offer you a participatory framework to stabilize your creative improvisation as you wove in and out of the arrangement's phrases, emphasizing the little breaks it offered, listening to and articulating its flows and contours corporeally without the weight of musical symmetry as an intellectual construct. You would hear not only the rhythms and sounds of Webb's soloists, but their interaction with the "visual rhythms" of your own movements in tandem with, or counterpoint to, the musical soundscape. You might hear these movements as a scat-track in your own mind or reflected back to you as the musicians "catch" your steps and variations, which you might, in turn, mirror back to them. However, you would not be listening only to the music nor only with your ears exclusively, but also on the affective plane to the haptic push-pull through which your partner shares themselves and their listening experience with you. By surrendering your individual center of gravity, through tension and compression, to a state of counterbalance, you would not even be listening purely *as yourself*, but as part of a merged, trans-subjective schema within the ballroom's

intercorporeal network of bodies in motion producing music and dance collectively,  
“fleshing out” the Savoy Ballroom’s musical world.

## Chapter Four: “Don’t Be That Way”: Race and Gender in Webb’s Critical Reception

*White America has often become exposed to emerging forms of Black popular music, for example, as part of some more general confrontation of social mores and cultural sensibilities in which the source of these innovations is invariably dehumanized or devalued. Thus, although whites have consistently been attracted by Black rhythmic/musical sensibilities, this attraction is often obscured or distorted by racist habits of thought and association that provoke suppression and denial, even while conjuring powerful attractions.*

—Perry Hall

*The most obvious quality the Negro imparts to his music is a certain vitality and abandon which most white men either lack or are reluctant to express.*

—John Hammond

Understanding Webb’s relative absence in the canon requires shifting focus to another significant segment of his audience: jazz critics. Early in his career, Webb was a darling amongst critics, who championed his band’s driving, unpretentious style. However, Webb’s legacy, or one might say lack thereof, resulted from a strong shift in his reviews around 1936. The same critics who had once praised the band suddenly turned on it, chastising Webb and his music as over-wrought, commercial, and inauthentic. Lamenting a perceived shift in the band’s quality and direction, critics marked Webb’s as a band in decline that perpetually disappointed and never realized its nearly unrivaled potential. Broadly speaking, critics accused Webb, one of their champions of musical authenticity, of “going commercial.” While the tradition of chastising bands for “selling out” is an enduring staple of pop music criticism, in the

1930s this was a more novel phenomenon, one related to the strongly leftist, anti-capitalist project of social transformation with which those constructing the nascent field of critical jazz discourse aligned themselves.

In the 1930s, “jazz critic” was an emerging identity as a small subculture of elite jazz fans launched magazines and newspapers in the US, England, and France that focused on “hot” jazz and swing bands and were marketed to professional musicians and hobbyist record collectors. From these publications emerged critical reviews of jazz records, detailed coverage of jazz bands and local scenes, and rich first-hand accounts of live performances and recording sessions. That these early critics had available to them the publishing engines necessary to create this mass media platform tells us something else about them: they had tremendous access to economic, social, and intellectual capital..

As did many young social elites, these men experienced ambivalence towards, and anxiety regarding, their tremendous privilege. As such, their obsessive jazz fandom was as much a social catharsis as it was a musical one. Critical engagement with the scenes and sound objects of black popular culture created a platform upon which young intellectuals could construct identities that either masked or validated their advantages, reconciling the disparity between their social class and their values. Toward that end, critics carefully crafted and rigorously policed an anti-capitalist, non-commercial construction of black masculinity, one they built using two of the more pernicious tools their multiply-privileged positions afforded them: racial appropriation and patriarchal entitlement.

This chapter argues that critics' deployment of these strategies became a significant factor in both their turn against Webb and the particular rhetoric with which this shift was executed. It focuses on the two events around 1936 that catalyzed anti-Webb vitriol by activating critics' anxieties surrounding race and gender, the first of which is critics' "discovery" of Count Basie and the Kansas City style. When critics began praising Kansas City's Count Basie Orchestra, and along with it the "Kansas City sound," they built an authenticity discourse that codified and celebrated those "black" elements of swing music that African American orchestras ought to emphasize. This coincided with a negative shift in attitudes towards New York's black bandleaders, among them Chick Webb. Critics chastised Webb, Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, and others for playing overly clever, intellectual, or commercially popular music that too closely resembled those "white" elements of popular music that critics found objectionable. In so doing, they employed Kansas City as a foil, as a new idealized standard of blackness against which to find Webb and other Harlem bandleaders lacking.

Around the same time Count Basie's popularity exploded, Webb had the good fortune to hire Ella Fitzgerald, a young singer who would ultimately become one of the only singers, and indeed one of the only women, considered a significant jazz artist. Coinciding with the raced discourse surrounding Basie and Kansas City, the role Fitzgerald's gender played in reshaping critical response to Webb's band represents the second half of this chapter's focus. Rather than criticize Fitzgerald directly, critics deployed her femininity to feminize the band itself, dismissing Webb's band and its music as soft, frivolous, and irrelevant. By reading criticisms of Webb through this heavily raced and gendered context, links between oppressive constructions of race and

gender and an ostensibly benevolent project of “supporting” black artists begin to emerge.

### **Why (and How) Critics Matter**

This chapter explores the role of listeners with outsized social capital and media access, in this case critics, in shaping aesthetics through discourse. While previous chapters demonstrate that local audiences co-create aesthetic communities and discourses, Webb’s reception in jazz magazines highlights the disproportionate influence critics acquired, which allowed them to shape jazz aesthetics. The tastes and preferences of all audiences help shape the expectations placed upon musicians, the opportunities available to them, and the (sub)cultural spaces they navigate. While mass audiences spark movements and build new aesthetics, it is generally critics, those with outsized access to cultural capital and mass media platforms, that codify these aesthetics and shape the discourses that define the choices available to artists’ and those choices’ consequences.

This codification of aesthetics, and the critic’s role in building and maintaining it, is identified by sociologist Howard Becker in *Art Worlds* as the construction and maintenance of a coherent “aesthetic system.” According to Becker, an aesthetic system provides justifiable bases upon which to judge the relative quality of work and to create coherent expectations that guide artists’ careers. Through a Foucauldian lens, this guidance might be read as “discipline” since an artist’s choice to conform or not conform to an aesthetic system’s structures may yield material reward and/or



punishment. Becker explains how critics' deployment of aesthetic systems impacts artists' access to the resources they need: venues, money, and audiences.

Critics apply aesthetic systems to specific art works and arrive at judgments of their worth and explications of what gives them worth. Those judgments produce reputations for works and artists. Distributors and audience members take reputations into account when they decide what to support emotionally and financially, and that affects the resources available to artists to continue their work.<sup>314</sup>

While Becker's theory articulates critics' power and influence, it fails to address an important question: who gets to be a critic and why? He identifies critics as those individuals whose opinions on aesthetics become trusted and valued, yet he does not discuss the processes or resources required to create that value. I argue that the means through which one accesses the role "critic" are tied to social and economic privilege. Through privilege, emerging critics can acquire education, access to media platforms, and standing in the social networks of powerful culture brokers.

The emerging power of jazz critics in the 1930s came through a particular blending of those roles through which cultural brokerage takes shape; these critics built hybrid careers as journalists, critics, historians, and impresarios. Through this multifaceted identity, they shaped public perceptions of artists, acquired control of performance and recording opportunities, and initiated the discourse that would define the jazz canon. Their races (generally white), genders (generally male), and social positions (often elite, generally well-educated) afforded them access to potent platforms from which to both espouse opinions and advance projects. Through these media, they constructed specific expectations for the performance of authentic hot jazz.

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<sup>314</sup> Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 131.

As jazz's first significant critics, these men were the architects of jazz's enduring "aesthetic system." Just as they accessed the influence through which they built this system was predicated on their multiply privileged identities, I argue so too did their privilege impact both the content of the system they built and the strategies through which they deployed it to impact the careers of jazz artists. Critics crafted this discourse to promote and popularize the music they most loved while also tying this music to the social justice projects about which they were most passionate. This passion drove the construction of a new identity space that would allow critics to oppose and transgress the trappings of their own middle- and upper-class positions within white culture. In creating their own sense of distance, they crafted a cultural space that promoted and encouraged, but also fetishized, difference. This difference took the form of black masculine identity, which, while exotic, grounded critics' progressive politics in the bodies of black artists creating culture from positions of oppression. To work and play with this sense of embodied power, critics "discovered" (read: constructed/acquired/controlled) a discursive and performative paradigm that routed non-commercial authenticity through black masculinity.

What kind of cultural work did black masculinity perform for these critics? I argue that it created a means for them to contest dominant constructions of American (or European) mass culture by establishing a viable alternative that maintained the cultural privilege and respectability associated with manhood. Building on Max Weber, Todd Reeser argues that dominant paradigms of American culture route masculinity and manliness through capitalism via the valorization of the man's role as "bread winner" and the conflation of wealth and financial success with potency and strength.

Within this framework, leftist jazz critics, who advocated for socialist economic models and alternative constructions of the relationship between men and labor, needed a means to retain clear identities as men. To do so, they constructed an oppositional form of masculinity by leveraging another form of difference: race. By re-routing masculinity through a particular imagined blackness, one that foregrounds anti-commercial folkishness and unrestrained passion/creativity, critics' jazz aesthetics fed into an alternate paradigm of masculinity and maleness.

This black masculine construct served two important functions: the reconciliation of an identity crisis and the construction of an institution. First, black masculinity served to resolve what Reeser terms a "crisis of masculinity" that results when "many men in a given context feel tension with larger ideologies that dominate or begin to dominate that context."<sup>315</sup> Reconciling such a crisis, then, while maintaining a sense of masculinity involves the creation of an alternative. As Reeser explains, "'Even though masculinity tends to hold this role as the discursive norm in the construction of non-normal subjectivities, normalized masculinity can nonetheless function as its own other through the creation of a certain kind of problematic masculinity.'"<sup>316</sup> Jazz critics, however, did not construct black masculinity as a problematic other, rather, they used it as a basis to contest, and ideally overtake, normative American masculinity as expressed through enthusiastic participation in capitalism. In essence, the masculinity articulated by leftists was designed to assert itself as a new norm and to reposition capitalist masculinity as problematic. John Gennari discusses extensively the various

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<sup>315</sup> Todd W. Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 27.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

ways in which white privilege shaped John Hammond and Leonard Feather's deployment of jazz as an advocacy tool within the 1930s leftist popular front and effectively demonstrates the numerous paternalist ways such advocacy gave these critics license to define and police black aesthetics. Where Gennari emphasizes these critics' race more extensively than their genders, Reeser's description of the dynamics of a "crisis of masculinity" helps explain how stabilizing and controlling the aesthetic meanings of jazz's blackness and folk aesthetic helped these critics stabilize their gender privilege as well.<sup>317</sup>

By stabilizing a coherent hot jazz aesthetic grounded in anti-commercial black masculinity, critics built the institutional framework for jazz's transition into, in Becker's parlance, a "complex and highly developed art world" of the sort where "specialized professionals...create logically organized and philosophically defensible aesthetic systems."<sup>318</sup> In this type of art world, critical discourse is both a vital stabilizing agent and a source of power through which non-artist specialists—professional critics—retain primary control over the maintenance of aesthetic systems. While jazz critics did not overthrow dominant capitalist paradigms, they succeeded in laying the foundation for decades of a relatively coherent institutional discourse of jazz aesthetics, history, and practice that continues to drive and shape streams of creativity, scholarship, and pedagogy within academia and the other institutional patrons that support jazz music and musicians.

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<sup>317</sup> John Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) 34-43.

<sup>318</sup> Becker, *Art Worlds*, 132.

To support the discourse they built through reviews and essays, critics relied on black jazz musicians as proxies or champions to enact a perpetual cycle of masculine articulation. As such, critics were dependent upon black artists both for their talent and for the signifying capacity of their otherness. Through their blackness and their class identities, musicians could project alternatives to the dominant paradigm with an authenticity rooted in the alterity of their black bodies. This distance allowed critics to adopt the posture of advocates or allies, not themselves the source of authentic black expression but a vital, supportive force to fuel its influence and its legitimacy. From this position, critics were able to shape and mold black expression to their own ends of progressive, anti-capitalist aesthetic discourse.<sup>319</sup>

As a normative framework, this construct of black masculine authenticity, functioned as what Judith Butler has termed a “regulatory fiction.” In her work on gender and queer theory, Butler uses the term “regulatory fiction” to identify the role of reproductive heterosexuality as a normative expectation shaping social performances and constructions of gender and sexuality.<sup>320</sup> Critics constructed this regulatory fiction by instituting what Butler terms “foreclosures” that eliminated options and pathways for black artists, routing their creativity towards aesthetics that allowed them to access the systems of opportunity jazz critics controlled. Butler identifies as foreclosure that

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<sup>319</sup> In discussing the Hammond and Feather’s rift over Ellington’s “Black, Brown, and Beige,” Gennari astutely points out that Hammond’s more myopic view of black aesthetics than Feather’s caused him to dismiss Ellington’s own articulation of black musical culture to popular front progressivism. As such, Hammond’s treatment of Ellington reveals nearly the same problematic denial of subjecthood as this chapter identifies in critics’ non-engagement with Ella Fitzgerald. See Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool*, 53-58.

<sup>320</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Construction: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” *Theater Journal* 40, no.4 (Dec., 1988): 528.

process through which discourse crafts normative frameworks, in this case non-commercial black masculinity, by shaming or otherwise shutting down alternative possibilities.<sup>321</sup> For musicians, this paradigm solidified over time into an awareness of which expressions of blackness received support and which would incur critical shaming and indifference. Through discourse and patronage, critics foreclosed expressions of blackness outside the boundaries of their own black masculine construct.

In advancing this authentic, folkish sense of black style, white critics' largely well-intentioned attempts to celebrate and promote black musical achievement placed black musicians in an impossible double-bind: achieving national mainstream popularity—which required “flash,” “novelty,” and “sweet playing”—would transgress jazz's newly-constructed “aesthetic system,” thus costing one critical respect and, therefore, damaging one's reputation and access to resources. John Gennari articulates the dependence that formed between black musicians and those white critics-cum-impresarios who created performance and recording opportunities for musicians they deemed important.<sup>322</sup> These critics' social justice work to advocate for African American musicians contributed to an atmosphere that I term “sonic blackface,” wherein black musicians had to “black up” their sound to fulfill expectations of what “real black music” ought to sound like and what values it ought to express. “Sonic blackface” then, functioned as the performed adoption of jazz's new “aesthetic system,”

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<sup>321</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 140. Heterosexuality's foreclosures, for example, include same-sex partners as potential lovers, same-sex attraction as a path through which to express sexuality, and performance outside one's perceived physical sex as a way to embody and enact gender.

<sup>322</sup> Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool*, 9.

as a product of the cultural work that would make black masculine authenticity the governing “regulatory fiction” in jazz.

### **Critics and their Early Connection with Webb**

The span of Chick Webb’s career in New York, roughly 1927-1939, coincides with the emergence of the first wave of significant jazz criticism. For these earliest critics, Harlem was the thriving Mecca of jazz, and they formed strong personal connections to this simultaneously real and imagined place. For John Hammond—a Vanderbilt heir and emerging leftist voice—Harlem was the scene where he felt most at home and most comfortable. Still, it seems clear that for Hammond, Harlem was not a home, but an escape from his own anxieties and ambivalence regarding his privileged surroundings. As he wrote for *The Melody Maker* in 1933, “The places for one to hear music in Harlem are the dance halls. Bands like the Blue Rhythm Boys, Fletcher Henderson’s, Chick Webb’s and Benny Carter’s are often at uptown ballrooms, where one can find the most pleasant escape from white ‘culture.’”<sup>323</sup>

Like Hammond, other critics who visited Harlem in the early 1930s picked up on local audiences’ enthusiasm for Chick Webb’s band and were quick to adopt him as a champion of their own. Webb’s earliest reviews come from the aforementioned UK publication *The Melody Maker*. Originally launched in 1926 as a trade publication for British dance band musicians, *The Melody Maker* began covering hot jazz music around 1930, when it hired “Mike” (bandleader Spike Hughes) as its anonymous record reviewer. It featured record reviews, dance band news, accounts of radio broadcasts,

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<sup>323</sup> John Hammond, “Spike and I Go Places,” *Melody Maker*, March 1933, 185.

and reminiscences from trips to America. This last item was a significant feature of European jazz publications, because audiences lacked access to the ballrooms of Harlem and other American hot spots for jazz and relied on critics' vivid accounts to give flesh to the music they enjoyed on records.

