

Introduction

Bismarck and Agatha Biederbecke worried about their son and his interest in jazz music. Leon, known as “Bix” was a young, middle-class, white male from an upper-middle-class Iowa family, who had developed a habit of sneaking onboard the riverboats that traveled up the nearby Mississippi River. Aboard the SS *Capitol*, Bix listened to and occasionally joined performances by black jazz bands that had become increasingly common on riverboats.¹ Ever since his older brother bought the family’s first Victor Talking Machine Company phonograph and a handful of records, jazz had been a sort of obsession for the young Davenport, Iowa, native: Bix had taught himself to play jazz trumpet by listening and imitating sounds he heard on the SS *Capitol* and on the Victrola. Though Bix was developing into a formidable musician, he also had a darker side. In 1921, Bix was arrested for committing a “lewd and lascivious act” with a five-year-old sight-impaired girl. Authorities ultimately dropped the charges after the girl’s parents blocked her from testifying in court. Growing increasingly uncomfortable with his sneaking onto riverboats, and in order to avoid town gossip following his arrest, Bismarck and Agatha Biederbecke decided a major change was necessary. In September 1921, they shipped off seventeen-year-old Bix to Lake Forest Academy, a prestigious Chicago boarding school. His parents hoped the school would instill a sense of discipline in Bix, improve his academic skills, change his general behavior, and remedy his interest in jazz.²

The remedy Bismarck and Agatha Biederbecke chose—school—was one other parents have chosen when hoping to change their children’s behaviors. Unfortunately for them, Chicago was one of the worst places they could have sent the young jazz musician. The Lake Forest classrooms were simply no match for downtown Chicago and its thriving jazz scene.

To improve his listening and playing, Bix regularly traveled to the South Side and to various dance halls in the Loop, often returning well past curfew. In one letter home, he wrote to his brother, “I’d go to hell to hear a good band.”³ Within a year, Bix was expelled for his poor class attendance, low grades, and general behavior problems. Bix frustrated educators by forming a campus band and performing “inappropriate” jazz music for at least one school dance. In essence, Bix introduced jazz to his new school, a connection I discuss in this book. The young trumpet player was also often caught drinking on campus, a major infraction during Prohibition. After missing curfew one too many times, the Lake Forest teachers voted to expel Bix in May 1922. One administrator wrote about Biederbecke, “We are . . . very sorry that he was in the school at all.”⁴ Freed from Lake Forest, and with his parents’ begrudging approval, nineteen-year-old Bix worked odd jobs during the day and soaked up Chicago jazz at night.

A likable person as well as an excellent musician, Bix quickly built a reputation as a formidable trumpet talent in Chicago and beyond. Bix recorded some of the country’s earliest and best-selling jazz records, some with his friend Hoagland “Hoagy” Carmichael. He toured relentlessly, traveling up and down the East Coast as a featured soloist for “King of Jazz” Paul Whiteman’s group, as well as other ensembles. Within five years of his expulsion from Lake Forest, Biederbecke’s popularity on college campuses rivaled that of any musician alive, a popularity perhaps due in part to Bix being the same age as his audiences. University administrators begrudgingly allowed Biederbecke and his bands to perform at various proms and college dances. Students could not get enough of Bix’s “dirty tone.” Unfortunately, his parents’ concerns about the iniquitous behaviors surrounding the world of jazz proved to be valid. In addition to his success, Bix increasingly gave in to one of the vices widely associated with jazz: alcoholism. Certainly, drinks were easily accessible for jazz musicians. His friend Louis Armstrong would later recall, “Poor Bix, he would never say ‘no’ [to a party] . . . It’s a drag!”⁵ In August 1931, Biederbecke died alone in his New York City apartment at the age of twenty-eight.⁶ In his death, Bix became the archetype of Jazz Age excesses, notably represented in the loosely fictionalized autobiographical novel and subsequent 1950 film *Young Man with a Horn*, starring Hollywood legends Kirk Douglas, Doris Day, and Lauren Bacall, as well as Bix’s friend Hoagy Carmichael.⁷

Bix’s short, famous, and ultimately, tragic life demonstrates the excitement and danger that swirled around jazz. Young people, by and large, embraced jazz as not only one of life’s pleasures, but, indeed, one of life’s

necessities. “A college existence without jazz,” one University of Illinois student quipped, “would be like a child’s Christmas without Santa Claus. It would be empty, boring, unendurable, exasperating. We couldn’t stand it.”⁸ For some adults, this type of sentiment proved troubling. Indeed, a critic no less influential than Secretary of the Interior Hubert Work, countered that the “jazz spirit of the present day” was responsible for an increasing number of students becoming “criminals” due to a combination of “meager mentality” and wanting “moral stamina.”⁹ No period in American history, aside from the Jazz Age, is known by a musical genre.¹⁰

