

In most histories of jazz, the music's arrival on the European continent is commonly linked to the presence of African American soldiers, most notably the Harlem Hellfighters Band of the 369th Infantry Regiment. The syncopated "ragging" of marches and popular dances that these musicians performed under the baton of Lieutenant James Reese Europe invigorated France during World War I and contributed to a fascination with black culture among avant-garde artists and musicians.¹ The Parisian setting in which jazz first achieved notoriety has interested scholars for several decades, but as Jed Rasula has noted, "Paris is only one piece of the puzzle."² Although Lieutenant Europe's ensemble was by far the most distinctive, it was only one among many military bands, both large and small, that spread America's new music across the continent during World War I. The repertoire, musical training and cultural background of these military ensembles varied widely. Some bands were developed on an ad-hoc basis; others were formally organized and trained before deployment. Some were composed of black musicians; others, like the Scrap-Iron Jazzerinos and the 158th Infantry Band under the direction of Second Lieutenant Albert R. Etzweiler, were strictly white.³ Most included male musicians only, but there were a few ensembles brought over to accompany theatrical entertainments organized by nonmilitary organizations like the Red Cross and YMCA that included women musicians too.⁴ Not surprisingly, such a diverse range of ensembles meant that the early dissemination and reception of jazz in various parts of Europe differed markedly. In Britain, jazz received a mixed reception, where it was viewed as a product of American folk culture related to both black and white traditions.⁵ And in France and Germany audiences embraced the music as an exotic, avant-garde art form performed almost exclusively by African Americans and rooted in a primitivist aesthetic.⁶ In Italy, however, the early reception of jazz differed markedly. Many Italian listeners perceived jazz as a fully commercialized art form linked to wealth, modern technology and Italian American innovation.

Jazz made its inaugural entry into Italy on June 27, 1918 – the day 1,700 members of the US Army Ambulance Service (USAAS) arrived in Genoa aboard the S.S. Giuseppe Verdi, a luxury ocean liner supplied by the Italian

government to assist in the efficient transport of American aid. In addition to 60 trucks, 30 cars, 360 ambulances and 30 motorcycles with side cars, the Americans arrived with enough musical instruments and sheet music to outfit three ensembles: two pit bands linked to the Kernell-Fechheimer shows *Good-Bye Bill* and *Let's Go*, and a smaller group referred to in military documents as the "American Jazz Band," also nicknamed Hamp's Jazz Band, after their bandleader, Charles W. Hamp, who played both piano and saxophone.⁷

The USAAS had been sent to assist the 332nd Regiment, the only US forces stationed in Italy during World War I. The regiment's principal mission was to build up Italian morale by showing that Americans had arrived and were finally engaged in protecting Italy's interests. Since the troops sent to Italy were far fewer in number than those delegated to France, they were advised to make themselves noticeable so that they might appear more numerous than they were. The USAAS bands, whose core duty was "propaganda and morale building," played a key role in creating this impression. Travel was encouraged, and the American Jazz Band, in particular, moved up and down the peninsula, from one locale to the next, performing "distinct American music" in public venues open to soldiers and Italian citizens alike.⁸ In his study of USAAS activities during World War I, military historian John R. Smucker, Jr. included detailed descriptions of the American Jazz Band's six months of active service.⁹ After the Armistice, the band's duties continued, and as one band member noted in a letter home, the YMCA took over management of the ensemble:

The problem of finances arose – who was going to foot the bill? This was solved in Treviso where ... we met a YMCA secretary named Pepin from Detroit. Pepin called his headquarters in Paris, France, and secured permission to spend 20,000 Lire for our expenses.¹⁰

Additional on-the-spot descriptions of the American Jazz Band's experiences during this period were related in letters home written by musicians. As the following excerpts reveal, the band received a warm reception from locals as they completed their "Victory Tour" of Italy at the conclusion of the war:

We arrived in Milano on that fateful day, November 11, 1918 [the day Germany signed an armistice agreement with the Allies], and the people were mad with joy. None of us had a button on our tunics when we, in the wee small hours, finally made it to our hotel. We augmented our equipment in Milano as some of us played more than one instrument. We rehearsed some more and then played in the hospitals for

convalescents in the area around Lago Como and several very large charity bazaars in Milano. Our own ambulance sections were first on the official tour. Every section was visited and some had moved up pretty close to Trieste. We then had our only chance to see Venice on this trip, and we played "Down in Honky Town," going under the Rialto Bridge in two big gondolas tied together.¹¹