To meet this demand and to establish credibility, European critics made "pilgrimages" overseas to experience Harlem in person. Indeed, "Mike" counted Chick Webb among his favorite bands based largely on his experiences hearing them play live in the early '30s. His early reviews of Webb's records in 1934 and 1935 reflect both his joy at hearing the band and the pain that he could not still hear them live. "Mike" praised Webb's band for what he perceived as its unaffected simplicity. In his early reviews, he considers the band an exemplar of Harlem swing music, marked by Webb's "unsophisticated music making" and "unpretentious ensemble movements."<sup>324</sup> "Mike" saw Webb's as a band whose music pleased audiences and "Chick, you see, does not aim high; he has no particular mannerisms; he has no ambitions as a composer. His sole aim in life seems to be the gathering together of sundry musicians, and, having gathered them together, therewith to make music of a simple kind, hereinafter and -tofore known as swing music."<sup>325</sup>

The core of this "swing music" for "Mike" was the "Savoy tempo," a phenomenon, like the term "swing" itself, that he expressed was indescribable but obvious to those who had experienced it, as he had, live at the Savoy Ballroom. Indeed, for "Mike," appreciating Webb's "unpretentious" and unambitiously simple brand of swing—in

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<sup>324</sup> "Mike" [Spike Hughes, pseud.], "Hot Records Reviewed," *Melody Maker*, May 26, 1934, 5.

<sup>325</sup> "Mike" [Spike Hughes, pseud.], "Hot Records Reviewed," *Melody Maker*, January 19, 1935, 5.



essence, to appreciate his “Harlemness”—was a mark of musical erudition open only to those in the know about Harlem’s nightlife scene. “The tremendous ease of these performances, with their swing and the memories they revive, are so typically Harlem that one fears that none but the *elite* who know uptown from downtown can really appreciate them.”<sup>326</sup> Like “Mike,” *Metronome*’s George T. Simon highlighted Webb’s association with the Savoy Ballroom in 1935, describing the band as “an accepted institution within an accepted institution” and praising their ability to swing. “Chick Webb’s Band is a neatly rounded outfit, concentrating on swinging everything within the walls of the famous Savoy. And when those darksters start swinging things up there, they really swing.”<sup>327</sup> European critics who had not heard Webb in live performance still lavished similar praise upon his recorded work. Ronald Wimble, writing for the *British Swing* in late 1935, described Webb’s as an elite band, writing “I feel that Chick Webb’s band in the combined work of the rhythm-section and soloists is almost without equal.”<sup>328</sup> Earlier that year, famed French critic Hughes Pannassie reviewed Webb’s collaboration with Mezz Mezzrow in the second issue of his magazine *Le Jazz Hot*, writing that “Chick Webb is above all praise. He is no doubt one of the greatest drummers.”<sup>329</sup> These early reviews make it clear that through the first half of the 1930s, Webb held a pristine reputation amongst critics. They regarded his band as a model of authentic swing music and celebrated the band’s popularity in Harlem, its simple yet

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<sup>326</sup> “Mike” [Spike Hughes, pseud.], “Hot Records Reviewed,” *Melody Maker*, June 30, 1934, 5.

<sup>327</sup> George T. Simon, “Dance Band Reviews,” *Metronome*, June, 1935, 19.

<sup>328</sup> Ronald Wimble “Some Thoughts and a Definition Inspired by a Recent Feature,” *Swing*, November/December, 1935, 248-249.

<sup>329</sup> Hughes Pannassié, “Les Disques,” *Jazz Hot*, April, 1935, 29.

intense presentation, and its abundance of hot rhythm. “Mike” sums up the tone of Webb’s early reception in a January 1935 record review when he writes “can you remember when there were any complaints to be made about Chick Webb’s music-making? I cannot.”<sup>330</sup>

From 1936 onward, however, there was an abundance of complaints about Chick Webb’s music making: it was a shell of its former self, it was too commercial, it was corny, it was overwrought, it was infantile, it was white. Pannassié wrote of Webb’s 1936 recording of “What a Shuffle” that it “doesn’t give us any more idea of what Chick Webb’s band can do. The piece and the arrangement are scarcely more than a succession of clichés.”<sup>331</sup> In a 1937 review for *Downbeat*, John Hammond attacked Webb for his “elaborate, badly scored, ‘white’ arrangements.”<sup>332</sup> He went on to accuse Webb of selling out, playing novelty songs and employing comedy tricks and, in a review for the British publication *Rhythm*, called the band’s playing “heavy-handed and uninspired” while claiming Webb sounded “like a colored Hal Kemp.”<sup>333</sup> Other critics echoed Hammond’s sentiment, including *Melody Maker*’s record reviewer “Rophone,” who took the reins from “Mike” in 1936; he wrote in a 1937 review that “the arrangements and the performances have lost that looseness, i.e., that swing of the best Webb days. They are packed with clichés and self conscious effects. The rhythm section has declined. The

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<sup>330</sup> “Mike” [Spike Hughes, pseud.], “Hot Records Reviewed,” *Melody Maker*, Jan 19, 1935, 5.

<sup>331</sup> Hughes Pannassié, “Disques,” *Jazz Hot*, November, 1936, 20.

<sup>332</sup> John Hammond, “Did Bessie Smith Bleed to Death While Waiting for Medical Aid?,” *Downbeat*, November, 1937, 3.

<sup>333</sup> John Hammond, “Anticipating a Sensation,” *Rhythm*, April, 1937, 7-9.

sax section has what the divorce courts call incompatibility of temperament.”<sup>334</sup>

According to Simon, by 1939 Webb’s band “unfortunately had taken a pretty nose-dive so far as dishing out honest-to-goodness swing is concerned” and that his only path to redemption was “de-emphasizing commercial (white-like) arrangements and going in for the freer swing which originally put Chick across—and which, by the way, is about the only course which will lead him back to that high niche which this plucky lad so justly deserves.”<sup>335</sup>

Webb was not the only bandleader whose music was so described, critics also lamented that the relevant contributions of Fletcher Henderson, Jimmy Lunceford, and Duke Ellington were behind them. These bandleaders, the most prominent icons in Harlem’s jazz scene, came to represent the tragic fading of New York’s once vibrant brand of big band swing music. What critics saw as a decline represented a growing rift between critics’ and Harlem bandleaders’ aspirations for “black music.” These musicians’ evolving styles engaged the dance culture of Harlem youth but also the Harlem Renaissance’s discourse of racial uplift. Increasingly, the complex and clever arranging that went hand-in-hand with rhythmic drive and hot improvisation signified blackness as cathartically and corporeally joyful, but also as intelligent, literate, and professional.

To critics, these growing aspects Harlem swing came across as inauthentic, dispassionate, and worst of all, “white.” *Melody Maker*’s radio reporter “Detector” identified this unfortunate trend “that jazz has become sophisticated, and that Negro

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<sup>334</sup> “Rophone,” [pseud.], “Hot Records Reviewed,” *Melody Maker*, March 25, 1939, 7.

<sup>335</sup> George T. Simon, “Roasts and Toasts,” *Metronome*, March, 1939, 21.

bands have contracted the disease so acutely from their white brethren that you can no longer tell t'other from which."<sup>336</sup> Indeed, by 1936, those Harlem bands that had, for the length of these critics' adult lives, been the bands they most prized and cherished had become targets of critical scorn and frustration for abandoning the purity of Harlem (read: black) authenticity. John Hammond was the most vocal in proclaiming Harlem's emerging staleness and declining relevance. In July 1936, he declared in the pages of *Downbeat* that "Harlem hasn't developed a first rate band for years" and a year earlier he wrote that "around Harlem there is nothing of interest" while conceding that "Chick Webb has the best band at the moment."<sup>337</sup> Hammond's growing disillusionment with Harlem was evident in his criticism of Fletcher Henderson, the bandleader he had once considered the nation's best. In April, 1937, he produced a scathing review of Henderson's band in which he lamented the once great bandleader's ongoing "disintegration."

At the Apollo Theatre the greatest arranger in the country displayed a group that possessed not an atom of swing, personality, or vitality. ... At the Savoy ballroom a couple of nights ago the band made just as bad an impression. The small crowd was bored to distraction by the sounds emitted by obviously blasé musicians and turned to the music of Chick Webb, which, for once, sounded spontaneous and refreshing by contrast.<sup>338</sup>

Through their financial success and aspiration towards an ideal of sophisticated erudition, Harlem bandleaders frustrated the critical impulse to create exotic distance between black bands and elite white audiences. Historian Benjamin Filene explains this

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<sup>336</sup> "Detector" [pseud.], "Savoy Sultans Took Us Back Ten Years," *Melody Maker*, September 24, 1938, 5.

<sup>337</sup> John Hammond, "Musicians Desert Gin and Weed to Swing Again," *Downbeat*, June, 1936, 22; "J. Hammond on 'Swing'," *Downbeat*, June, 1935, 12.

<sup>338</sup> John Hammond, "Benny Goodman Draws Record Negro Patronage," *Downbeat*, April, 1937, 16.

phenomenon in the context of 1930s “folk” and “roots” music explaining that “roots musicians are expected to be premodern, unrestrainedly emotive, and noncommercial” and that performers “who too closely resemble the revival’s middle-class audiences are rejected by those audiences as ‘inauthentic.’” Through this phenomenon, jazz musicians aspiring to project middle or upper class values would transgress what Filene terms an “identification premised on difference,”<sup>339</sup>

### **“The Count Steps In”: The Emergence of the “Kansas City Sound”**

Spearheaded by Hammond, critics turned to the working class clubs of Kansas City for a style of swing music that spoke more strongly to their own aspirations for black jazz. Throughout the late 1930s, Hammond and those he influenced marked Kansas City as the source for a brand of swing music more closely connected to the authentic blackness critics sought to tap into and promote. The critical discourse that constructed and articulated the “Kansas City sound” had a strong and immediate impact on the reception and careers of New York bandleaders including Webb. As a case study, the emergence of the Kansas City sound demonstrates several important phenomena. First, it chronicles the emerging regionalism of jazz historical discourse and the practice of grounding jazz’s authenticity in specific places at specific temporal junctures. Second, it is among the first instances where jazz’s newly-formed aesthetic system chastised and policed the stylistic trajectory of black performers. Finally, it demonstrates the

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<sup>339</sup> Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 63.

significant impact that a single critic—John Hammond—could have on jazz discourse and jazz practice through a massive injection of social and financial capital.

Disillusioned by New York bands' highly arranged style and use of novelty tricks, Hammond turned to his attention to the music of Kansas City, and specifically the band of William "Count" Basie, whom he first heard on a small experimental radio station that broadcast Basie live from the tiny Reno Club, which he described in 1936 as "the ideal stage for unselfconscious and direct music."<sup>340</sup> For Hammond, Basie's sound represented the "swing, personality, and vitality" he found lacking in Henderson, Webb, and other Harlem musicians. Hammond, who had launched Benny Goodman's rise to stardom the previous year, selected Basie as his next project and sought to introduce Basie and his band to the New York scene and to the nation. In July 1936, he wrote in *Downbeat* of the unheralded band "I want to say categorically and without fear of ridicule that Count Bill Basie has by far and away the finest dance orchestra in the country. And when I say this, I am fully aware of Benny Goodman, Fletcher Henderson, and Chick Webb."<sup>341</sup> He heralded the band for playing with "the supreme freedom one associates with Kansas City."<sup>342</sup> Hammond brought the Basie band to New York, securing them bookings at the Roseland Ballroom and other venues. In promoting Basie as the definitive example of "hot swing music," Hammond was challenging the dominance of the New York style by throwing his considerable economic and critical

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<sup>340</sup> John Hammond, "Basie Makes Chi Debut—Field's Flops in N.Y., 'Sachelmo's' Book Reveals Boastful Artist," *Downbeat*, November, 1936, 4.

<sup>341</sup> John Hammond, "Count Basie Has Finest Dance Orchestra in U.S.," *Downbeat*, June, 1936, 6.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*

weight behind Basie's Kansas City brand of swing, claiming that compared to Kansas City's jazz clubs, "New York seems a dull and prosaic place."<sup>343</sup>

For Hammond, Basie and other Kansas City musicians were his discoveries, artists fated to ply their craft in obscurity if not rescued and developed through Hammond's own patronage and promotion. Gennari identifies this discoverer-as-hero posture as a pattern in Hammond's relationships with those artists he identified as projects and notes his clashes with Bessie Smith and others who resisted what they saw as his paternalistic intervention into the careers they were already managing successfully on their own terms.<sup>344</sup> Indeed, the "folk-activist/discoverer" was an identity with significant traction at the time as John and Alan Lomax sought to document and "save" America's dying folk culture and as early Ethnomusicologists engaged in a project of preservation and analysis in the interest of rescuing the sonic output of obscure and exotic peoples the world over. This culture, with which Hammond would have had significant familiarity through his work with *The New Masses*, fetishized the heroic white adventurer/cultural savior as much as the primitive black performer.<sup>345</sup>

Though Basie's band was a discovery for Hammond, his colleagues, and his audience, neither the Kansas City style nor the musicians in Basie's band were new to the Harlem scene. In fact, Basie and most of his band spent time in Harlem as part of the Bennie Moten orchestra in the early 1930s, even battling Webb's band at the Savoy in

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<sup>343</sup> John Hammond, "Many Faces in New York Swing Spots," *Downbeat*, October, 1936, 3.

<sup>344</sup> Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool*, 37-38.

<sup>345</sup> Gennari, *Blown' Hot and Cool*, 47-48.

1932.<sup>346</sup> Yet, while musicians and musical styles flowed constantly between cities and regions as musicians traveled between territories and bands toured across the country, isolated and coherent regional styles were emerging as part of critics' earliest attempts to historicize, canonize, and spatialize jazz. They were the first to take an interest in both identifying the coherent lineage of a unified "jazz tradition" from which new artists and styles derived their authenticity and also in classifying and spatializing jazz's development by identifying and describing specific styles, time periods, and regional variations. Before their work, there was no discourse that identified the jazz idioms of different American cities or regions as distinct aesthetic styles or subgenres. Even as late as 1937, the concept of distinct regional idioms felt like a novel concept to the American jazz press, and one that originated overseas. In a 1937 *Downbeat* article "French Divide Hot Jazz Into Schools," Leslie Lieber writes:

If you should accost an American on the street and suddenly ask him what New Orleans style and Chicago style is, he would probably describe the first as a way of preparing oysters and the second as a method of shooting a machine gun. The French, however, talk of the New Orleans, Chicago and New York styles of playing, and, if listening to the radio, could identify the city before the station announcements were made.<sup>347</sup>

While regional style has become a ubiquitous feature of jazz historical narratives, at the time it was something new, something French. Its appeal to American critics created a tendency for jazz's "hotspot" to pull up stakes and migrate: New Orleans—the "birthplace" of jazz—reigns supreme until roughly 1917 at which point Chicago becomes the home of "hot" jazz, followed by New York and the emergence of the

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<sup>346</sup> Count Basie with Albert Murray, *Good Morning Blues: The Autobiography of Count Basie* (New York: Da Capo, 2002), 129.

<sup>347</sup> Leslie Lieber, "Hot Clubs Divide Jazz Into Schools," *Downbeat*, August, 1937, 7.



earliest swing musicians in 1926. One notices that, roughly every ten years, the creative energy in one location dissipates—or black musicians' commercial success disrupts the "identification premised on difference"—and jazz's authenticity, its "roots", moves to a new town where a crop of unspoiled working-class musicians resumes the practice of innovating within the bounds of a coherent, "hot" African American tradition.