By 1924, the editor of the music magazine the *Etude* decided that educators’ concerns about jazz had grown to a level that it warranted devoting a full issue of the magazine to the topic. James Francis Cooke assured his readers the magazine would handle the topic with nothing short of journalistic neutrality. In his editorial for the special issue, “Where *The Etude* Stands on Jazz,” Cooke less-than-neutrally characterized the genre as an “accursed annoyance to teachers for years.”¹¹ The front cover featured a circle of brass and wind instruments surrounding the caption, “The Jazz Problem: Opinions of Prominent Public Men and Musicians” (see fig. I.1).

The gradual decline of a Victorian worldview coupled with adults’ unwillingness to embrace the jazz-drenched modern world that young people championed provides the backdrop for this study.¹² At its height, Victorianism rested on various identifying characteristics: a belief in a general superiority of Anglo-Saxon identity; considerable social emphasis on the immediate family, with parents doling out lessons in self-control and restraint; and clearly defined gender roles, such that boys were applauded for being diligent and stern while girls were taught to be modest and aim for simplicity of dress.¹³ Certainly Victorianism had slowly been losing its “stranglehold on the national imagination,” since at least the turn of the century.¹⁴ Still, the Jazz Age systematically amplified the decline of previously cherished facets of Victorian identity—and critics amplified their responses. In *Cuttin’ Up: How Early Jazz Got America’s Ear*, Court Carney noted, “The shift from Victorianism to Modernism formed the context in which Americans reacted to jazz music. In general, Victorianism created a dichotomy separating controlled human instincts from natural impulses, and modernism strove to reunite these two forces.”¹⁵ Yet while historians have focused heavily on jazz’s cultural impact and early performance history, schools have been seen an afterthought in this culture war. This seems surprising, given how students in the 1920s were spending more

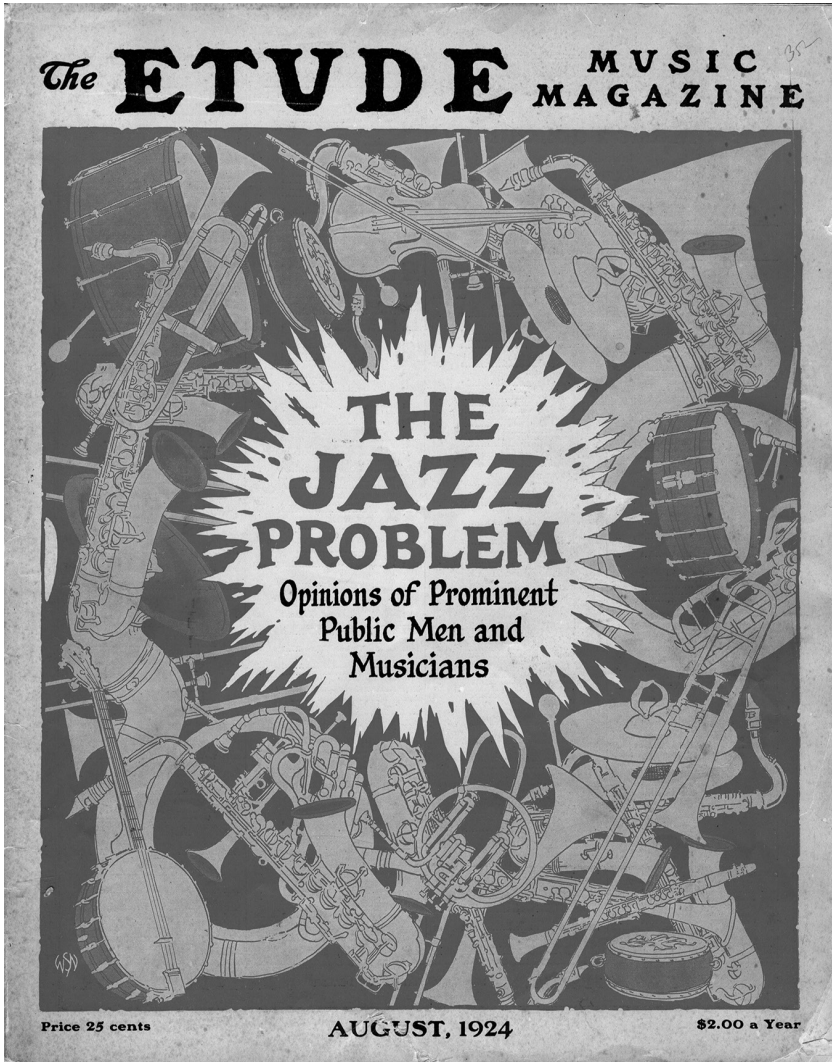


Figure I.1. "The Jazz Problem," Cover. *Etude*, August 1924.

