

Alice Gerstel, “Jazz Band” (1922)

Abstract

War and revolution and modernization in general left many Germans with a sense of disorientation and alienation. Many critics on the Right spoke of a “crisis of civilization,” as in the very popular book by Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*. But the cultural phenomena of the postwar period, and especially music and film, also elicited criticism from the Left. In this article from the socialist magazine *Die Aktion*, the writer Alice Gerstel (1894-1943) interprets the popularity of jazz and the dance halls where it was played as an expression of the supposedly vacuous, apolitical entertainment culture of the “dying era of the bourgeoisie.”

Source

Jazz Band

Every era has its expression. It could be many things: individual persons and books, warehouses, monasteries, or airplanes. But the deepest expression of any era is always its music.

What Palestrina was for the violently convulsed and yet radiant Catholicism of the fifteenth century, Bach for the heroic yet objective period of Luther, Wagner for a tinsel, theatrical, true-to-itself and profoundly mendacious epoch—is for the dying era of the bourgeoisie the jazz band. It unifies within itself everything that remains from the great collapse of the world and humanity, dances with it over the abyss, marking tangents (from tango with a capital T) on the charred edges with the easy caution and simple decadence of its pointed shoes. It has that desperate, burned-out, light, unscrupulous, gasping, yet liberating step. It has that exoticism of color that reigns—not by accident—over our desire. It has that rat-a-tat of the cannons they have been firing at the “enemy” for five long years and which have just recently been deployed in the conquest of Dachau near Munich. It has the trumpets that called the coalminers in Ostrau to arms, the drums that call exploited humanity to its last desperate revolt; and it has the festive sound reminiscent of the champagne they pour, at last permissible once more in noblest reconciliation with the international band of racketeers, down throats parched from so many lyrical cries.

A Negro sits behind the mystical instrument. It is a drum with trumpets, tambourines, bells, blocks, and straps attached like small but essential ornaments on the facade of a bank building. The Negro, half slave-driver, half juggler, holds two sticks in his hands. He beats them on the blocks. Sometimes it sounds like he is pounding nails into a coffin, then again as if his knife slipped while he was slicing salami. His thick lips press on the mouth of the trumpet; in his eyes he holds a sly and melancholy smile, meanwhile there is a drum roll, a blow on the tambourine, a stroke on the bell. Next to him a pale adventurer strums chords on a balalaika—the sound as monotonous as a debate in Parliament—and the violinist, the third in the devilish trio, occupies no fixed place but skips, fiddle under his chin, among the skipping couples, and plays sweet cantilenas for the ladies and rakish trills under their skirts. The dancing couples are under the spell of these rhythms, these colors and sounds, to which an English or German text can be nothing but a makeshift substitute for some sort of Dadaist, exotic howl and stammer. They slip in the wildest gyrations over the polished floor with a precision that suggests ultimately nothing other than a well-oiled automaton. The men stare fixedly, press their lips decisively together. Nothing can dissuade them from the secret of which they are certain: how dreadful is the wretchedness of this time, how there remains nothing for them to do but dance and the market runs itself and [Karel] Čapek’s robots make the sewing needles and roll their cigarettes into ready-mades. But

the women are still as unaware as little animals. Half-charred, they still refuse to believe in fire. With half-open mouths and half-closed eyes they enjoy the drunken debauchery of this raving music, let the nails of the beat be driven into their masochistically lustful flesh, let them drift over the meadows of their dreams through glass flowers smelling lightly of Chypre and Fleur d'Orsay.

The halls are washed in an antique cubism, all the remnants of lost cultures celebrate inside them a last rendezvous, and it would not surprise us suddenly to see the daughter of Amenophis of Egypt dancing among the couples in the arms of Oscar Wilde. For here, here in the mood and in the jazz music what remains of the creative force of this sterile time unfolds: the genius of the eclectic, the cocktail mix of souls, the recklessness, the random toss and melding of complexes, the recklessness of puppets on a string, the passion of people condemned to death who want to eat one more blue and singing herring.

But sometimes out of the drumbeat whirlpool and the trumpet blasts comes the mighty rhythm of the *Internationale*: "Brothers, listen for the signal. ..." And already massed in closed ranks behind the private boxes are the musical-instrument makers, the parquet polishers, the stokers, the electricians, and ditch diggers, the hundreds upon thousands of a menacing, unending, ultimate, mighty era!

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