Hammond's appraisals of Basie and other Kansas City bands imbued their blues-based head arrangements and boogie-woogie riffs with the folk authenticity and anti-commercialism that critics valued. He praised Andy Kirk's band in 1936 for possessing "that unique Kansas City simplicity and style which make it such a relief after the Eastern bands."<sup>348</sup> Of the Kansas City Rockets, Hammond wrote in 1938 that "I was amazed at their vitality and precision, qualities still difficult to find in Eastern colored outfits."<sup>349</sup> Hammond's rhetoric, citing the band's drive and freedom, activates the racial links between "real hot jazz music" and the authentic folk practices of southern African Americans. In an explication of hot jazz's "Negroid" roots, *Downbeat* writer Paul Eduard Miller claimed that obscure yet significant musicians, denied fame by a myopic focus on northern scenes, had the most profound impact on Kansas City bandleaders like Moten, Kirk, and Basie. Hammond himself wrote of Kansas City that, "Descriptions of the place as the hotbed of American music are in every way justified, for there is no town in America, New Orleans perhaps excepted, that has produced so much excellent music—

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<sup>348</sup> John Hammond, "Norvo Knocks Patrons for Loop, but Heidt Ruins Digestion," *Downbeat*, December, 1936, 3.

<sup>349</sup> John Hammond, "Hammond Throws Hat in the Air for Shaw & Discovers More Blues Pianists," *Downbeat*, July, 1938, 4.

Negro, of course.”<sup>350</sup> By late 1937, *Downbeat* critic Dave Dexter Jr. went so far as to claim that Kansas City was eclipsing New Orleans and the deep south as the “hotbed of jazz.”<sup>351</sup> Further marking Basie’s music as “authentically black”, Hammond featured them as *the* representative example of “hot swing music” for his “From Spirituals to Swing” concerts at Carnegie Hall. These concerts featured a variety of black artists and articulated a “progression” of black musical output from the hollers and shouts of field spirituals and southern gospel through secular blues pianists and ultimately Basie’s Kansas City swing orchestra.<sup>352</sup>

Hammond presented Kansas City swing as the authentic progeny of black folk music while criticizing New York bandleaders for selling out. This sentiment of selling out was echoed by George T. Simon, who described Webb’s commercial turn as a tragic disconnection from the “hot” Harlem audiences whose approval imbued the band with black authenticity.

...as the evening wore on, it became apparent that one of the band’s greatest qualities was sorely lacking. That was the general free spirit of attack, the will to give whole-heartedly, a quality that has always been one of the strong selling-points of the Webbian presentation. Somehow or other you began to feel as if the band were beginning to high-hat hot Harlem: that its successful appearances in all parts of the land had begun to have their psychological effect, and now that the band was becoming a national institution, it was beginning to consider itself too good for its Savoy Stalwarts... Here’s uttering a humble prayer that this truly great Chick Webb band, which can cut just about any swing outfit in the world, won’t turn into one of those stiff, stagey aggregations, which measures glory in terms of quarts of grease paint and number of orchestra seats sold per

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<sup>350</sup> John Hammond, “Kansas City a Hotbed For Fine Swing Musicians,” *Downbeat*, September, 1936, 1.

<sup>351</sup> Dave Dexter Jr., “South No Longer ‘HotBed of Jazz,’ New Orleans Gives Way to Kansas City as Home of Famous Jam Men,” *Downbeat*, December, 1937, 10.

<sup>352</sup> Dunstan Prial, *The Producer: John Hammond and the Soul of American Music* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 84-116.

performance. The band is too great, both personally and musically, to allow itself to tumble into such listless doldrums!<sup>353</sup>

Simon and Hammond's staunch anti-commercialism reflect critics' conflation of black authenticity and anti-capitalist radicalism. This link is articulated clearly by French critic and Hot Club pioneer Hughes Pannassié in his review of Benny Goodman for *Jazz Hot*. "It is in fact, a group equal in value to the best coloured orchestras, and it is the only white combination of this importance which, since the beginning of jazz, has managed to live while making few concessions to commercialism and, on the other hand, constantly endeavouring to make the public appreciate true jazz music."<sup>354</sup>

Panassié's impact on American jazz critics was tremendous and his perspective fit nicely with the radical leanings of many influential critics like Hammond, who wrote for the communist journal *The New Masses*, which actually financed his "From Spirituals to Swing" concert.

Hammond and Pannassié's anti-commercialist writing aligns with the narrative of hot improvisation as a "righteous cause" as outlined by Bruce Boyd Raeburn. Discussing leftist jazz critic Charles Edward Smith, Raeburn writes,

Intrinsic to the category of 'hot' was a purist impulse that became known as the 'righteous cause' as the decade of the 1930s unfolded. The cause was 'righteous' because it affirmed the spirituality found in improvisation—the expression of feeling from the heart. The negative image of this concept was 'sweet,' the product of a commercialism dominated by Eurocentric standards. Noncommercial music was therefore more representative of the American spirit, revealing the character of the people as they *were*, instead of as they *should* be.<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>353</sup>George T. Simon, "Roasts and Toasts," *Metronome*, January, 1938, 20.

<sup>354</sup> Hughes Panassié, "Homage to Benny Goodman," *Jazz Hot*, November/December, 1936).

<sup>355</sup> Bruce Boyd Raeburn, *New Orleans Style and the Writing of American Jazz History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 26.

Like Smith, Panassié and Hammond sought to associate African Americans and the folk music born of their social struggles with the true and genuine American spirit, which, to them, was a radical, anti-capitalist spirit.

However, while Hammond was a radical activist for social justice, he was also a Vanderbilt and had no need to earn a living. The same could not be said for black jazz musicians, who struggled to make ends meet performing in the kinds of rough and tumble dives Hammond valorized while being shut out of the kinds of lucrative radio and hotel jobs that would have demanded “commercial” or “corny” music, and at a significantly higher salary. In his book on pioneering black New York bandleader Fletcher Henderson, musicologist Jeffrey Magee points out that Henderson was initially successful modeling his orchestra after that of Paul Whiteman, whose orchestral jazz was a frequent punching bag of critics, but adopted a style with more “vitality” and “rhythmic drive” to capitalize on the aesthetic expected of black bands.<sup>356</sup> Writing about the early development of Bebop in the 1940s, musicologist Scott DeVeaux cites black musicians’ lack of access to more lucrative opportunities as a driving force behind their decision to congregate in small clubs on 52<sup>nd</sup> street and give audiences of white beat poets an “authentic” jam session experience.<sup>357</sup>

Historian Lewis Erenberg places Count Basie’s immediate appeal in Harlem within a larger cultural shift in black class-consciousness. He claims that depression-era Harlem became disillusioned with middle- and upper-class pretensions, musically

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<sup>356</sup> Jeffrey Magee, *Fletcher Henderson: The Uncrowned King of Swing*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27-28.

<sup>357</sup> Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

symbolized by the complex and clever written arrangements popular in the '20s and early '30s and still driving the sound of the top black swing bands.

The style built on a black middle-class dream of the twenties to elevate the folk experience to grander more elegant heights. The Basie style, conversely, had emerged from the isolated lower-class black ghetto of Kansas City and swung the blues with a drive and abandon that expressed the desires and hopes of ordinary black people. Using fewer formal arrangements, building the charts on a string of exciting, lengthy solos, the Basie band challenged the East Coast style and brought jazz's quintessential populism to the fore in the mid-1930s.<sup>358</sup>

Erenberg's appraisal reflects a potent narrative that still drives jazz historical discourse on Kansas City's impact in the late 1930s. That narrative, initiated by John Hammond and others, held Kansas City as a new source of black musical authenticity. The more authentic (read: blacker) Kansas City sound served as a corrective to the impurities and compromises critics perceived in those New York bands who were beginning to see greater commercial success. If Kansas City bands were now playing real black jazz music, the implicit, and sometimes explicit, conclusion was that New York orchestras were not black enough. While Hammond and his contemporaries celebrated jazz's black origins in order to foster integration and social justice, their work damaged and invalidated the contributions of New York's black swing orchestra leaders, whose attempts to in Erenberg's words, "elevate the folk experience to grander more elegant heights," were now passé.

Basie was Hammond's hero in this new narrative, yet even as Hammond praised and promoted this champion of the Kansas City sound, he continued to exert control over Basie's aesthetic. While supporting Basie with bookings in New York, sterling

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<sup>358</sup>Lewis A. Erenberg, *Swingin the Dream: Big Band jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998), 95.

critical reviews, and concert presentations, Hammond took it upon himself to reshape the orchestra by smoothing its rough edges and cleaning up its sound by adding personnel from New York orchestras. At the same time, the implicit threat hung over Basie that he too could fall “victim to the same trappings of commercial success that had doomed bands like Webb’s. As early as 1936, he wrote of Basie that “once it becomes mannered and pretentious the group will have lost its only reason for existence.”<sup>359</sup>

### **“Poor Little Rich Girl”: Feminine Frivolity and Critical Reaction to Ella Fitzgerald**

Chick Webb’s 1939 Baltimore funeral was a major event that garnered national press coverage with a reported 10,000 fans mourning outside Waters A.M.E. Church.<sup>360</sup> The otherwise somber ceremony featured a couple of musical performances by members of Webb’s band, most notably a rendition of “My Buddy” by his star girl singer: Ella Fitzgerald. The emotional Fitzgerald struggled to perform as by one account “grief wracked every muscle in the supple body of this brown skinned girl...as she steadied her swaying body by holding tight to the microphone.”<sup>361</sup> This display of emotion speaks to the depth of Fitzgerald’s connection with Webb, who hired her in 1935 when she was a homeless orphan singing in amateur contests in Harlem. In turn, she gave Webb’s band its first taste of national fame by fronting the band on a string of popular hits.

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<sup>359</sup> Hammond, “Basie Makes Chi Debut,” 4.

<sup>360</sup> Nell Dodson, “10,000 Bid Farewell to Chick Webb,” *Baltimore Afro American*, June 29, 1939, 1.

<sup>361</sup> “My Buddy is Sung by Ella at Services,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 1, 1939, 2.

Fitzgerald would go on to build a legacy amongst the small but elite group of singers regarded as significant jazz artists. Yet, her early work with Webb's band is often overlooked or derided by critics. In his ubiquitous history of the swing era, Gunther Schuller dismisses Fitzgerald's early career, describing her hits as "puerile songs" and "inane efemera."

Webb's career demonstrates once again the painful truth that outstanding music rarely coincides with great public success. Though highly regarded by fellow musicians and by his loyal fans at the Savoy, Webb did not enjoy national prominence until he had acquired a girl singer by the name of Ella Fitzgerald and, in particular, her recording of a dreadful bit of silliness called *A-Tisket, A-Tasket*. Fortunately the inane ephemera of that day are now long forgotten, while we can today still enjoy the quite remarkable recordings of the Webb band at it's orchestral best.<sup>362</sup>

Schuller's criticism reflects a paradigm that can trace itself to Fitzgerald's reception during the 1930s. At the time, critics did not attack Fitzgerald directly, rather, they criticized Webb and his band for featuring her. They assailed the band for its commercial turn and for featuring Fitzgerald's popular vocal numbers. Buried within their attacks, which deploy rhetorics of anti-commercialism and authenticity, is a discourse that articulates popularity with femininity. Critics use of terms such as "frivolous", "popular", "novelty", and even "vocal" activate gendered tropes that, even when she is not mentioned directly, evoke Fitzgerald and her femininity as a means to feminize, and therefore chastise, Webb's band. Furthermore, by directing such criticism at Webb and other men, rather than at Fitzgerald herself, this discourse erases Fitzgerald's subjectivity as an artist, instead deploying her as an object to facilitate a strictly homosocial aesthetic discourse where the relevant speakers are all male.

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<sup>362</sup> Gunther Schuller, *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz 1930-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 297.

In 1935, Chick Webb's band was fronted by entertainer Bardu Ali and crooning singer Charles Linton. Following an increasing trend to feature girl singers, Webb encouraged the two to scout out potential females to fill the role. When the pair heard Fitzgerald perform at an amateur contest, they recommended her to Webb. While skeptical at first, primarily due to her physical appearance, Webb hired her once he heard her perform. His enthusiasm for Fitzgerald's singing grew quickly, and he had his arrangers create numerous songs to feature the talented young singer. Relatively soon after she joined the band, the press began to take note of the emerging phenom.

Among the first critics to publicly praise Fitzgerald was *Metronome's* George T. Simon. In his June 1935 review of the band, he lauds the new singer, claiming "Miss Fitzgerald should go places," while noting of the band as a whole that "it's all very good hot music and certainly deserves every bit of the fine rep it's got in Harlem."<sup>363</sup> By January the following year, Simon was prepared to anoint Fitzgerald a sensation on the verge of stardom.

Ella Fitzgerald...the seventeen-year-old gal singing up at Harlem's Savoy with Chick Webb's fine band... un-heralded, and practically unknown right now, but what a future... a great natural flare for singing ... extraordinary intonation and figures ... as she is right now, she's one of the best of all femme hot warblers ... and there's no reason why she shouldn't be just about the best in time to come ... watch her!<sup>364</sup>

Simon's position, though unique in its enthusiasm, more or less reflected feelings towards Fitzgerald until 1937 when "A-Tisket, A-Takset" hit the airwaves. The song was based on a children's nursery rhyme that Fitzgerald recalled from childhood. Van

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<sup>363</sup> George T. Simon, "Dance Band Reviews," *Metronome*, June, 1935.

<sup>364</sup> George T. Simon, "Pick-Ups/Roasts and Toasts," *Metronome*, January, 1936, 27.



Alexander's arrangement proved to be a perfect vehicle to showcase the phonetic playfulness of which Fitzgerald was a master. "Tasket" became the band's first and indeed only major national hit; it was the top song in the country and its sales broke records. The song gave Webb's band national notoriety, opening doors for a level of national touring that the band had not seen previously. That said, the real star was clearly Fitzgerald. During this period, one sees a shift in advertising from promotions for "Chick Webb and his Orchestra" to "Ella Fitzgerald with Chick Webb and his Orchestra" and even "Ella Fitzgerald and her "a-tisket, a-tasket" Orchestra." The song itself was an easy target for critics, given its origins as a nursery rhyme. The song's connection to childhood fueled a growing criticism of popular songs and swing music as appealing to infantile sensibilities.

While "A-tisket, A-tasket" itself was generally well-received, critics began to lament the band's turn towards the "commercial." In a 1937 record review for *Metronome*, Gordon Wright praised Fitzgerald's "mighty fine warbling" only lines after writing that "Chick is going a bit too commercial on these sides and doesn't do his band complete justice."<sup>365</sup> Critics viewed Webb's vocal numbers featuring Fitzgerald as concessions to a misguided record-buying public uninterested in the genuine swing music (read: instrumental songs) favored by the press as real, authentic jazz. As "rophone," put it, "This band has now reached a stage where one feels that everything it plays has the express object of pleasing those audiences that have been roped in by the attraction of Ella's personality and are not otherwise interested in jazz."<sup>366</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> Gordon Wright, "DISCussions," *Metronome*, March, 1937.

<sup>366</sup> "Rophone" [pseud.], "Hot Records Reviewed," *Melody Maker*, March 25, 1939, 7.

John Hammond frequently praised Fitzgerald, but rarely for her talent or musical contributions to the band. Rather, he noted her role in popularizing Webb's band nationally and filling the drummer's coffers. "But one thing we can safely predict: Chick is definitely on the road to financial success, for the singing of Ella Fitzgerald has become an enormous asset to any band."<sup>367</sup> His faint praise for Fitzgerald couches Fitzgerald's contribution in the dreaded language of commercialism; her prominence is, therefore, a concession to oppressive market forces, her role that of "asset" rather than artist. "At least partly because of Ella Fitzgerald the band is extremely popular these days, but I'm afraid that its musicianship is far below the standards Chick ought to set for himself. ... But Chick is such a swell performer and Ella so great a personality that crowds usually overlook such deficiencies."<sup>368</sup> This review indicates the three most common tropes of Webb criticism in the band's final two years: the band's turn towards commercial tunes, either explicitly or implicitly attributed to Fitzgerald's growing prominence; the ignorance of popular music consumers; and Fitzgerald's role as a non-artist—a "personality" rather than a performer.