time in schools than ever before. Across the 1920s, just under 83 percent of elementary and high school students were attending school daily. At the turn of the twentieth century, the percentage of daily attendance was just 68 percent.¹⁶ And students were not only attending schools more regularly, schooling was occupying a larger role in their lives.

In *The Jazz Problem: Education and the Battle for Morality during the Jazz Age*, I show how jazz was the vehicle for understanding the daily lives of students and educators, as both groups responded to the decline of Victorianism in the face of a new modern American culture. Schools were not secondary actors in the narrative about how jazz “got America’s ear.”¹⁷ *The Jazz Problem* frames high schools and colleges as the primary sites of dispute between a wounded, though still influential, Victorianism and the emerging modern world, one synonymous with jazz. Schools were places where conflicting messages about jazz became the norm—where adults preached and where young people practiced.¹⁸ Educators used a variety of curricular and extracurricular tools during school and outside school hours, in their efforts to dissuade their students from jazz. Such efforts were, at best, largely unsuccessful, and, more accurately, backfired. Young people saw their teachers’ efforts as evidence that jazz was an exciting generational boundary line to embrace. And while young people routinely snuck into dance halls to dance the Charleston, it was in schools where they shared phonodiscs, clandestinely taught each other the newest dance steps, and made plans for the weekend. In short, in schools young people first learned that jazz was *their* music. As a major site of character formation where students came of age, high schools and colleges were the places where jazz was discussed, devoured, and deprecated. However, this is not merely a story of rebellious privileged children and their conservative parents. Nor is it a story as simple as “white parents feared their children listening to *black* music.” Rather, the narrative I tell shows an interrelated set of conversations that transcended the racial boundaries enforced by a segregated school system. But one thing is certain, those conversations took place in, and focused on, high schools and colleges.

For critics and supporters alike, jazz represented something of a Rorschach test. Jazz’s fluidity gave both groups the space to see what they liked and what they feared. A sense of increasing blackness on the white body politic? Jazz certainly delivered. Outrage about increasingly sexually active young people? Jazz’s aphrodisiac qualities were well known, if not exaggerated. A sense of generational boundary that encouraged an increasingly evident youth culture? Here, young people cheered jazz, particularly young white people. Still, the “jazz problem” looked different in black high schools than it did on predominately white college campuses, where faculty and students alike largely agreed jazz should not supplant the spiritual, the primary source of musical pride. For all involved, students and educators, white and black, jazz’s power was in its indefiniteness,

that supporters and critics alike could see in it what they embraced or what they feared. “Jazz” meant more than music. Jazz was a *lifestyle*, one that operated as a useful metaphor for a whole host of concerns.¹⁹ When speaking of jazz, critics routinely referenced the associated bare arms and legs of female jazz dancers, and the omnipresent possibility of alcohol and the increase in sexual activity. As the logic went, if they could dissuade young people from indulging in jazz, perhaps their interests in the other associated vices would also fall away.

Technology, Schools, and the Culture Wars of the 1920s

Historians have pushed back against the popular yet reductive depiction of the “roaring twenties” in favor of a more dynamic vision of the decade as “the roots of America’s culture wars.”²⁰ The 1920s was not a decade of unbridled “voodoo orgy,” though that interpretation still pervades much of popular media.²¹ Instead, scholars have cast the decade as the setting when an increasingly diverse range of character groups—party-happy flappers, the KKK and other “guardians” of supremacist ideals, evangelical Christians, liberal public intellectuals, African American and other minority groups—all waged a struggle for the “soul of America.”²² As Lynn Dumenil pointed out, “The depiction of the roaring twenties obscures the complexities lying beneath the surface, especially the considerable social tensions that permeated the culture.”²³ I link this interpretation of the decade, one begun in the 1950s that eventually culminated in Dumenil’s *The Modern Temper*, to the more recent specialized works that engaged black and feminist interpretations.²⁴ Jazz was not simply an idea argued by white Americans about progress and morality. It drew out variety regional and national anxieties about race and gender under the guise of the decline of Victorianism. In jazz, adults similarly saw a tangible villain they could point as the primary cause for a multitude of social ills—a supposed increase in “petting” (a purposefully vague term referring to any sexual contact), frenetic dance steps virtually synonymous with alcoholism, and an increase in prostitution. *The Jazz Problem* recounts how adults acted out those anxieties as they struggled to tighten a seemingly loosening grip on American youth. It was one thing when grownups with faculties wise enough ultimately embraced jazz; it meant something quite different when young people did. The former were considered irreparable, the latter could be “saved” or “rehabilitated.”