A reporter for the Paris edition of the *New York Herald* described this memorable Venetian performance, noting that the band's usual "penchant for physical comedy" put them at some risk in the "picturesque setting."¹² Like LaRocca's ODJB, the USAAS Jazz Band regularly included slapstick physical antics in their performances: "Instead of sitting calmly on stage," noted a contemporary witness, they "dance, roll over, embrace each other and do various acrobatic acts without missing a note, the whole effect being whimsical and full of surprise."¹³

As one soldier noted in a letter home: after Venice, the band went "back to Milano for some recordings for the Società Italiana di Fonolipia" [*sic*].¹⁴ Fonotipia was Italy's leading gramophone record label at the time. Established in 1904 by the Anglo French composer Baron Frederic d'Erlanger, Fonotipia's studios were located in Milan and generally hosted recording sessions featuring celebrities, most notably the leading opera singers of the day. For two weeks in December 1918, however, performers from the "U.S.A. Army Ambulance Service" and the "Italian Army" came together to record a commemorative set of forty gramophone discs, filling the Fonotipia studios with a markedly different sound.¹⁵ "The biggest phonograph concern in Italy offered to pay a high price for the records," reported one military official. "Owing to army regulations, however, the contract was declined." But that didn't stop the musicians. They played for free, and in 1921 the recordings were reportedly still "immensely popular in Italy."¹⁶

Fonotipia's interest in documenting the performances of the USAAS Jazz Band says a great deal about the music's early audience in Italy. From the beginning, the jazz performed by American troops was associated with the upper echelon of Italian society. Like the stars of Italian opera, American bands were marketed to wealthy audiences, most notably those in the North, who could afford a gramophone and were eager to learn the latest dances being taught in the dance academies that sprang up in nearly every urban center north of Rome.

A catalogue for the USAAS gramophone discs produced by Fonotipia reveals that, from the beginning, the project was perceived as one that could be marketed on both sides of the Atlantic. Prices were listed in both Italian

lire and US dollars, and the recommended price per disc – two dollars – was quite expensive. The catalogue also carried a dedication, written in both Italian and broken English, that reflected the record company's reverence for the US military's contributions:

The Società Italiana di Fonotipia begs to dedicate this catalogue of Italo-American Propaganda Programme to the US Army Ambulance Service with Italian Army in Italy as a slight mark of gratitude for the kind and valuable assistance obtained through the courtesy of Colonel E. Persons and Lt. Colonel C. Franklin, Chairman of Entertainment Committee.¹⁷

Unfortunately, there appears to be no extant complete set of these recordings.¹⁸ Nonetheless, a photo of the “American Jazz Band” and a detailed list of the repertoire included in the catalogue, combined with the register of recording sessions preserved in the Fonotipia archives, reveal much about how these early performances must have sounded. The instrumentation on these recordings for the USAAS “American Jazz Band” included: piano, drums, saxophone, string bass, two violins, one viola, two banjos and a ukelele.¹⁹ Their repertoire was a mix of popular dance tunes (“Hindustan” Fox Trot by Oliver Wallace and “Uncle Tom One Step” by Hugo Frey),²⁰ patriotic tunes (“Over There” and “[It's a long way to] Tipperary”), Broadway numbers (“*Good-bye Bill* Medley” and “Chinese Blues”), and contemporary jazz tunes (“Oriental Jazz” and “[Darktown] Strutters Ball”). The inclusion of these last two numbers is especially telling, since LaRocca and his ODJB had recently released the inaugural recordings with Columbia and Aeolian Vocalian.²¹ By 1919, many of the tunes recorded by LaRocca's group had attained immense popularity in Italy, where the bandleader's Italian heritage was taken as a point of pride. Recognizing a profitable market when they saw one, American recording companies like Columbia and Victor regularly used their Italian affiliates to produce reprints of the ensemble's recordings shortly after their initial release in the United States. Although the ODJB never performed in Italy, the influence of their recordings had a telling effect on Italian musicians attempting to imitate their style. This is clearly heard in a rendition of “At the Jazz Band Ball,” recorded by Nicola Moletti and the Orchestra del Trianon in Milan in April 1919 and released on the Grammofono label, an Italian affiliate of The Gramophone Company Ltd., which was based in the United Kingdom.²² This recording doesn't swing with the same ease as the American original, and the Italian performers struggle in their attempts to replicate the collective improvisation made famous by the ODJB. Nonetheless, the influence of the American model is clear. Additional recordings by Moletti's band – most notably “Hindustan”