As we see in the case of the "Kansas City sound," white critics re-imagined black musicians as anti-commercial heroes, projecting their own aesthetic values onto black male proxies who were, in fact, savvy businessmen who viewed satisfying audiences as the role of a professional musician, rather than as cynical pandering. In addition, many black bandleaders admired the kinds of sweet, commercial music early jazz critics detested. However, the real complexity and diversity of black bandleaders'

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<sup>367</sup> John Hammond, "'Bongo Player Thrills New York – Fletch Henderson's Band Ragged," *Downbeat*, March, 1937, 3.

<sup>368</sup> John Hammond, "Chick Webb's Standard of Musicianship Too Low," *Downbeat*, November, 1937, 3.

professionalism and musical taste failed to penetrate the fantasy constructions of critics. Therefore, no “purely musical” justification for the presence of a girl singer was possible.

Since they could not be explained musically, girl singers were necessarily regarded as concessions to commercialism, to the tastes of the unenlightened fans that cranked the wheels of crass American capitalism. Thus, while reviews acknowledge the increasing popularity and commercial success of Webb’s band, critics’ low opinion of his audience reduced the band’s progress and success to cheap pandering. When Fitzgerald’s presence enlivened audiences, the audiences themselves were blamed for poor taste. *Downbeat* critic Bob Bach exemplifies this rhetorical strategy in a 1937 review when he writes, “Ella Fitzgerald got a bigger hand than Teddy Wilson and Lionel Hampton which should be a sure tip-off on the crowd.”<sup>369</sup> Bach’s review demonstrates the band’s double bind: if they did poorly, featuring Fitzgerald lead to their downfall; if they did well, it was because audiences were ignorant.

This thread of criticism, lamenting the band’s “commercial” turn, persisted even when Fitzgerald herself was actively praised. Directing criticism towards the band itself rather than towards Fitzgerald specifically positions her as object rather than subject. In this way, criticism of Fitzgerald is relational in that it is not about her as an individual performer, but as an object in relation to her male bandleader and his orchestra. Girl singers like Fitzgerald were not considered musicians or artists in the way bandleaders or individual soloists were. As such, Fitzgerald is relevant only insofar as she impacts the aesthetic direction of Chick Webb and his band of male instrumentalists. To blame

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<sup>369</sup> Bob Bach, “Swing Bands Take Place of Sleepy Orchestras,” *Downbeat*, May, 1937, 27.

Fitzgerald explicitly for her vocal performances or for the band's artistic direction would be to credit her with a level of agency and autonomy as a musician that would fundamentally transgress contemporaneous perspectives on musicality and femininity.

These critiques rely on gender-coded language as the act of singing, and the role of singer, code feminine in jazz as they do in other genres in part because instruments, insofar as they symbolize tinkering and technical culture, code as masculine objects and instrumental performance as the labor of men. As such, Fitzgerald's voice was a transgression of masculine space that signified the kinds of commercial concessions critics so deplored. Her growing prominence in the band, previously an exemplar of the real swing music they prized, became an emasculating threat exacerbated by the extremity of her commercial popularity. What critics perceived as Webb's band's focus on the light, the frivolous, the sweet, and the popular transgressed their aspirations for what men's music should sound like and for what male musicians, especially black men, ought to produce.

Affirming critics view of Webb's "concessions" requires assuming that Webb, given a choice, would adopt the mantle of anti-commercial hero they envisioned for black bandleaders. However, by many accounts, Webb had spent years frustrated with his band's inability to expand its reach nationally and tap into the national audience enjoyed by Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway.<sup>370</sup> The band's new "tactics" with Fitzgerald, focusing on commercial tunes, were not new at all. Rather, they were simply more successful with her as part of the band. Webb had in fact spent years attempting

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<sup>370</sup> Stuart Nicholson, *Ella Fitzgerald: A Biography of the First Lady of Jazz* (New York: Macmillan, 1994), 25.

to break through with sweet vocal numbers, and one can see significant evidence in the band's recorded output before Fitzgerald joined the band. In 1934, Webb hired falsetto crooner Charles Linton and recorded sweet ballads featuring him. 1934's "Imagination," a sweet ballad recorded the year before Fitzgerald joined the band and at the peak of their critical popularity, reinforces the *Pittsburgh Courier's* 1933 claim that Webb could dish it up plenty hot, but liked his music sweet. This recording contains virtually no instrumental solos and minimal ensemble support for Linton's sweet vibrato-laden vocals. As Linton explained it, his role with the band was to do the classical and ballad numbers.<sup>371</sup> Linton's work proved extremely popular and drew crowds of admiring young women to Webb's performances. This was likely the sort of tune that prompted the *Chicago Defender* to declare that Webb was "nationally famous for preferring his music soft and sweet", and, referring to Fitzgerald's first recording session with the band where she did "Love and Kisses" and "I'll Chase the Blues Away," that Webb was "clinging to this 'soft and sweet ideal.'" It was this music that helped the band secure a lucrative radio contract with NBC, making them the most frequently heard band over the airwaves at the time. Thus, when critics lauded Webb's earlier focus on raw, corporeal hot instrumentals, they were noting only one aspect of the band's very versatile personality. In fact, Fitzgerald was not brought in to sing sweet ballads but to perform more uptempo swinging numbers.

Adding Fitzgerald to the band was the result of Webb's decision to hire a girl singer who could do for more up-tempo numbers what Linton contributed on ballads. The strategy was tremendously successful as Fitzgerald's popularity vastly expanded

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<sup>371</sup> Ibid. 33-34.

the band's reach. However, to paint this as some kind of unexpected twist of fate that pulled Webb out of a comfortable local career would be a distorted picture of Webb's aspirations. That said, Fitzgerald was the most obvious lightning rod for what appeared to be a change in direction, but was in fact consistent with Webb's aims and a welcome realization of desires he had held his entire career.

So, why did critics suddenly view Fitzgerald's presence as a massive change in direction when it actually continued Webb's existing strategy? Because with Fitzgerald, the strategy actually started to work. 1937's "A-Tisket, A-Tasket" sold over a million records, an outstanding feat for any band at the time regardless of race. Second, her popularity afforded her a prominence and public presence unheard of for a mere girl singer. Fitzgerald came to dominate the band's public identity, and I argue that the ubiquity of her presence transgressed the homosociality of swing bands. The immediate and unavoidable presence of a woman as a band's public face and centerpiece upended expectations about the role of girl singers, who, at least for critics, were mere nuisances and unfortunate concessions to popular taste.

Fitzgerald's success and her style pushed against this received wisdom. Even early on, Fitzgerald was a versatile and creative musician; not only did she show a strong aptitude for phrasing and rhythmic play, but she also played a significant role in creating her own material. Van Alexander, who arranged for her during her time with Webb, describes the generation of her most famous tune "A-Tisket, A Tasket" as a co-creative effort. After Fitzgerald brought Alexander the idea, the two worked together on what would become a national hit. Her aptitude for composition and early experimentation with scatting and ornamentation paint a picture of a jazz artist who

already possessed a unique style and the ability to make substantial creative contributions. This was the Fitzgerald that Webb recognized, that other bandleaders actively courted for their own outfits, and that fans repeatedly recognized in magazine polls as jazz's finest.

However, critics' posture towards Fitzgerald was one of non-engagement and even non-acknowledgement. By engaging only Webb in critical dialogue, even when their objection was only to the band's repertoire and style when featuring Fitzgerald, critics erased Fitzgerald's agency and subjectivity as an artist. At times, critics adopted a sympathetic yet paternalistic posture towards her, claiming that she, a simple young girl, could not be blamed for the pedantry of her performances. "Rophone" called her "a grand singer, but she is only as good as the songs she sings, and too much commercial material has undoubtedly warped her style."<sup>372</sup> At the same time, critics occasionally painted Webb similarly blameless, claiming that he was simply too weak not to be lured into the forest of national prominence by the lorelei of Fitzgerald's commercial appeal. Thus, we see Fitzgerald cast as both the Madonna and the whore: an innocent girl subject to the unfortunate decisions of her arranger and bandleader yet whose fame was a seductive temptress that "made" poor Chick Webb sell out his fans and abandon his style, for he would never choose to "high hat hot Harlem" on his own.

Situating her as a taint or impurity, some critics made more explicit links between Fitzgerald's public rise and the band's musical fall after his death. Even more bluntly, "Rophone" claimed in a eulogizing review that, "the discovery of Ella set Chick's

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<sup>372</sup> "Rophone" [pseud.], "Hot Records Reviewed," *Melody Maker*, August 5, 1939, 11.

band on a commercial path which changed its character irreparably.”<sup>373</sup> As an innocent, Fitzgerald is a perfectly good, even great, girl singer with no influence over the band’s direction. Being used to sell records and make money in a compromising bow to crass commercialism, she is as much a victim of Webb’s avarice as the critics whose expectations he violates. Since, in the perception of critics, she neither writes the music she sings nor actively pushes the band’s musical direction, she may be a tool to affect the band’s commercial turn, but she is not an agent of it. As a non-agent in Webb’s commercial turn, Fitzgerald’s retention of authenticity is linked to a kind of musical virginity. This childlike picture of Fitzgerald is of course aided by the “infantile” material she sang, which used devices like “tasket”’s nursery rhyme to emphasize her childlike nature. Fitzgerald’s origin story, her rescue from homelessness and Webb’s adoption of her, contribute as well. On the other side of this narrative, Webb is the innocent. A victim of his own success and the temptations offered by Fitzgerald’s “personality,” Webb becomes a victim of ignorant audiences and a popular music industry at odds with the tastes of Webb’s elite critical listeners. As “rophone” put it in his back-handedly charitable obituary, “It is much better and kinder to think of Chick as a swell artist and fellow who was carried away by something too big for him, in the form of Broadway commercialism.”<sup>374</sup> In the end, Webb also loses his agency as he becomes swept up by forces too great for him to comprehend or resist. As in the case of Basie, jazz critics’ attitudes towards Webb become paternalist, a term made all the more powerful by their use of Fitzgerald as a means of feminizing Webb and his band.

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<sup>373</sup> “Rophone” [pseud.], “Commercialism Was Too Strong for Chick Webb,” *Melody Maker*, July 8, 1939, 6.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid.



As the seductress, Fitzgerald contributes to the corruption of Webb's band by offering them an irresistible window into the world of commercial music. While still object rather than subject, Fitzgerald's ability to crank out popular novelty songs becomes a seductive temptation to Webb, luring him and his band away from an idealized pre-Fitzgerald authenticity and towards the trappings of national fame and popularity. By bringing a woman into his band space, and by featuring her above his instrumental soloists and even himself, Webb sullies the musical purity for which critics praised his band.

This criticism is both about Fitzgerald and not about her at all, as critics merely use Fitzgerald to facilitate their engagement with Webb. Reeser's framework the dynamics of love triangles in literature suggests that Fitzgerald's erasure was the product of jazz discourse's homosociality. He posits that love triangles play out not between three equal agents, but between two male subjects and a female object. In the love triangle, the woman's role is merely to serve as a conduit, or even a context, through which men define and express their relationship to each other. As such, love triangle discourse is a male homosocial one built upon the ubiquitous objectifying practices of competition for, and exchange of, women.<sup>375</sup>

In some very obvious ways, Fitzgerald's early criticism is not purely analogous to a love triangle as such: neither Webb nor the throng of leading jazz critics publicly expressed romantic interest in her, and conversation between critics and Webb was distinctly one-sided; at least in the surviving historical record, Webb's critics are the only ones with a voice. Nevertheless, Reeser's model is useful in illuminating critics' use

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<sup>375</sup> Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory*, 55-71.

of Fitzgerald as an object or tool to facilitate a conversation with Webb. This dynamic trades upon the expectations of male dominance and female servitude that shaped and maintained the homosociality of the big band as critics focused their displeasure not on Fitzgerald but on how Webb and his male collaborators were using her.

What is disappointing is that the narratives this criticism built, as well as the patriarchal logic that drives them, persist in more recent work, reactivating the misogynist premises that drove earlier critics' accounts. In an excellent biography that actually gives this period a pretty nuanced treatment, Stuart Nicholson still undermines both Webb's and Fitzgerald's artistic agency by claiming that Webb hired Fitzgerald because he "...was frustrated and impatient, willing to try anything that might increase his popularity" and that, "Artistically, Ella was unconcerned about the quality of the material she was asked to perform." More problematically, Jim Haskins' 1991 biography claims that "Chick Webb had no real need for a girl singer, except as 'window dressing'" and that he considered singers "superfluous." He says Webb saw her as "a young, naïve girl with an unpolished talent, and he had no interest in catapulting her to a featured role that she might not be able to handle."<sup>376</sup> Of course, this was driven by Haskins' broader claim that singers were necessary only because they "added a dimension to a band's performance that ordinary people who had no hope of understanding pure jazz needed."<sup>377</sup> Haskins' rhetoric hits on an important argument, and one I believe reflects the position of Webb's critics. What does it mean to foster an aesthetic where voices, and, by extension, women, are "impurities" that taint or dilute real jazz?

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<sup>376</sup> Jim Haskins, *Ella Fitzgerald: A Life Through Jazz* (London, New English Library, 1991), 35.

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.* 37.

Lara Pellegrinelli explains this dynamic's role in perpetuating jazz aesthetics as a patriarchy when she writes,

In general, the ideology of the 'artist' gives women and singers little symbolic capital. They may find a place among the muses that inspire male creativity, ...but they rarely count as important historical figures or icons. If demanding art music is made by men for men as connoisseurs, then the elimination of singing as women's primary form of participation helps make jazz into a more 'serious' (i.e. 'male') domain.<sup>378</sup>

Over time, this aesthetic has been a foundation for the construction of jazz's institutions, aesthetics, and curricula. It drives what Pellegrinelli identifies as jazz's erasure of women, and, I would argue, of femininity. Just as Sherrie Tucker's work on women instrumentalists highlights a significant disruption where women musicians transgressed the vocal roles into which female performers were comfortably relegated, Ella Fitzgerald was a girl singer who critics had trouble dismissing as mere "window dressing," especially as her presence occupied more and more of the entire window. Even as a singer, her talent and her overwhelming popular appeal, itself a product of her uncanny ability to connect with audiences, caused a significant disruption in the status quo, and the critical backlash her presence drew to Webb's band demonstrates the rigorous cultural work that built and policed the masculine aesthetic of "pure jazz" and the homosocial space it maintained.<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> Lara Pellegrinelli, "Separated at 'Birth'; Singing and the History of Jazz," in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, eds. Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 42.

<sup>379</sup> Fitzgerald would, of course, go on to great success as a respected jazz artist. One interesting example of a different relationship with a white impresario is her work with Norman Granz, who featured her prominently in "Jazz at the Philharmonic" concerts in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Interestingly, Fitzgerald's presence helped expand the series' popular audience, yet its credibility as legitimate was not threatened by her presence. Two likely reasons are the self-conscious positioning of jazz as "art" rather than "folk" music and Fitzgerald's shifting performance style as she "traded fours" with musicians, functioning more like an instrumentalist. For more detailed discussion, see Tad Hershorn, *Norman Granz: The Man Who Used Jazz for Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 127-165.

Strictly speaking, Webb's voice is absent in this dialogue, for he wrote no replies to critics' complaints about his band's trajectory. However, we can read Webb's reply in his band's refusal to change course and in his persistent promotion of Fitzgerald and her repertoire. Helen Oakley Dance, Webb's publicist at the time, remarked in later oral histories on Webb's determination to "go his own way" and seek a wider audience. Webb, like other bandleaders in Harlem, valued his band's success both for its financial rewards and because it marked the band's professionalism and ability to appeal to diverse audiences and demonstrate mastery of a range of styles. Choosing to continue featuring Fitzgerald while still producing some of the band's most celebrated instrumental records suggests that Webb was satisfied, even thrilled, with the fruits of this collaboration and that his music neither participated in critics' political project nor did it require their validation.