Jazz in the 1920s was, without a doubt, black. Critics and enthusiasts overwhelmingly agreed the music had developed as the province of black musicians.²⁵ Though a universally agreed on creation story has eluded scholars, some general facts are clear. The music developed as black musicians in the south—particularly, though, not solely, in New Orleans—combined some semblance of African and European rhythm and harmony.²⁶ The Great Migration out of the south carried the music out of the south and across the country. Among these immigrant musicians, the pianist Jelly Roll Morton went to Chicago while the trombonist “Kid” Ory moved west to Los Angeles in 1919, three years later making what was likely the first instrumental black jazz recording at a studio on Santa Monica Boulevard. At least in terms of musical diaspora, such moves were not unprecedented. Since at least the early 1910s, black ensembles had toured across the Midwest and had sought employment on the thriving riverboat scene. Still, the Great Migration altered the musical dynamic by creating an increasingly permanent presence of jazz in regions outside the south. Large urban centers, destinations for such migration, became centers of jazz performance and dance.²⁷

Many white critics viewed this spread of jazz as cause for alarm. White critics used the emergent genre as evidence to justify their views of African Americans as both culturally and intellectually inferior. Terminology like “the Senegambian buzz-fuzz,” “oscillatum Ethiopius,” or even the tamer sounding “syncopated” were coded, racialized language to connect jazz with a stereotyped unrefined blackness.²⁸ In jazz, the idea of the sexually charged, unintelligent, and hypersexualized black man had a recognizable manifestation, an old idea with a new medium for re-presentation. Yet as Gerald Early has pointed out, such terminology was fundamentally reductionist in nature, meant to evoke the “form of black primitives.”²⁹ The detractors who employed such language sought to define African Americans *writ large* as singularly culturally and intellectually underdeveloped, using a rubric that placed whiteness as the epitome of such organizational schema. In response, many black educators, musicians, and intellectuals who actively fought to dispel such myths distanced themselves from the music. As the reasoning went, if jazz acted in the minds of critics as another indicator of cultural and intellectual inferiority, then not being associated with it could serve as a sort of indicator of intellectual equality. A 1922 advertisement in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) magazine *The Crisis* pushed back on this point that black musicians could only play, and therefore sell, jazz. He wrote,

“We believe the dealer is wrong. But unless we furnish him with what he has demand for, he will not handle our goods. . . . We have a special proposition for music teachers. Write for it.”³⁰

An increasingly sophisticated radio technology coupled with the increasing affordability of phonograph records in the 1920s helped account for jazz’s rapid cultural diffusion.³¹ The first commercial radio station, KDKA, in Pittsburgh, went on air in 1920. Eighteen months later, the number of commercial stations had risen to 220. By 1930, over 900 stations existed nationwide and over 40 percent of households owned radios.³² Throughout the 1920s, young people increasingly turned to radio to listen to jazz, often at the expense of the phonograph. In 1927, 987,000 phonographs were sold; five years later, the number had fallen to 40,000. In contrast, radio production increased. Less cumbersome and cheaper than the phonograph, the radio easily filtered jazz into the home, much to critics’ frustration. Station managers increasingly recognized that jazz’s popularity among young people helped sell on air advertising space. One Dallas priest lamented in 1921, “Have you noticed how the modern young person, instead of sitting quietly in a corner to read, keeps a phonograph grinding out the latest syncopated tunes, and then goes on talking as though the music were not playing?”³³ A high school student wrote in her diary that she was listening to “damn good jazz on the radio” until her parents complained; her mother turned off the radio, saying, “They call that music!”³⁴