Fox-trot and the Tin Pan Alley song “Smiles” by Lee S. Roberts and J. Will Calahan – also appeared on Fonotopia’s recordings of the “American Jazz Band.”²³

In addition to their studio work, the American Jazz Band continued to perform for a variety of audiences, large and small, across Northern Italy for several months after the war. Their concerts “amazed and delighted the Italians.”²⁴ But as one band member noted, the most memorable interactions involved hobnobbing with Italian nobility, many of whom embraced the new dance music with great enthusiasm:

It was on one of these trips into Milano that the band was invited to the home of La Contessa Jeannette dal Verme, where we played, danced, and drank through a very pleasant evening. I can’t remember the names of the guests at the dance, but I do know one was a princess; and we all took a turn with her.²⁵

The princess referred to here was Yolanda of Savoy, the eldest daughter of King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy and his wife Princess Elena of Montenegro. Princess Yolanda was an avid sportswoman, who took great pleasure in the athletic dances associated with the new American music. Yolanda served as a hostess and sponsor for the ensemble during their visits to Rome, as did Thomas Nelson Page, the American Ambassador to Italy during World War I.²⁶ As one band member noted:

Our tour took us to Turino [*sic*], Firenze, (with a side trip for some to Pisa), and on to Rome where that lovable couple, Ambassador Page and his beautiful wife, took us under their wings and saw that every wish of ours was satisfied ... In all these places we played to the convalescents, the poor, the opulent, young, old, and the nobility. The only one we missed was the Pope! This was a new experience for the Italian people with American dance and jazz music, and although many did not understand the words of the songs, they loved their rhythms, the humor, and the lonesomeness of a blues tune.²⁷

After the Armistice, numerous American military bands, all of them white, appeared in celebratory performances in Italy highlighting the cooperation of Allied Forces. Some of these bands were sponsored by the YMCA, others by Italian government officials.²⁸ From 1918 until the spring of 1921 (when the final American troops went home), the YMCA maintained a series of relief centers in Rome, Venice, Genoa and Trieste that served the “sailors and marines from the Adriatic fleet” who remained in Italy “through the Fiume controversy.”²⁹ These military personnel were drawn especially to Rome, where in addition to motorbus tours of the city’s ancient monuments, they were treated to an array of musical entertainment. Vittorio

Spina, who later became a well-known Italian jazz guitarist, witnessed the arrival of these soldiers as a young boy. In a 1960 interview he looked back fondly on his first encounters with American jazz:

In Rome, the American troops had arrived, and these soldiers had formed an orchestra that rehearsed at the YMCA on via Francesco Crispi. The head of the orchestra was a sergeant named Griffith, who later married a girl from Rome.³⁰ In fact, I lived right behind there, and I always went to hear them play. In the orchestra there was an American soldier who played banjo. I wasn't familiar with the instrument, so I started to do a little investigation of those four strings. I thought to myself: "How is it tuned? If it's tuned like a guitar, then it would be easy to play," I told myself, since I already knew how to play [the guitar]. But I just couldn't figure it out. At a certain point I thought, "it's tuned the way it's tuned." I was a kid, a smart aleck. I went up to [the banjo player] and said: "You know, I also play banjo. Will you let me try it?" The bandleader said to let me try and asked me what tune I knew how to play. Since I had a good ear, I said right away: "That first one," and started to play, but nothing recognizable came out. At the end they asked me to play something I knew, and then things began to go better. This is how I entered into friendship [with them].³¹

The Americans in Rome offered Spina more than just friendship. The Spanish flu was ravaging Italy at this time. Food was scarce, and many families, like Spina's, found themselves in difficult circumstances.