Critical vitriol seems to have had relatively little impact on Webb's career itself. During its critical nadir, Webb's band had a breakout hit that was the number one song in the country, he began penetrating the lucrative hotel market that was so difficult for black bands to access, and his band enjoyed more national radio exposure than most bands of either race. However, the two bands that have come to most personify the swing era are Benny Goodman's and Count Basie's, both of whose careers were launched and supported by the enthusiasm of one influential jazz critic, John Hammond.<sup>380</sup> While both excellent bands, these two more than any others enjoyed access to the prominence afforded those aligned with jazz's emerging critical apparatus;

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<sup>380</sup> Of course, Duke Ellington is a major figure in the jazz canon, but not primarily for his contributions to swing music.

what might Webb's legacy look like had critics championed the band rather than chastised it?

Furthermore, what if critics were, to an extent, right? Could Webb's sound have changed so drastically to justify the shift in his band's reception? There were some major changes to the band around this time, most notably, Edgar Sampson's resignation as chief arranger in 1936. In fact, some critics explicitly pointed to Sampson's departure, and the elevation of arrangers they perceived as inferior, as the most critical factor in Webb's decline; so crucial was Sampson's arranging style to Webb's sound that, as one critic put it, reporting that Sampson was leaving Webb "is like saying Duke Ellington is leaving Ellington."<sup>381</sup> However, one finds nothing in oral histories with other musicians and with Webb's Harlem fans nor in accounts the black press or any media outlet other than elite jazz magazines to support the narrative of Webb's sudden and drastic musical decline. The common thread in Webb's negative reception is its source: a small group of critics and publications working to introduce and enforce a specific aesthetic for black music, one that at the time had yet to make significant inroads amongst musicians themselves and certainly not amongst popular audiences.

Yet critics' control over access to recording opportunities and, in the ensuing decades, their important role in shaping the smooth transition from "jazz criticism" to "jazz studies" and "jazz history" has had a massive impact on the historical record. At the same time, one can easily dismiss critics as cultural outsiders with a limited and skewed perspective on Harlem's music and its audiences. Indeed, a partial dismissal, or

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<sup>381</sup> Leonard G. Feather, "Chick Webb Bombshell – Edgar Sampson Leaves," *Melody Maker*, August 15, 1936, 7.

at least healthy skepticism, of critical reception is healthy when doing jazz history.

Critical voices shine through the loudest because their perspectives are the easiest ones to access. Critical reception is useful when the criticism is read in context, with as much awareness as possible of the critics' specific perspectives and of their power to craft foreclosures, to funnel creativity towards certain aesthetics and away from others.

While critics had tremendous power over artists' reputations and opportunities, Webb's example shows that an artist could still thrive, even achieve massive success, without critical endorsement. At the same time, in the case of jazz, critical discourse smoothly transitioned into historical discourse as jazz studies became an institutionalized practice. As such, narratives of competing and emerging styles like the sudden surge of Kansas City jazz in the late 1930s obscure the faultlines of competing aesthetics, which were more the product of critics' own constructions than of significant fissures among musicians or their popular audiences. Furthermore, unpacking the raced and gendered rhetorical drive behind the aggrandizement of the authentic Kansas City sound and the dismissal of Harlem bands such as Webb's invites a deeper look at those artists who suffered most significantly from critical erasures: women jazz musicians. While Fitzgerald later enjoyed a significant career as a respected jazz artist, her case is by far the exception and not the rule. As jazz critics leveraged their privilege to build jazz's aesthetic system, those who failed to conform were squeezed out of the emerging canonical narrative. Yet, studying the cultural work that created these erasures, that forgot certain musicians and remembered others, gives a thicker perspective on the practice of criticism and on what terms like "real jazz", "hot jazz", and "authentic jazz" have come to mean and the problematic cultural work they

continue to perform. We find this thickness in the critical reactions to those artists like Webb and like Fitzgerald, who ignored critics' admonitions not to "Be That Way."

## Chapter 5: “Breakin’ it Down”: Unpacking the Webb/Goodman Battle

While such a study is certainly needed, this dissertation was neither designed nor intended as a comprehensive biography for Chick Webb. However, throughout its three methodological case studies, I have yet to discuss the only moment in Webb’s career one could reasonably call part of the jazz historical canon: his May, 1937 battle against Benny Goodman’s band at the Savoy Ballroom. This battle is an iconic moment, and it arguably defined and shaped Webb’s place in history. Thus, I will conclude this project with a final case study to illustrate how the three perspectives articulated in my chapters might be synthesized and applied to yield a multi-methodological, immanent jazz history.

Employing the principles of spatial practice theory articulated in Chapter 2, I will use Webb’s history in band battles, and the history of jazz band battles in general, to demonstrate the performative and discursive functions of battles as specific representational spaces and as representations of space. Next, I will follow the corporeal and intercorporeal focus of Chapter 3 to both hypothesize about Webb’s specific strategies of audience engagement during the battle and also explicate how the cathartic intercorporeality enacted within a battle space created a specific discursive potency at the fraying borders of spatial practice, representational space, and representation of space as discrete categories. Finally, I will employ the critical



discourse analysis advanced in Chapter 4 to explicate the new realms of discursive possibility Webb and Goodman's battle yielded. However, in doing so I will also illustrate the active foreclosure on several of these possibilities as the Webb/Goodman battle was routed to serve particular discourses of white supremacy and American exceptionalism as it continues to do to this day. Through this process, I hope to model a form of integrative analysis that paints a rich, holographic picture of this moment and also advances new methods and pathways to enhance the methodological and discursive toolbox of jazz studies.

### **The Webb-Goodman Battle in Contemporary Media**

Following Susan Leigh Foster's organizational structure in *Choreographing Empathy*, I will start with the Webb/Goodman battle's enshrinement in more contemporary sources, and it receives its most significant treatment in Ken Burns' episodic documentary *Jazz*.<sup>382</sup> The battle enjoys six minutes of screen time in a feature titled "Do You Remember," the penultimate segment of the series' fifth installment, *Swing: Pure Pleasure*. It begins with a reminiscence by *Metronome* critic George T. Simon about the plethora of great bands and venues in New York during the late 1930s. With Webb's recording of "Stompin' at the Savoy" playing at the background, the disembodied voice of Simon's interlocutor rattles off a string of bands and venues one could experience—all of them white and segregated—before closing with "and then, there were the ballrooms, the Roseland with Woody Herman, and the Savoy with Chick

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<sup>382</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 8.

Webb.”<sup>383</sup> The scene shifts to Harlem where the film’s narrator introduces Chick Webb by tying him firmly to the Savoy Ballroom. As the narrator explains, “The Savoy was still Harlem’s hottest spot, and Chick Webb, who had been one of the first bandleaders to play swing, was still in charge.” Critic Gary Giddins introduces Webb as a “unique” figure by juxtaposing the powerful sound of his drumming with his diminutive stature and physical ailments. As the lens focuses on the battle, the voiceover announces that, “On May 11, 1937, Benny Goodman ventured uptown to challenge Webb in what was billed as the music battle of the century.”<sup>384</sup>

As the film portrays the battle itself, the narrative voice switches to the two most famous surviving African American lindy hoppers—Frankie Manning and Norma Miller—who narrate the battle, claiming that in their opinion, Webb’s band outswung Goodman’s. As they describe the battle’s events, Burns recreates the battle by compressing it to a single tune, switching back and forth between Webb’s and Goodman’s commercial recordings of Edgar Sampson’s “Don’t Be That Way,” synched with alternating photos of the two bands. In the film’s narrative assessment, “the Goodman band was routed,” a position it emphasized by playing loud cheering crowd noise during clips of Webb’s “Don’t Be That Way,” but not in Goodman’s.

This cinematic account of the battle echoes other memorializations in popular and academic literature. George T. Simon’s tome of comprehensive bandleader biographies *The Big Bands* opens its piece on Webb with a thick description of the battle. Referencing his contemporaneous writeup in *Metronome*, Simon writes that,

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<sup>383</sup> *Jazz*, directed by Ken Burns, volume 5: “Swing, Pure Pleasure” (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2000) DVD.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*

According to my report, Benny's band played first and made a great impression. Then 'the Men of Webb came right back and blew the roof off the Savoy. The crowd screamed, yelled and whistled with delirium. From then on the Webb band led the way, and, according to most people there that night, truly topped the Goodman gang.<sup>385</sup>

Most contemporary sources more or less reproduce this account. The DeVeaux/Giddins *Jazz* textbook describes the battle as a "trouncing" and notes that Goodman's celebrated drummer Gene Krupa "bowed down in respect."<sup>386</sup> The textbook *Jazz: The First Hundred Years* by Henry Martin and Keith Waters similarly acknowledges Webb's victories over Goodman's and Basie's bands, noting he was awarded these wins by his "loyal audience."<sup>387</sup> Such accounts correspond with themes in the white jazz press's writeups just after the battle took place. Commentary in *Downbeat*, *Metronome*, and *The Melody Maker* began by emphasizing the massive crowd assembled for the event: roughly 4,000 inside the ballroom and another 5,000 outside, and each acknowledged that Webb's band was the consensus victor. Burns's cinematic representation highlights two important aspects of the event: its atmosphere of large-scale spectacle and its signifying potential in broader conversations about race and difference. However, Burns's presentation highlights these aspects of this event as exceptional when they were actually typical qualities of the "battle of music" as a specific presentational genre for big band dance music in the 1920s and 1930s.

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<sup>385</sup> George T. Simon, *The Big Bands*, revised enlarged edition (New York: McMillan, 1974), 440.

<sup>386</sup> Scott DeVeaux and Gary Giddins, *Jazz* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 269.

<sup>387</sup> Henry Martin and Keith Waters, *Jazz: The First Hundred Years*, second edition (Belmont, CA: Schirmer, 2006), 157.

## Battles of Music and Representations of Difference

By the time Goodman and Webb battled in 1937, their contest was already underwritten by layers of signification and performance convention formed through roughly a decade of “battle of music” contests at the Savoy Ballroom and elsewhere. Such battles had come to function as spectacles where spatial practices marked the events as exceptional spaces of elevated musical and rhetorical intensity. These practices were fueled by discourses of competition and difference through which bands came to symbolize styles, regions, genders, and races. As champions for different types of identities, bands who battled each other made ballrooms into representational spaces where their musical conflicts spoke to broader social debates.

The concept of jazz battling dates back to the informal contests between New Orleans combos battling in the street from carts and wagons as they advertised their evening performances, yet the specific formation of the jazz “battle of music” likely dates to Harlem in 1927, when the Savoy Ballroom first employed the practice as part of a broader strategy to emphasize the grandiose scale of its offerings.<sup>388</sup> In its first major battle of music, Chick Webb’s band supported Fess Williams’ Royal Flush Orchestra to battle the visiting Joe “King” Oliver’s band from Chicago. The battle was part of an attempt to capitalize on the Savoy management’s significant financial investment in a two-week residency for Oliver’s band. To mark the battle as a major Harlem event, the Savoy billed it as a major gala spectacle, emphasizing to the *New York Amsterdam News* that “such celebrities as Paul Whiteman, Vincent Lopez, Ted Lewis, Ray Miller, George

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<sup>388</sup> In my searches through two major newspaper databases of historical black newspapers, the first use I have found of the term “Battle of Music” is in the Savoy’s 1927 advertisements for a battle between King Oliver’s band and Chick Webb and Fess Williams’ Savoy ensembles.

Olsen, Ben Bernie and countless others have all signified their intention of welcoming the King of Jazz to New York on his first visit.”<sup>389</sup>

The plan succeeded as the ballroom reportedly sold out and had to turn people away, a pattern that would repeat in subsequent events at the Savoy and elsewhere throughout the 1930s.<sup>390</sup> Indeed, though Webb and Goodman’s battle did sell out the ballroom and flood the surrounding streets with fans unable to enter, this was typical rather than exceptional of major battles of music. Inspired by the Savoy’s model, battles held in 1929 in Baltimore’s New Albert Hall drew audiences that more than doubled the building’s official capacity of 2,000.<sup>391</sup> A 1931 Detroit battle held Christmas week between Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, and McKinney’s Cotton Pickers at the city’s newly constructed naval armory reportedly drew 7,100, a figure exceeding the crowd present for Webb and Goodman.<sup>392</sup> In 1936, north Philadelphia’s Nixon Grand Theater held a battle for which the hall was reportedly “packed to overflowing.”<sup>393</sup>

Drawing these kinds of crowds relied on an assemblage of spatial practices through which promoters, audiences, and bands enacted battle spaces as spectacular. Promoters contributed to this sense of spectacle by presenting battle events as extraordinary through decoration, promotion, and rhetoric that marked such events as representations of military space, of battles and battlefields. The Savoy’s first major

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<sup>389</sup> “Chicago’s Best Band in Town” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 4, 1927, 11.

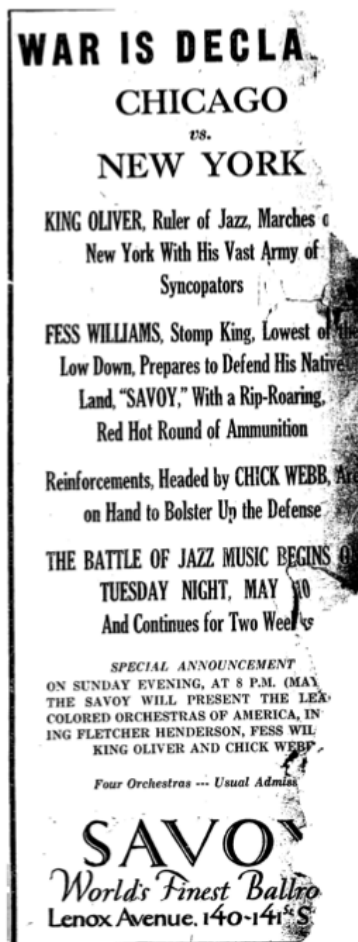
<sup>390</sup> “‘Battle of Jazz’ Stirs Vast Crowd,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 18, 1927, 11.

<sup>391</sup> Advertisement, *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 23, 1929, 8.

<sup>392</sup> Bessye Bearden, “Around New York,” *Chicago Defender*, January 23, 1932, 5.

<sup>393</sup> “Sunset Royal Entertainers Outplay Tommy Dorsey in ‘Battle of Music,’” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 24, 1936, A7.

battle in the 1920s featured Webb and Fess Williams engaged in “Jazz Warfare” with King Oliver’s band in May 1927, almost ten years to the day before the Goodman battle. The press and advertisements for this event employed military rhetoric to frame it as a regional contest between Chicago and New York. “War is Declared,” claimed an advertisement in the *New York Amsterdam News* as Oliver “marches on New York with his vast army of syncopators” and Fess Williams “prepares to defend his native land, ‘Savoy.’”<sup>394</sup>



**Figure 5.1. “War is Declared” advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News*, May 11, 1927, 11.**

<sup>394</sup> Advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News*, May 11, 1927.

Such regionalism also drove a “North vs. South” battle at the Savoy in 1929 featuring bands from Richmond and Baltimore against Williams and Duke Ellington. Press coverage promised that the invading bands would “defend the southern laurels” and were “ready to blow their last note in the claim that they are the better orchestras” while both Williams and Ellington were reportedly “ready to do or die in defense of their city and have musical bars in readiness with which to smite.”<sup>395</sup> The Ballroom also exaggerated this spectacle through decoration and costuming. Their 1927 July 4<sup>th</sup> battle promised the Ballroom would be “dolled up in appropriate style” to “commemorate the ‘Spirit of 1776’” through a 12-hour battle featuring four bands and the debut of Fess Williams’ new composition: “Red, White, and Blues.”<sup>396</sup> In 1934, Pittsburgh’s McKeesport Park Pavilion further extended the concept by offering an all-night July 4<sup>th</sup> battle outdoors. As the *Pittsburgh Courier* explained,

Battles are supposed to take place in the wide, open spaces where the war generals declare the shot and shell can do the most damage...to the warriors. BUT in battles of music, the wide open spaces contribute to the pleasure of the listeners and dancers. The cool invigorating breezes . . . the close-to-nature feel of the grass, trees, and flowers . . . the splashing, sparkling springs of water! That’s when a battle of music takes on new dangers for romantic hearts.<sup>397</sup>

As this event attracted a significant crowd, another battle was scheduled for the following month, and it promised to feature “2500 dancers and rides and concessions. And thousands of myriad electric lights.”<sup>398</sup> Thus, the physical transformation of

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<sup>395</sup> “Dixie Orchestra to Meet New York Jazz Kings,” *Chicago Defender*, May 4, 1929, 7.