Concerned Americans in the 1920s increasingly looked to schools to address a multitude of anxieties, at the same time that schools were taking on increasing enrollments of students. In 1900, just under 11 percent of fourteen- to seventeen-year-old students attended high school; by 1930 the number had risen to 51 percent.³⁵ Enrollment of black students remained much lower than for their white counterparts. African American students were 1.5 of high school enrollment in 1920, and just 3 percent a decade later, while representing roughly 10 percent of the total population.³⁶ Higher-education enrollment showed a marked improvement from the late nineteenth century. By the end of the 1920s, roughly 1,400 higher-education institutions served a national population of 122 million.³⁷ Over the course of the decade, the number of students attending college had nearly doubled, jumping from 600,000 to just over 1.1 million, with roughly 20 percent of college-age students attending some sort of secondary institution.³⁸ The decade witnessed an increase in the number of colleges serving black students, from thirty-three in 1915 to seventy in

1927 (years of federal surveys of black college enrollment). That increase in institutions also accounted for an increase in enrollment, from 2,600 to almost 14,000.³⁹

As such enrollment statistics suggest, schools were also taking on an increasingly prominent role in society. Daniel Clark has noted, a college education in the early twentieth century, particularly for white men, was increasingly seen in popular imagination as a necessary stepping stone for later success in life.⁴⁰ By the 1920s, college became major sites of tension for those who sought to maintain a Victorian ethos and those who challenged that worldview in favor of embracing a yet-to-be-defined modern lifestyle. Like Bix Biederbeck's parents sending him to a Chicago boarding school, concerned adults looked to schools as a solution to young people's increasing jazz interests. At both the high schools and colleges, white and black educators joined in this battle, though their reasons differed. White teachers often spoke of jazz in racialized aesthetic terms, an unwelcome musical bastard of European harmony and African rhythm. As one educator told his peers in 1928, "Jazz, with all its unwholesome, wanton influences, takes the place of the sincerity and sweetness of the classics."⁴¹

Given the increasingly prominent role schools were playing in the 1920s, those institutions became a logical ally in the fight to quell such cultural anxieties. The Jazz Age was a moment when educators—newly tasked with the health of the "whole child"—employed new tools to protect, legislate, and teach morality to students. High schools were not only increasing in enrollments, but services, capabilities, and expectations as well. Reformers took steps that broadened the roles those schools had in young people's lives, including an increasing set of responsibilities for the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being of the students. Educators also sought to instill a sense of racialized, often eugenic, Americanism, among an increasingly pluralistic student body.⁴² Others sought to make schools more physically accessible and less intimidating to students requiring additional assistance.⁴³ In higher education, enrollments swelled, *in loco parentis* was being challenged, and colleges tried to find out more about students in order to guide their moral development.⁴⁴

Taken together, scholarship on Jazz Age and schooling at the time explains much about curricula, programs, philosophies, architecture, budgets, and enrollments, but relatively little about the cultural lives of students. However, historians have yet to go inside schoolhouse doors to understand how educators and students responded to the decade's cultural changes that elicited exultation and existential dread in seemingly equal parts. Paula S.

Fass alluded to the need for that lived experience in her seminal text *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s*. She pointed out, “Educators were suddenly confronted by new social problems concerned with residence, recreations, youth organizations, and only casually related to academic concerns.”⁴⁵ Ultimately, the case studies I discuss add greater texture and more of an on-the-ground lens to the young people that the actors in policy-oriented curriculum and policy histories were trying to impact. Such a social history-infused approach explores not only the goals of those who viewed schools as a counterbalance to the decade’s cultural changes, but explains how the people in those buildings, mostly young people, responded to that counterrevolution.

Book Organization

Much of my inquiry, particularly when discussing higher education, is a national story with a Midwestern regional interest, a region supposed to be, in the words of *Ladies Home Journal* editor John McMahon, “a citadel of Americanism and righteousness.”⁴⁶ Yet it is not my thesis that the “jazz problem” was a regional manifestation—in fact, I would strongly argue that it was not. Instead, the number of large land-grant universities, as well as smaller religiously affiliated liberal arts colleges, provides multiple cases that demonstrate how university officials and students in different types of institutions in different regions reacted to jazz. Because the vast majority of historically black colleges were (and are) below the Mason-Dixon Line, I focus more on the south when discussing those schools to draw on as large a sample size as possible. Similarly, I shift to the Northeast when discussing single-sex women’s colleges. Still, the general focus remains what campus bon vivant and white jazz musician Hoagy Carmichael unironically called the “mystic Midwest response to jungle beat.”⁴⁷