They gave me chocolate, cigarettes; in short, they revived me a little! Meals were often skipped at my house. My father had recently died, and there was no money. In short, these Americans were my salvation, because a few days later they came to find me and invited me to work for them: to pick up the mail, do little odd jobs ... And then, there was the orchestra, and I was always there listening, trying to figure out how to play the banjo.³²

Photos from the period confirm Spina's story. One shows him sitting in a crowded hall, waiting for a concert to begin. The audience is mixed: Italian officials, American military, well-dressed young women. Italian and American flags hang along the back wall. Spina is sitting on the lap of an American soldier and grinning from ear to ear.³³ A second photo shows Spina, a bit older, playing mandolin while an American sailor (perhaps Sergeant Griffith) provides accompaniment at the piano (Figure 2.1). As Spina explains, he was eventually given a position in the band:

One fine day the banjo player was transferred, and Sergeant Griffith asked me if I wanted to play with them. Imagine that! They brought me my own instrument, and two times a week I played with the American orchestra, for dances at the Sala Pichetti on via del Bufalo. It was a real big orchestra: trumpets, trombones,

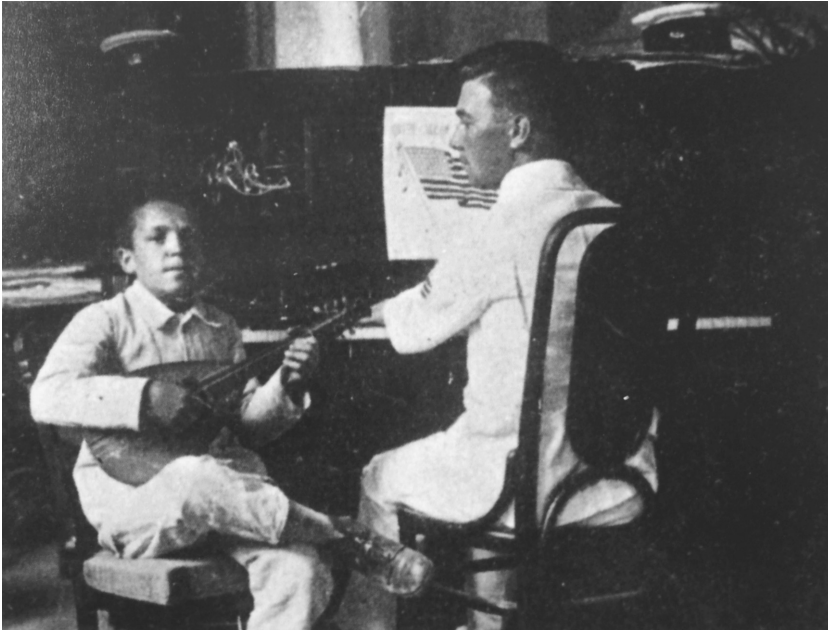


Figure 2.1 Vittorio Spina (mandolin) with American soldier, perhaps Sgt. Griffith (piano) in Rome, ca. 1918.

Source: Photographic archive of Adriano Mazzeletti.

saxophones; and they played all the pieces that were in vogue at that time: “Havana,” “Ka-Lou-A” [sic], “Indianola,” “Original Fox Trot.” There was no talk of improvisation; it was all written stuff, American pieces that Griffith had transcribed.³⁴

Enrico Pichetti, the owner of the hall rented by the YMCA during this period, included a description of these performances in his memoir *Mezzo secolo di danze* (Half a Century of Dance):

During the war, this form of entertainment needed by the young people that fought on the battlefield was offered in full form to the Americans. The YMCA rented the Hall three times a week to host dances for the Americans passing through Rome and those that belonged to the association. They played [the music] themselves and brought their own jazz-band instruments, from which they created furious rhythms and cadences, drawing out what seemed like discordant sounds and wild pitches, accompanied by singing. After a while, however, our ears became accustomed [to the music] and we realized that the syncopated beat added an overwhelming eagerness to the dance ... I wasn’t stupid. When I heard their jazz band I realized that, justifiably, our music and our instruments could not satisfy them. Whenever the sailors of the Navy, who were anchored in Naples and Citavecchia, came to Rome, they flocked to my Hall, which was always crowded.³⁵

Jazz drew more than just Americans. Pichetti's club quickly became a popular venue for Italians too. But as Spina explained, not everyone was welcome: "only someone with an invitation could enter: nobles, aristocrats, everyone from the upper class."³⁶ This is an important point: from the beginning, jazz was embraced by the Italians as an elite, modernist art form. It is worth remembering that the first US military jazz musicians to arrive in Italy did so aboard a luxurious ocean liner. In the early 1920s, jazz became a symbol of affluence among most young Italians, and as the music's popularity grew, exclusive nightclubs appeared in the upscale neighborhoods of large Italian cities. New dance schools sprouted like weeds across the urban landscape, promising step-by-step upward mobility for eager, aspiring socialites. Jazz was for the wealthy, and for those who aspired to be wealthy. Recognizing the profits to be made, Italian entrepreneurs began to invest heavily in jazz after the war, so much so that by 1924 a wide variety of venues geared towards the country's affluent and aristocratic youth could be found in Rome and all major cities north (Milan, Turin, Florence, Genoa, Venice, among others).