<sup>396</sup> “Celebration Will Usher in July 4<sup>th</sup> at Savoy,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 29, 1927, 11.

<sup>397</sup> “Rides and Concessions to be Going at Olympia for Big Midnight Ball,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 4, 1934, A8.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*

ballrooms into warzones and the exaggerated rhetoric of musical warfare were spatial practices that re-rendered ballrooms as representations of military space. However, the particular military construction they indexed was a nostalgic one: not the immediate horror of the Great War's trenches but the romanticized battles of centuries past, which the members of the aristocratic classes could consume as thrilling entertainment. Like the benefit parties of Harlem social clubs, battles could thus also offer access to the performative signifiers of Euro-American class privilege. Battles could also be intra-city contests designed to settle issues of local dominance as in a 1931 battle seeking "to find best band in Pittsburgh to put Pitt on map."<sup>399</sup> In such contests, bands became totemic symbols whose regional identities formed concentric circles. When battling King Oliver, Fess Williams and Chick Webb represented their "home turf" at the Savoy, the neighborhood of Harlem, and the whole of New York City.

While battles in the late 1920s and early 1930s most commonly focused on regional conflict, the battle format was ideal for indexing bands' identities along multiple axes of difference. The rhetoric surrounding band battles tended to highlight the most obvious distinction between the two bands as the point of clash and novelty that merited a spectacular event. As such, band battles became sites for epic clashes between bands themselves but also between the concentric circles of identity the bands represented in different contexts. Throughout the thirties, regional clashes were joined by battles about nationality, ethnicity, gender, and race. National identity became relevant in the early 1930s when battles began featuring Latin bands. Gus Martel's Cuban Orchestra battled Claude Hopkins, Luis Russell (who was himself Panamanian),

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<sup>399</sup> "Stoney Gloster and His Eleven Clouds of Joy," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 12, 1931, 9.



and Rex Steward in 1933. In 1934, the Apollo Theatre rendered the concept theatrically, featuring a battle between Willie Bryant and Alberto Socarras' Cubanacan Orchestra as part of the stage review "Harlem vs. Cuba."<sup>400</sup> Battles also featured battles between male and female orchestras, playing upon the novelty or "freak show" element of a battle of the sexes as part of the battle of music's focus on spectacle. In summer 1934, the Sunset Royal Entertainers battled Gertrude Long's orchestra twice in Pittsburgh; the previous year, the city's Pythian Temple hosted a contest between Stony Gloster's Eleven Clouds of Joy and the Rhythm Queens Orchestra. The *Pittsburgh Courier* reported that the Rhythm Queens had responded to an open challenge and that Gloster, "says that such nerve on the part of a few femmes is too much for musical men to endure, and while it may not be considered nice to beat a lady, anything is fair in love or war—and folks—this is going to be war. A battle. a real battle. a battle of music[sic]."<sup>401</sup> His attitude illustrates the air of the grotesque or freakish that could accompany such a spectacle, for a battle must be a special occasion if it suddenly made public beatings of women permissible.

However, Gloster's rhetoric also reveals the danger such battles posed to those holding positions of privilege, because they became a kind of meritocratic proving ground. In band battles, musical articulations of broader regional, gender, and race hierarchies could be objectively tested via "fair" sonic combat. As such, battles were not only freakish carnival spectacles, but also ostensibly impartial public contests, like sporting events, where marginalized groups could demonstrate their equality or

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<sup>400</sup> "Harlem vs. Cuba," *New York Amsterdam News*, March 9, 1935, 10.

<sup>401</sup> "So! The Girls Will Challenge the Boys in Synco Duel," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 25, 1933, A8.

superiority unencumbered by socially imposed restrictions.. This signifying potential aligned battles of music with African Americans' affinity for boxing in the 1930s thanks largely to the unmatched success of "The Brown Bomber" Joe Louis. Like Jack Johnson in the 1910s, Louis's success defeating Caucasian opponents disrupted the narratives of white supremacy and affirmed the promise of racial uplift that African Americans, if given a fair shot, would not only thrive but excel in competition with whites. While the specific point of difference under dispute could vary, the battle format as a part of African American musical culture thus drew from emerging constructs of black masculinity in the early twentieth century. By emphasizing war imagery and boxing rhetoric, battles placed musicians in the two identity categories in which black American men had successfully disrupted narratives of black inferiority: as athletes and as soldiers. As musicologist Ken McLeod has argued, African American sports culture and musical battles became thoroughly intertwined in the 1930s as African American musicians and audiences assimilated the rhythms of symbolic competition into modes of musical play.<sup>402</sup> While battling was thus a playful mode of communication, it could also become a powerful symbolic discourse about racialized narratives of superiority or inferiority, especially when interracial battles evoked the same signifying capacities through which Joe Louis was emerging as a hero both within the black community and nationally.

The impulse to set up battles as racial contests expanded throughout the late 1920s into the 1930s, and Webb's battle with Goodman was far from the first to feature

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<sup>402</sup> Ken McLeod, "The Construction of Masculinity in African American Music and Sports," *American Music* 27, no.2 (Summer, 2009): 207-209.

black musicians playing against whites. Such events date back as early as 1928, when Fess Williams participated in a four way battle at Chicago's Regal Theatre with three white orchestra leaders: Abe Lyman, Dave Peyton, and Paul Ash as part of a program memorializing black actress and *Shuffle Along* star Florence Mills.<sup>403</sup> The following year, Ike Dixon, a black bandleader in Webb's native Baltimore, partnered with promoter Lew Goldberg to stage a massive battle between four black orchestras and four white orchestras at New Albert Hall. Through warfare rhetoric, the event's advertising situated this racial clash as the evening's novelty excitement.



**Figure 5.2. Interracial band battle advertisement, *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 23, 1929, 8.**

This martial rhetoric was amplified in a *Baltimore Afro-American*'s story, which described the contest as "really a mob war and a race riot" where Dixon was ultimately

<sup>403</sup> "Chicago Theatrical News," *Chicago Defender*, April 21, 1928, 7.

triumphant and crowned Baltimore's "King of Jazz."<sup>404</sup> Like Webb and Goodman's battle, the event reportedly packed the ballroom well past capacity as "4200 persons crowded into a hall that has the capacity of 2000 persons."<sup>405</sup> This battle was successful enough that the event was restaged with ten bands just months later and with the promise of interracial warfare made explicit in the advertising.



Figure 5.3. Interracial band battle advertisement, *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 4, 1929, 12.

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<sup>404</sup> "Tickle Toe" [pseud.], "Dance Halls," *Baltimore Afro-American* March 9, 1929, 9.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

Both these events were advertised only in the black press, thus suggesting that the spectacle of interracial battles held especially strong symbolic capital for African American audiences.

Harlem took up the practice as well when in 1933 Fess Williams and Noble Sissle battled white bandleaders Paul Tremaine and Tommy Morton at the Rockland Palace for its New Years Eve gala.<sup>406</sup> Later that year, the Harlem Opera House billed a battle between the black Hardy Brothers band and the white Victor Lopez as “The Most Unique Entertainment Ever Presented on Any Stage in Harlem – A Black and White Battle of Music.”<sup>407</sup> The contests began moving beyond this air of novelty spectacle in the mid 1930s as white bandleaders seeking legitimacy as proponents of “hot” swing music began challenging black bands to demonstrate their equal or superior facility. In 1934, Pittsburgh bandleader Lee Rivers sought a black challenger for a battle at the Pythian Temple. As the *Pittsburgh Courier* explained,

Unlike some white aggregations, Lee Rivers is anxious to compete with the best colored orchestra in this section. A battle which ordinarily would be won by a colored orchestra on ‘hot’ numbers and by whites on ‘sweet’ numbers, finds in this attraction a different situation. The Deep River lads are said to be able to take care of themselves on both brands of syncopation and it is left to the Sepias to show their best—and it had better be good!<sup>408</sup>

More famous white orchestras would follow this trend, most notably Glen Gray and the Casa Loma Orchestra. Before Goodman’s explosion in popularity, Gray’s Casa Loma band was widely regarded as the top white exponent of hot swing music. Just a month after Rivers’ open challenge, Gray battled Noble Sissle’s band for a crowd of University

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<sup>406</sup> Untitled report, *Pittsburgh Courier* December 31, 1932, A6.

<sup>407</sup> Advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News*, October 6, 1934, 6.

<sup>408</sup> “Interest Keen as Orchestras Plan Jazz War,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 21, 1934, A8.

of Pennsylvania undergraduates, who declared Sissle the winner in this “war with the hottest ofay band in America.”<sup>409</sup> Also eager to test his mettle against colored competition, Tommy Dorsey battled the Sunrise Royal Entertainers at Philadelphia’s Nixon Grand in 1936 after Dorsey had “boasted that his band would outplay any aggregation of musicians, white or colored.”<sup>410</sup> Battles turned ballrooms into representational spaces where bands became totemic proxies for musical styles, locations, genders, nationalities, or races.

As interracial band battles became more common, Webb began taking part in such contests. In fact, his battle with Goodman was not his first with a white band, it was his fourth. In the two years before his battle with Goodman, he battled Tommy Dorsey once and Glen Gray twice. His first tangle with Gray in 1935 was part of his participation in a city-wide Musicians’ Union Benefit where the *Kansas City Plaindealer* reported Webb “sailed into the competition ‘four sheets to the wind’ and emerged victorious.”<sup>411</sup> When the bands met again the following year, the *New York Amsterdam News* again declared Webb victorious based on audience applause but argued that the two bands played vastly different styles, praising Webb’s swing and Gray’s “mechanical perfection.”<sup>412</sup> While Goodman lacked Webb’s prolific experience in battles, he had participated in a handful of interracial battles before tangling with Webb. In 1935, Goodman battled with two black ensembles—Walter Barnes’ Royal Creolians and the

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<sup>409</sup> “Sissle Adds New Men to Band for Run at the Fair,” *Chicago Defender*, May 26, 1934, 8.

<sup>410</sup> Tom Dorsey Will Feature Nixon Show,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, October 15, 1936, 10.

<sup>411</sup> “Chick Webb Wins Music Battle over Casa Loma,” *Plaindealer* [Kansas City] 37, no.19, May 10, 1935, 3.

<sup>412</sup> “2 Bands Battle at Savoy Dance,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 1, 1936, 13.

Wildcats Orchestra—in a midnight benefit for the Royal Theatre sponsored by the *Chicago Defender*.<sup>413</sup> The following year, he battled Noble Sissle during a social event at the University of Virginia; the two bands were packaged together because both were represented by the Music Corporation of America.<sup>414</sup> While it is unclear why, Goodman was apparently reticent to face Webb's band initially as he reportedly turned down an offer to battle him in 1936, the year before their battle finally took place.<sup>415</sup> Though it is impossible to know Goodman's mindset, he may have been well aware of the Savoy Ballroom's potent symbolic capital and the thick representational politics surrounding battling the most popular black band in Harlem.

Battles were not only spaces to perform such modes of difference, but also to test the social assumptions they triggered. As battle rhetoric positioned them as events to "settle the argument once and for all," when infused with race and gender politics they became laboratories to test social hypotheses. Were women truly capable of doing men's work? Are black people naturally deserving of their inferior opportunities? These were the types of broad questions that underwrote the rhetoric of battles of music. When featuring racial difference, battles activated the ideology of racial uplift and its emphasis on meritocracy and fair play. Absent the segregationist hierarchies that bolstered white bands' professional success, battles became spaces where racial essentialism was confronted by a setting that would ostensibly yield a meritocratic result.

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<sup>413</sup> Jack Ellis, "The Orchestras," *Chicago Defender*, December 14, 1935, 9.

<sup>414</sup> "Sissle and Benny Goodman in Jazz Battle," *Chicago Defender*, May 9, 1936, 8.

<sup>415</sup> Billy Rowe, "Out of Billy Rowe's Harlem Notebook," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 6, 1936, A8.

As such, Webb and Goodman's battle functioned within a specific discursive tradition built over time within African American ballroom culture. The event thus made two simultaneous, though perhaps conflicting, promises. First, it promised a night of musical extremes where massive crowds and a "main event fight" atmosphere would create an elevated sense of excitement and intrigue. Second, it offered a musical format through which to enact and potentially settle broader debates about racial difference and local supremacy. Through a foe like Goodman, who represented both whiteness and a nationally successful brand of swing music, Webb's band symbolically represented the Savoy Ballroom, the neighborhood of Harlem, and black people as a race.<sup>416</sup> As we have already seen, Webb molded his band into the spatial and sonic fabric of everyday life in Harlem. The ubiquity of battling in his professional trajectory indicates one more avenue of deep social listening where Webb used his music to engage the performative politics of cultural discourse in Harlem.

### **Intercorporeal Ecstasy and the Racial Politics of Tempo**

When reporting on the battle in *Metronome* and *Downbeat*, critics focused significant attention on the less-than-ideal circumstances under which the two bands, and especially Goodman's, were expected to perform. From accounts in the white jazz press, the bands were scarcely audible at times due to the massive crowd, the

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<sup>416</sup> I say that the band represented all black people even though its membership, with the exception of Fitzgerald, was male. This aligns with the idea of a "champion" representative from the race. As in the case of black athletes whose achievements were assigned totemic symbolism, bands' male membership reinforced the articulation of masculinity with heroism. At the same time, Webb's band's maleness was a privileged and unmarked identity, and thus race, rather than gender, was the space of difference in which this battle operated discursively.



ballroom's acoustics, and a malfunctioning PA system.<sup>417</sup> John Hammond complained that, "the noise level was so high that none but the brass soloists was even audible."<sup>418</sup> A reporter for *The Melody Maker* echoed Hammond's complaint, observing that "it was impossible to hear the music over the dance floor, and only spasmodically did the staccato notes of the brass sections or the accented beats of the rhythm batteries ring clear enough through the hall."<sup>419</sup> While these reporters suggested such problems might invalidate the battle or prevent an audience from experiencing the music, the imprecise audibility suggests an event where the bands' playing, the audience noise, and the overall visceral energy were significant parts of the sensory experience. Considering battles as spaces for heightened excitement and intercorporeal experience, Webb's success may have come from his decade of practice working in this format at the Savoy and other venues. By understanding and connecting with audiences' preferences for fast, intense music, he leveraged the visceral kinship and connection with the Savoy's dancing patrons I explored in Chapter 3.

While battles were presented as some kind of neutral, scientific testing ground, they were exceptional events in what they demanded of both performers and audiences. While the performative militarization of battle of music sites contributed to the spectacular atmosphere, it was bolstered by the physical extremes to which the battle format pushed both dancing and musicking participants in the space. Unlike other double bills or multiple band concerts, battles featured a format of constant music

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<sup>417</sup> Helen Oakley, "Webb Wins Title of Swing King," and John Hammond, "Thousands of Show Folks Out in N.Y.—Goodman Dance an Incredible Sight," *Downbeat*, May 1937, 2-3.

<sup>418</sup> Hammond, "Goodman Dance an Incredible Sight," 3.