This study develops over five chapters, an organizational structure that highlights the differences in jazz responses between high schools and colleges. While educators at high schools and colleges were increasingly concerned with the morality of their students, they diverged in their answers to the “jazz problem.” This first chapter sets up the differing responses of educators at both levels. It focuses on how high school and college officials reacted to the threat jazz believed posed to young people in Chicago, one of the country’s most “toddlin’ towns.”⁴⁸ Certainly, a palpable degree of concern over student well-being existed for both high school and college

students. Still, Chicago high school administrators took comparatively drastic measures to minimize students' contact with and interest in the music while their higher-education counterparts took a more hands-off approach. Building on this discussion of institutional response, chapter 2 explains why educators felt they had to take such drastic actions by breaking down the racialized argument against jazz itself. It argues that white music teachers were quite outspoken about the genre, both for its supposed musical and moral shortcomings. Much of this chapter focuses on the Music Supervisors' National Conference, a white music education group whose members offered up various solutions to solve the "jazz problem." As chapter 3 explains, the reasoning for this racialized opposition to jazz differed for black educators. Unlike their white colleagues, black educators rarely discussed jazz. Instead, they pointed to the spiritual as the most important recognizable black contribution to music. Black music educators worried above all else that jazz could "corrupt" the spiritual—that students would musically combine the sacred and secular. In those rare instances when jazz was discussed, black educators dismissed it in terms that were often stronger than those of their white counterparts.

The final two chapters turn specifically to higher education, a major progenitor of jazz-crazed young people. Colleges in the 1920s were taking up the role of morality on campus, with an old guard defending more straightforward moral critiques to reformers pushing greater social science-driven method of diagnosing and solving problems.⁴⁹ Chapter 4 places jazz in the middle of this debate by examining the attitudes of students and faculty in higher education. Without a doubt, white college students overwhelmingly praised jazz. In fact, jazz was audibly the background of higher-education life in the 1920s, enjoying a sort of hegemonic popularity among white college students. Still, a vocal minority of white students critiqued the genre on aesthetic and religious grounds, while most black students expressed little interest in jazz, preferring to identify musically with the spiritual. White higher-education faculty, like their secondary school colleagues, largely took a dim view of jazz. Yet while they dismissed jazz in professional publications, higher-education faculty typically did not feel they should attempt to shape students' musical tastes. Instead, it fell to deans of men to attempt to stem extramusical consequences associated with the music. The final chapter turns to the problem of jazz dancing on campus, easily the most popular form of recreation during the decade, and a tangible, discernible target for the prescient sexuality surrounding jazz. The chapter initially focuses on university-sponsored events, such as

proms and balls, and how they served as events around which students and faculty could negotiate what was socially acceptable and what was forbidden. Colleges placed minimal restrictions, despite grumblings from alumni, administrators, and professors' own inclinations. Even relatively conservative institutions, such as historically black and evangelical colleges, dropped their dancing bans by the middle of the decade, largely in response to student interest. Chapter 5 then turns to the central role dancing played in Greek life. While many Panhellenics were genuinely interested in jazz, others found themselves drawn to the music for another reason—the chance to dance with “the coeds.” Concluding with a discussion of the pianist Hoagy Carmichael, chapter 5 explains how colleges served as fertile breeding grounds for jazz musicians.

Finally, I should explain some points about terminology. First, though other synonyms were used at the time, unless otherwise specified in direct quotes, I use the word *spiritual* because it implies a connection with the sacred, a point black music educators often included when critiquing jazz. Other possible terms used during the Jazz Age included “Negro folk songs,” “black folk songs” or simply, “our music.” Second, though historians and musicologists can point to notable differences between jazz and its antecedent, ragtime, critics of the genres in the 1920s either did not recognize such distinctions or did not acknowledge them. As a result, some of the quotes I include use the terms *ragtime* and *jazz* in a seemingly interchangeable manner. Not appreciating the real musical differences between the genres points more to an unwillingness among critics to recognize any musical validity. Third, the term *European classical music*, while imperfect, I believe is the best available option for this study.⁵⁰ The issue of who owns music, or at least who can make historical ownership claims, is a necessary question for other studies. For purposes here, I simply ask readers to see my best intentions, one that acknowledges all genres' lineage, creates space for musical collaboration, and acknowledges a history of race-based musical exploitation. Finally, I use the terms *predominately white institutions* and *historically black institutions* throughout the text in an effort to avoid normalizing whiteness in higher education. I also recognize that other types of institutions have historical and current significance, including, though not exclusive to, tribal colleges and universities as well as Hispanic serving institutions.