<sup>419</sup> "9,000 Fans for Goodman-Chick Webb Swing Battle," *Melody Maker*, May 27, 1933, 9.

to promote continuous dancing throughout the evening. In general, the convention became that when one band completed a set, a competing band would immediately start up to keep the dancers moving and on the floor. Placing such demands on dancing audiences, these events' enacted a spirit of "one night only" specialness that encouraged musicians and onlookers to completely deplete their physical reserves, offering the kind of conditions that facilitate trance-like states of shared catharsis.<sup>420</sup>

The battle environment was exceptional as it broke the normal ebb and flow of a ballroom setting in favor of the escalating excitement of a singular, spectacular event, which—as we have seen in Chapter 3—lends itself to intercorporeal catharsis. Battles featured continuous dancing as bands would play sets one after the other or trade off individual songs. As such, the crowd participated in the heightened energy, pushing the outer limits of their stamina. This format likely lent itself to an intercorporeal listening experience the dynamics of which would have been exaggerated by both the social and rhetorical energy surrounding such spectacular events as well as the physical and emotional energy of musicking and dancing participants.<sup>421</sup> Furthermore, the dialogic nature of a battle between two bands, with audience applause judging the winner, created a musical space that foregrounded communicative dynamics and necessitated active engagement. In describing Webb's first major battle, the "Jazz Warfare" event

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<sup>420</sup> Judith Becker, *Deep Listeners*, 29. Becker describes trancing as a particular type of deep listening experience shared at community gatherings. She claims these diverse experiences do share "limited universals" including "emotional arousal, loss of sense of self, cessation of inner language, and an extraordinary ability to withstand fatigue." Given this description, her model certainly suggests that battles could function as "trance events" and thus facilitate deep intercorporeal listening.

<sup>421</sup> The term "musicking" was coined by Christopher Small as a means to shift the analytic focus from musical sound as an independent object to music making as an active physical and social practice. See Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998).

with King Oliver's band, *New York Amsterdam News* hints at an intercorporeal environment where each band's discrete sounds blended into the ballroom's assemblage of spatial practice.

Like crazed spectators at a prize fight during a crucial moment, the giddy mob of dancers swayed and girated[sic] back and forth to the all consuming melodies of each aggregation of stars, seemingly unconscious as to who was playing just as long as the heaven-sent music continued and didn't stop.<sup>422</sup>

While the sensational language may suggest that the music became somehow irrelevant, I would offer the opposite: it facilitated a state of deep listening akin to Becker's trance scenarios.<sup>423</sup> In moments like this, the ballroom became a container for a musical event of perpetually escalating sociality.<sup>424</sup>

So, when Manning describes the Webb-Goodman battle as "an electrical night," a critic refers to the entire ballroom shaking, or a reporter—as in the above story—describes the music as "all consuming," I propose that we not dismiss these accounts as mere hyperbole. The perpetual escalation of exertion from both band members and dancers yielded the kind of intercorporeal dynamic outlined in Chapter 3. Through the atmosphere of elevated intensity, the two bands' soundscapes merged into a singular phenomenon as everyone involved lost track of where one band's body ended and the other's began.<sup>425</sup> Thus, while the rhetoric surrounding battles emphasized division and

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<sup>422</sup> "Battle of Jazz' Stirs Vast Crowd." *New York Amsterdam News*, May 18, 1927, 11.

<sup>423</sup> Judith Becker, *Deep Listeners*, 25.

<sup>424</sup> Here I employ "sociality" as employed by anthropologist Jo Vergunst and sociologist Anna Vermehen as the relational dynamics created *through* shared activity rather than the *a priori* conditions *for* shared activity. See Jo Vergunst and Anna Vermehen, "The Art of Slow Sociality: Movement, Aesthetics, and Shared Understanding" pp. in *Sociality: New Directions*, eds. Nicholas J. Long and Henrietta L. Moore (New York, Berghahn Books, 2013), 191-208.

<sup>425</sup> I use the term "body" here as employed by musicologist Tracey McMullen, who argues that pieces of music and the bands who play them can form coherent "bodies" that negotiate and at times flatten

difference, the lived experience of battles may have offered a social space where perceptions of difference actually collapsed.

Such a utopian reading works with the Savoy's rhetoric and its contemporary nostalgic positioning as a colorblind utopia. However, the Savoy's patrons were aware of the racial rhetoric surrounding the battle and were invested in Webb's role as a representative of their space. Savoy audiences' reputation as the world's best lindy hoppers also functioned to position the Savoy's crowds as the most authentic and discerning jazz listeners. Being able to activate that crowd affirmed a dance band's claim that its music was in fact hot and fidelitous to the aesthetic ethos of the swing "craze." While white bands could be expected to compete and do well at the Savoy, they certainly were not expected to win. In fact, the white press after the Goodman battle advanced the narrative that Goodman could not have possibly defeated Webb in this format as battling at the Savoy was a core aspect of Webb's professional practice. Webb succeeded by engaging his audience in this format, yet his skill at doing so was turned against him in critical accounts. This disparity itself reveals how the signifying capacity of spatial practice, and the discourses of power battle spaces articulated, contributed to the cathartic engagement of intercorporeal experience while an aesthetic system rooted in autonomous transcendence and controlled by white dominated publications minimized the significance of this dynamic; critical discourse analysis thus exposes the discursive erasure of Webb's popular audience and its experiences.

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internal difference to project a coherent, unified image. As this chapter focuses on bands' identities as coherent symbols, the intercorporeal dynamics I describe are important insofar as they frey the edges of these coherent, uniform presentations of self. Tracey McMullen, "Bands, Orchestras, and the Ideal *I*: The Musical Stage as Constitutive of the *I* Function," (PhD diss., University of California San Diego, 2007), 9-10.

Critics further emphasized Webb's home crowd advantage to diminish the battle's significance. They argued that the Savoy's audience would naturally be biased towards their home bandleader and that Goodman received nothing approaching a "fair shot" in this context. As Bach explained it,

If any choice between the two bands had to be made, my spies assure me that it would most likely be Chick that took the honors for the evening. Nor should his news be too startling when one considers that Chick, knowing every trick of the trade at The Savoy, makes a habit of cutting topnotch bands that dare venture onto his home grounds.<sup>426</sup>

While this perspective adopts a tone of apologism for Goodman's defeat, it also highlights that Webb did have significant experience in this format and a connection to this audience. So, absent the dismissive judgment implied in Bach's appraisal, he does offer a window to explore spatial practices within the ballroom during a battle.

Mastering the dynamics of this particular format and engaging the Savoy's dancing audience were competencies Webb developed over time and deployed effectively within this context. Given his ten years of frequent battling experience, Webb's intimate familiarity with the battle format likely contributed to his "victory," but his success is none the poorer or less significant for it. This interpretation of Bach's observations affirms Chapter 2's conclusion that adaption to the specificities of space, context, and audience were fundamental elements of Webb's band's professional practice.

In the 1930s, battling became a core component of Webb's professional life as his relationship with the Savoy Ballroom deepened. In late 1930, he participated in the Savoy's "Million Dollar Affair in Musical Talent," a battle alongside Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Cecil Scott, Lockwood Lewis, and Cab Calloway's Missourians.

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<sup>426</sup> Bob Bach, "Swing Bands Take Place of Sleepy Orchestras," *Downbeat*, May 1937, 27.

Echoing the hyperbole that commonly accompanied battles, the event was advertised as “mark[ing] the first time in history that six orchestras of the scope and reputation of the above named group have ever met and the carnival is expected to draw one of the greatest crowds New York has ever seen.”<sup>427</sup> More battles would follow throughout the early and mid 1930s against Ike Dixon, Luis Russell, Willie Bryant, Claude Hopkins, Teddy Hill, Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington and others. These battles regularly claimed audiences in the range of 3,000-4,000, approaching or exceeding the Savoy’s capacity, and they frequently employed hyperbolic rhetoric to indicate their novelty and spectacle. In fact, Webb’s first major touring engagement with Moe Gale’s management agency revolved around battling. In 1931, Gale founded his agency as Savoy Enterprises, Inc., “a new amusement service specializing in booking and promoting colored orchestras and entertainers.”<sup>428</sup> The launching event for Gale’s new venture was a touring battle of music featuring Webb, Bennie Moten, Blanche Calloway, Zack Whyte, and Roy Johnson’s Happy Pals.<sup>429</sup> From its start, Webb became entrenched in the Savoy’s practice of band battles, and this emerged to become a defining element of his musical identity.

According to Oakley, Webb succeeded in his battle with Goodman because he was better at activating this specific crowd of dancers, “Chick had the edge on Benny in the fact that he provided the dancers with ‘those right tempos’ and due to previous experience in battling bands, he knew just how to call his sets and what to feed those

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<sup>427</sup> “Six Great Orchestras in Big Battle of Music,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 10, 1930, A6.

<sup>428</sup> “New Booking Co. Organized,” *Plaindealer* [Topeka], 33, no.45, November 13, 1931, 3.

<sup>429</sup> “Chick Has ‘Hot’ Band,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 3, 1931, 19.

people.”<sup>430</sup> Familiar with both the crowd and well practiced in the format, Webb knew how to paint the musical drama of a battle to create the kind of intercorporeal catharsis the *Amsterdam News* observed during his battle with Oliver ten years earlier. Again, it is likely his tempos were faster than Goodman’s, invoking what Miller labeled his “Kicking-the-ass” beat. This assertion is bolstered by Teddy McCrae, a member of the Webb band who recalled consciously deceiving members of Goodman’s band into believing that Webb’s live tempos were slower.

Benny came up to the Savoy a few times and he listened to what we were doing, and every time we would change our tempos, just play them ordinary. But the night of the battle, we put everything back in the way it was supposed to be.<sup>431</sup>

In his documentary, Burns dramatizes this dynamic through his choice of recordings, as Goodman’s “Don’t Be That Way” at 160bpm is significantly slower than Webb’s at 215bpm. The tempos also held racial signification, highlighting the Savoy’s audience’s exceptional ability as dancers and their taste for Webb’s faster tempos.

While little survives of the actual musical content of the battle, two independent accounts confirm at least two moments during the five hour contest where one band picked up the same tune their rival had just performed. Goodman’s band played “Big John’s Special” after Webb’s version and Webb, in what critics labeled a key highlight of the evening, responded to “Jam Session,” one of Goodman’s “flag-waivers,” with his own rendition.<sup>432</sup> According to Oakley, this moment was the evening’s climax as Webb took

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<sup>430</sup> Helen Oakley, “Call Out Riot Squad to Handle Mob at Goodman – Webb Battle,” *Downbeat*, May 1937, 1.

<sup>431</sup> Teddy McCrae in Kaufman.

<sup>432</sup> Oakley, “Call Out the Riot Squad,” 3.

the number and “blew the roof off the house with it.”<sup>433</sup> Playing another band’s tunes was a common feature of band battles that likely would have been heightened during Webb and Goodman’s contest, because the two bands’ books featured many similar or identical arrangements. This was the case because Edgar Sampson, Webb’s chief arranger throughout the early 1930s, had joined Goodman’s band in 1936 and provided him with either the same arrangements he wrote for Webb’s band or with lightly modified versions. Thus, Webb was able to respond to Goodman’s playing by picking up precisely the same tune but at a tempo more likely to appeal to the Savoy’s audience.

Accelerated speeds activated a somewhat contentious discourse that articulated a racial politics of tempo. John Hammond, in fact, objected to Webb’s ostensible victory, complaining that the band was incapable of playing at a consistent speed.<sup>434</sup> However, as I discussed in Chapter 3, Webb’s accelerating tempi were forged through an ongoing, dialogic relationship with the Savoy Ballroom’s audiences. In addition to the particular pleasure in dancing fast and exerting oneself during the heightened atmosphere of a battle, faster tempi allowed experienced lindy hop dancers to demonstrate their own exceptional skill. Their ability to dance and dance well at tempos that mystified other crowds enacted a rhetoric of corporeal virtuosity and cultural ownership that validated black audiences’ superior ability to interact with Webb’s brand of swing music. Such strategies of sonic and physical virtuosity could also be tools to resist appropriation. As Norma Miller explains,

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<sup>433</sup> Ibid.

<sup>434</sup> Miller, interview with author.



Always the issue between white bands and black bands, black bands played faster. We had the men that could play, now Benny Goodman had a very good, organized white band, they were the best of the lot. But, Chick Webb had all black musicians, what else can you do but run them out by changing the tempo? You're white, I'm black, how could I out do you, 'cause remember we're playing the same damn thing, how else can I get better of you, because you know if you keep it the same, the whitey's gonna take it away from you.<sup>435</sup>

Here, Miller suggests that even within a space of ostensibly utopian, intercorporeal catharsis, there existed means to enact a racially charged discourse that affirmed black virtuosity. The racial politics of tempo as deployed at the Savoy during this battle suggest that community catharsis and the spatial enactment of broader power struggles need not be mutually exclusive. Rather, Webb affirmed his connection to the Savoy's audiences by playing a style that communicated his deep knowledge of their specific preferences and exceptional abilities.

What the battle seems to suggest, in Frankie Manning's words, is that "Chick Webb outswung Benny Goodman *that night*."<sup>436</sup> Manning's is a fundamentally immanent claim: that Webb's band was superior for this audience in this place and at this time. Critiquing Gunther Schuller's use of the battle to disparage Goodman's band, Goodman scholar Edward Pessen argues that Schuller over-reached and claims it is inappropriate "for a scholar who purports to weigh the comparative musical performance of two orchestras to treat their performances as though they are a gunfighter's shootout or a one-on-one match in playground basketball."<sup>437</sup> However, Pessen's criticism, and those of critics in the 1930s, seem to dismiss Webb's victory

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<sup>435</sup> Miller, interview with author.

<sup>436</sup> Manning, interviewed in Burns.

<sup>437</sup> Edward Pessen, "A Less than Definitive, Nonhistorical Account of the Swing Era," *Reviews in American History* 17, no.4 (December, 1989): 604.

merely because he did what he was good at—reading the particularities of the performance context and connecting well with a dancing audience in Harlem.

Emphasizing an immanent perspective helps explain why the Savoy's audience would have been partial to Webb and his playing without invalidating that audience for their lack of impartiality. By resisting a discourse of transcendence that would seek to render musical sound as autonomous from the spatial, temporal, and interpersonal dynamics of its creation, criticisms of the battle's volume level or crowd behavior fail to hold water as dismissals of the battle's result. Rather, emphasizing the event's imminence offers us insight into why this audience would have responded so well to Webb's playing and emphasizes playing to the dynamics of the format and the audience as a professional skill cultivated through years of experience. However, the racial politics of tempo and dance virtuosity also suggest that intercorporeal experience within a dance event does not transcend and remove itself from discourses of power and identity. Rather, those discourses become active layers of experience and signification that contribute to, and are impacted by, the dynamics of such "spectacular" events as battles.

### **Racial Discourse and the Battle's Legacy**

After the battle, white critics tended to focus less on Webb's victory than explaining and justifying Goodman's loss. As we have seen, explanations ranged from technical difficulties to strong police presence to a hostile and biased crowd. Whatever the case, these critics commonly emphasized this night's singularity and used its exceptional characteristics as a means to dismiss its validity as anything more than a

single instance. Their discourse emphasizes the impossible, unwinnable situation in which Goodman found himself and thus his grace and courage at even making the attempt.

Surprisingly, there is relatively little coverage of the event in the black press, which may be due to the reasonably regular occurrence of such battles. However, the writings of Porter Roberts, a critic and columnist for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, suggest that Webb's status as victor did have resonances within broader debates about race and musical opportunity. Adopting the same logic that validated black excellence through totemic sports figures like Louis and Owens, Roberts used Webb's victory to contest black bands' marginal positions within the various yearly ranking polls in jazz periodicals. Roberts repeatedly cited the Goodman Webb battle throughout 1937 and 1938 to validate his claims of racism in the national reception of swing bands. Highlighting the incongruity between the battle's result and the two musicians' performance opportunities, Roberts suggested that NBC radio feature Chick Webb immediately before CBS' Goodman broadcasts to actively challenge CBS' continued insistence on billing Goodman as "the King of Swing", effectively seeking to reproduce the Savoy Battle on the airwaves for a majority white audience nationwide.<sup>438</sup> The battle bolstered his indignance at the results of *Downbeat's* 1937 list of top bands.

Now, I feel sure that the famous colored musicians who have become the 'goats' of 'Down Beat's' contest, do not mind forgiving the prejudice that has been shown by most of the white voters for [unintelligible word in surviving document] is their privilege! Now to some, the 'RATINGS' and another hearty laugh, won't you join me? Quick look at this: In the swing band section. Benny Goodman, Bob Crosby, Tommy Dorsey, and Casa Loma (white) bands are voted ABOVE Jimmy Lunceford, Chick Webb, Duke Ellington, and Count Basie!! Which

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<sup>438</sup> Porter Roberts, "Praise and Criticism," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 28, 1937, 20.

ain't true. Chick Webb out-played' Benny Goodman in Harlem a few months ago. And I don't believe you could pay the other three to play a battle of music with Jimmie, Duke, and Count. Haw! (How much do you want to bet?)<sup>439</sup>

For Roberts, the idea that a battle victory actually validated musical superiority became a tool to name and contest the systematic racism through which black bands were both under-rated and denied better opportunities. In his writings, he asked other black critics not to show gratitude for the mere mention of black bands, and argued that insisting on anything less than equal consideration was an affront to black pride.

"THIS NOTE: Dear colored writers: I am still trying to dope out just why so many of you rush to your typewriters and write lovely words of praise and ACCEPTANCE when colored musicians are mentioned in contests such as the one mentioned above, even when you KNOW they have been under-rated! Naw, pride IS NOT something you eat, it is that something that is supposed to make guys like you stand up on TWO legs instead of FOUR!!"<sup>440</sup>

In Roberts' work, we see an important yet marginalized perspective within jazz discourse, one that celebrates neither white critics nor white bands for their progressivism and benevolence towards African American musicians. Rather, Roberts offers a more incisive and insistent critique of the obvious racial inequality within jazz critical discourse, and victories such as Webb's gave him the firm basis from which to advance his argument. His work situates battles within the same representational space top black athletes like Joe Louis and Jesse Owens then occupied as champions whose repeated victories and clear dominance argued a potent argument against essentializing discourses of white supremacy.<sup>441</sup>

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<sup>439</sup> Porter Roberts, "Praise and Criticism," *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 18, 1937, 21.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid.

<sup>441</sup> Donald Spivey, "The Black Athlete in Big Time Intercollegiate Sports," *Phylon* 44, no.2 (Second Quarter, 1983): 116.

Recognizing the potency of battles' racial signification, Roberts called on black bands to continue fighting and winning such contests as a means of combating racial inequality. Roberts criticized the utility of black bands engaging in battles that did not contest racism, arguing of Duke Ellington's battle with Jimmie Lunceford that he, "Just can't see any real advantage in it, can you? I really think they could bring more credit to the colored band world if they would concern themselves with battles of music with some of the white ham bands that are being rated over them!"<sup>442</sup> Through this criticism, Roberts articulated an explicit critique of racism within the world of popular music that challenged both structural racism and appropriation within the music industry.

Reading Roberts' work through the type of critical discourse analysis with which I critiqued the emerging discourse of white jazz criticism in Chapter 4 reveals an attempt to resist to the confluence of white consumer desire, benevolent patronage, and fetishized aestheticization of blackness out of which jazz's aesthetic system was forming. It also positions Roberts' perspective within a broader, and at times conflicted, mission of advocacy within the black press more broadly. The *Pittsburgh Courier*, during the 1930s enjoyed a circulation of 185,000 and was dedicated to the concept of an activist paper dedicated to the mission of racial uplift by reporting broadly on issues of consequence to African Americans and while offering criticism, maintaining an optimistic emphasis on race progress.<sup>443</sup> Furthermore, Roberts' columns articulated a paper-wide "self respect" campaign the *Pittsburgh Courier* championed throughout the 1930s that called upon African Americans to stand up against unflattering media

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<sup>442</sup> Porter Roberts, "Praise and Criticism," *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 10, 1938, 21.

<sup>443</sup> Armistead S. Pride and Clint C. Wilson, *A History of the Black Press* (Washington, DC, Howard University Press, 1997), 139.

representation and systems that impeded black economic self-determination; along with its enthusiastic coverage of Joe Louis, this campaign was instrumental to the paper's emergence in the mid-1930s as the nation's top weekly black newspaper.<sup>444</sup> Roberts' column bolstered this strategy of optimism and accountability. He frequently lavished on black musicians, athletes, and popular dancers, yet he also criticized black artists, audiences, and club promoters for either creating or complying with professional dynamics he saw as detrimental to black progress. Echoing the paper's broader call for mutually supportive black institutions, Roberts repeatedly called for new organizations of black bandleaders and black club owners to support each other and end cycles of systematic exploitation.<sup>445</sup>

A deeper analysis of Roberts' criticism provides a fascinating window into the seldom-discussed world of jazz criticism within black newspapers, and situating this project within the broader activist mission of a paper like the *Pittsburgh Courier* highlights the discursive forces within black communities that may have influenced artists' aesthetic and professional choices as well as audience preferences. It also moves towards displaying the specificity of a single author's perspective when writing for a specific paper, which resists his absorption into "the black press" as a monolithic construct. What this analysis does not do, however, is offer the same type of critical entry point into the core of the aesthetic system that drove and continues to drive the most institutionally potent forms of jazz discourse. While over-emphasizing the white jazz press contributes to the continued erasure of voices like Roberts', it is also

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<sup>444</sup> Andrew Buni, *Robert L. Vann of the Pittsburgh Courier: Politics and Black Journalism* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974), 227-230.

<sup>445</sup> Porter Roberts, "Praise and Criticism" *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 6, 1937, 10.

problematic to imply equivalent power dynamics in the relationship between discourse and systems of power when unpacking the work of black critics whose voices have not been amplified through the engines of white supremacy. That said, re-invigorating Roberts' perspective forces some uncomfortable but necessary questions about the Webb-Goodman battle and its legacy. Roberts' insistence on not subordinating black artists' contributions to narratives that feature white musicians remains crucially relevant as an intervention into the Webb-Goodman battle's historical legacy and the raced dynamics of jazz history more broadly.

For Goodman, the Webb battle became another part of his reputation as a racial progressive. By entering into a context where he could not have been expected to win, Goodman was received as courageous and authentic for even attempting to tangle with Webb at the Savoy. I read Goodman's "defeat" and its reception as a problematic sort of racial penance that acts as a salve on other obvious results of Goodman and his bandmates' white privilege. Despite Webb's victory in the battle, virtually no one in print has criticized the fact that Goodman's band rather than Webb's or another black band was the one to play Carnegie Hall and to enjoy unparalleled national, commercial success. By losing to Webb, Goodman ceded the title of "King of Swing in Harlem" in a way that bolstered, or at least rendered less problematic, his sovereignty over all other territory.

By emphasizing the singularity of Webb's victory and the specificity of local circumstances that enabled it, critics and scholars ghettoize Webb and his music by emphasizing its boundedness within Harlem. Thus, even if there was a clear victor in the battle, such a victory only proved supremacy in Harlem, which carried symbolic

capital but could still be dismissed as something that would fail to translate to the broader audiences that producers and impresarios like Hammond sought out for bands such as Goodman's. As discussed in Chapter 4, deploying essentialized black masculinity as a policing strategy kept these bands and their sounds ghettoized. Although victors in local battles, figures like Webb were safe to lose to because they posed no tangible commercial threat; the distinction between black and white spheres of commercial musical opportunities was such that black musicians posed no serious threat to white access to lucrative commercial opportunities nor to the places of privilege at the top of ranking lists in major publications. When musicians like Webb did begin penetrating these spheres with commercial hits like "A-Tisket, A-Tasket", they were savaged by critics for betraying their role as the natural, primitive, perpetually under-paid soul of jazz, a soul whose spheres of musical practice could be curated and policed. As a non-threatening source of musical and racial authenticity, we might also read Webb as Goodman's "magical negro," a benevolent and naturally potent savant who ritually transferred to Goodman intangible affect of black style, and permission to use it, that enabled his band to find the perfect balance of white precision and black rhythmic vitality for which they have come to be remembered.

The "magical negro" archetype applies here because both contemporaneous and subsequent critical discourse situates Webb as a character in a narrative that centers Goodman and his band's experience and growth. In films, "magical negro" characters help white protagonists resolve their dilemmas by helping them access a particular folk



type of folk wisdom or spiritual practice.<sup>446</sup> In Chapter 4, I demonstrated that white critics expected black musicians to adopt a particular form of sonic performance such that their black masculine sound would help white progressive leftists access an authentically anti-capitalist masculinity. In both cases, the implied or stated focus is the moral or musical improvement of a white protagonist. By contrast, the battle discourse advanced by Roberts that articulates the contest to the discourses surrounding Louis and Owens, centers black racial and political struggle and offers strategies to contest systems of oppression. Thus, it is insufficient to dismiss the idea that a battle would have a clear winner or that who won mattered, because the accepted results of a battle made tangible contributions to struggles of power and resistance. While black jazz criticism receives little attention, indeed almost none in this dissertation with the exception of Porter Roberts, featuring the perspective of black voices in print offers alternatives to narratives, imbued with unexamined privilege, that laid the foundation for the aesthetic system that still guides jazz communities and jazz discourse.

### **Towards an Anti-Exceptionalist Jazz Studies**

Ken Burns' film, and indeed many "jazz tradition" master narratives perpetuate the rhetoric of musical transcendence. As essentially a "great man" history, Burns builds a canon on what Catherine Gunther Kodat describes as a "juridical-ecclesiastical system of hierarchy and distinction in which certain works, upon meeting certain criteria, are

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<sup>446</sup> Cerise L. Glenn and Landra J. Cunningham, "The Power of Black Magic: The Magical Negro and White Salvation in Film," *The Journal of Black Studies* 40, no.2 (November, 2009): 138.

acknowledged as masterpieces.”<sup>447</sup> On its surface, the Webb-Goodman battle narrative is one of the film’s more immanent moments as it foregrounds a specific moment in time and emphasizes its context and audience. Here, Webb’s immanent success is celebrated as he “routes” or “vanquishes” Goodman in this specific moment in front of these specific fans. Yet, the same principles of totemic signification that help us see ballrooms as representational spaces also reveal this moment’s problematic position vis-à-vis Burns’ broader transcendent narrative. Burns’ focus on the swing era is thus not about canonizing an individual musician, but about rendering the American context as itself fundamentally transcendent. The film’s treatment of the 1930s, spanning three volumes of the ten volume series, reveals “the American spirit” as the film’s truest and most heroic protagonist.

Many jazz critics have beat up on Burns’ film, however its grand narratives reveal deeper problems with “the jazz tradition” and its ubiquitous deployment as an oppositional canon to Western classical music. As “America’s classical music,” jazz emphasizes its difference by highlighting its context: it is African American music and the product of cultural struggle. However, rather than an actual immanent critique, jazz’s foregrounding of American context positions America as itself a transcendent gift to the world whose government structures, ideology, and culture are universal and timeless and thus can and should traverse borders and boundaries. As such, we see that jazz’s canonization of American culture and history serves the political project of American Exceptionalism. Jazz’s role in this broader rhetorical project is multi-fold: it

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<sup>447</sup> Catherine Gunther Kodat, “Conversing with Ourselves: Canon, Freedom, Jazz,” *American Quarterly* 55, no.1 (March 2003): 13-14.

foregrounds popular democracy and justifies and validates America's "race problem" as a necessary part of our national struggle to achieve a racially transcendent "melting-pot", an American gumbo of post-racial pluralism where difference is refined into a politically neutral spice masking the taste of blood and bitterness from the fruit of the poplar tree.

In this concluding analysis of the Webb-Goodman battle, I hope that any attempt to draw clear boundaries between my three methods of inquiry—Spatial Practice Theory, Carnal Musicology, and Critical Discourse Analysis—was ultimately unsuccessful. These methods do their best work when they inform each other, as their limitations become apparent when deployed discreetly. My analysis of Webb's live performances in Harlem demonstrated the significance of venues and the dialogic relationship with audiences through which the band forged its sounds as part of the spatial fabric of everyday life in Harlem. However, such an analysis, necessarily retrospective and foregrounding the signifying capacity of physical space, risks overdetermining these relationships. While Webb's music was clearly impacted by the broader geographic and socioeconomic dynamics in Harlem, there is always a danger in overreaching and proposing some kind of cleanly mirrored sonic-spatial *Zeitgeist* where any social development has a corresponding musical one and where all particularities of sound can be productively accounted for through social history. Chapter 3's dance-based "under the skin" analysis offers a counterbalance by exploring subjectivity and engagement at the individual level and proposing the catharsis of intercorporeal listening as a motivation for musical engagement not entirely subservient to "broader" concerns of power and identity. Yet, whose subjectivity am I exploring? In routing this

analysis through my own dance experience, the specificity of Harlem audiences' experiences eighty years ago can be either erased entirely or—more problematically—bent to serve my own embodied interpretation. These two approaches can, however, keep each others' dangerous excesses in check by fostering productive dialogue between imagined bodies and deep social history while creating space for communities in historical studies to do more with music and dance than simply re-render discourses of identity politics visually, sonically, and kinesthetically. Critical discourse analysis, as applied to privileged voices, is crucial to tracking the flows through which specific community experiences are processed, repurposed, and often erased in the construction and application of aesthetic systems. However, this approach's gravity towards print media and powerful voices can also reinforce the privileged attention such voices receive even as it critiques this dynamic. Ideally, an approach that integrates these three methodological perspectives foregrounds corporeal experience as a type of spatial practice that both informs and is informed by larger systems of discursive struggles over power and representation.<sup>448</sup>

What all three perspectives ultimately drive towards is a check on the project of positioning jazz as a fundamentally transcendent music and great jazz artists as those whose music either rises above or conquers the messy spaces and circumstances of its creation. The aesthetic system forged in the 1930s that continues to drive such transcendent narratives leaves little room to properly consider a figure like Webb as anything other than supporting character, because it gives us few tools to articulate the

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<sup>448</sup> While a balanced integration would be ideal, a carnal musicology can also fall victim to a kind of overdetermined *Zeitgeist* when deployed to validate or line up cleanly with a broader contextual and/or discursive argument.

significance of the local and the specific—those spaces where Webb’s most interesting and relevant contributions become apparent. Within a critical language where great music evolves beyond the locally and temporally articulated circumstances of its creation and where it severs itself from community practice to become an unchanging object forged by the mind of a solitary genius, Webb’s dialogic relationship with Harlem audiences can be only an originary starting point lending Goodman, or simply “America,” a necessary trace of black masculine sonic authenticity. As such, there has been little space for the immanent perspective necessary to articulate in scholarly literature, textbooks, course lectures, or popular jazz history what Webb “can really do” for our understanding of jazz and the collaborative nature of musical life.

While ultimately a purely immanent perspective is also insufficient, a stronger focus on strategies of immanent inquiry is a necessary corrective to a discourse that allows jazz to serve as an unproblematic salve to America’s traumas of oppression and that validates the decontextualized extraction of autonomous sound from communities of co-creative participants. Thus, the tools I have advanced through this study of Chick Webb could also be used not only to spark an expanded consideration of other jazz musicians marginalized within discourses of transcendence and musical autonomy, but also to more richly explore the immediate circumstances and community connections through which accepted members of the jazz canon forged the sound worlds we continue to celebrate.

Webb may or may not be one of the great jazz musicians of all time, but his music was a significant part of Harlem’s cultural life in the 1930s. In his career and his practice as a musician, I see strong parallels for the type of jazz studies discourse I hope

the field continues moving towards. Studying Webb helps me envision a rhetorically nimble jazz studies ever sensitive to its role in various communities and markets. Just as Webb maneuvered through diverse performing contexts, jazz studies can ideally play as well and as substantively in diverse rhetorical situations. Ideally, rigorous critical and historical work can manifest as journal articles, popular criticism, liner notes, documentary films, and public presentations, mastering the performative specificities genres without disingenuously pandering or sacrificing its author's voice. Such a jazz studies could activate the minds and bodies of elite enthusiastic specialists and casual fans alike, creating space within our discursive dance for a range of participants as our interactive dynamics hinge on listening deeply to and moving with each other. Finally, this jazz studies would neither disdain commercial success and mass appeal nor would it accept a comfortable role in the fantasies and political projects of institutionalized systems of power and privilege even as doing so may result in drastic professional consequences. Rather than achieve the transcendent immortality of an Ellington or an Armstrong, Chick Webb withstood a different, yet no less important, "test of time": doing the most you can with what you have in service to the particularities of time and place precisely where you are at and moving those around you to respond in kind.

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## **Note on Transcriptions**

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