One of the most famous nightclub impresarios during these early years was Arturo Agazzi, known professionally as Mirador. Born and raised in Milan, Mirador moved to London in 1913, where he found work managing musical performances for private parties and small clubs before landing a job as manager of *Ciro's*, one of London's most prestigious clubs. This was where he first encountered American popular music. As soon as the armistice was announced in 1918, Mirador returned to Milan, where he set up his own club, aptly named *Mirador's*, which hosted *Mirador's Syncopated Orchestra*, the first native jazz band in Italy. Although Mirador was not a professional musician himself, his talent as an impresario led to the creation of an efficient nightclub circuit, which facilitated the employment of countless jazz musicians, both Italian and foreign, who toured in small combos from one venue to the next in all the major cities north of Rome.³⁷

Southern Italy did not take to jazz in the early years, which is ironic, given the fact that the family of Nick LaRocca, the Italian American first credited with commercializing jazz, came from Sicily.³⁸ There are myriad social and cultural reasons why cities like Naples and Palermo were left out of the jazz circuit, as we shall see in later chapters. For the moment, it is enough to say that the region's poverty, high illiteracy rate and strong ties to provincial traditions cut it off from many of the cultural and technological innovations associated with jazz. Of course, there were some southern Italians, like the Neapolitan Futurist Francesco Cangiullo, whose variations on Marinetti's *parole in libertà* explored popular entertainment, including

jazz, and the noise of urban life. But like other southern Italians, Cangiullo had to venture north to participate in modern Italian culture. Simply put, Italy's jazz awakening was regional, not national. Jazz was a phenomenon limited to the industrial north.

So far, I have discussed the presence of jazz in Italy as a predominantly "white" phenomenon. Although it is true that Italian listeners first experienced live jazz as the commercialized form of dance music performed by white military units, it would be mistaken to assume that Italians were unaware of the music's African American roots. When Bruno Zuculin published his article on "American Dances and Music" (discussed in the previous chapter), he was responding to Italy's growing fascination with the music being supplied by groups sponsored by the USAAS and YMCA. Jazz was not the first American genre to reach Italian audiences, but it was definitely the most influential, and Italians were curious about the links between the newest imported dances – the fox-trot and one-step – and earlier African American dances like the cakewalk, which had made a fleeting appearance in Italy before the war.³⁹ Not surprisingly, it was the Futurists who first discussed the African American art forms that fueled the birth of jazz in the United States and informed its reception in France.

The Futurists and Jazz in Italy

Marinetti and his colleagues viewed jazz and its associated activities – dance, fashion, cocktails and improvisation – as effective tools for Futurism, the movement designed to foster the political and artistic revival of Italy in the modern age. Recognizing that they lived in a world defined by technological progress, the Futurists strove to bring art closer to the new sensibility of modern life. As one scholar has noted: "They hailed the thrill of speed and wondered how human beings could embody the excitement they found in machines."⁴⁰ The Futurists were the first in Italy to adopt the aesthetic of "primitivism" and its links with African American culture. They eagerly embraced the beauty of primitivism as described by their avant-garde colleagues in France, and they looked to dances like the cakewalk as ideal sources for the development of a primitive aesthetic.

In their numerous treatises, the Futurists hailed the rejuvenating powers of primitivism and modernism, often linking their aesthetic qualities in effective and compelling ways. For example, in 1910 Umberto Boccioni wrote: "Our time initiates a new era naming us the primitives of a new,

completely transformed sensibility.”⁴¹ He declared himself and his fellow Futurists as the “first people” committed to discovering “a totally new reality, a reality of the machine age, where industrial development, the expansion of big cities, and mass production” reflect “the spirit of modern times.”⁴² It is important to focus on Boccioni’s understanding of the term “primitives,” which at the time evoked a connotation different from how we might understand the term today. Boccioni and other Futurist artists embraced the label “primitive” as a positive attribute. To be a contemporary artist practicing “primitivism” meant that one appropriated into one’s own modern art the ideas and characteristics of so-called primitive and exotic cultures of the past. Thus the jazz musician, like the Futurist painter, was simultaneously a primitive and a modernist. Both took the characteristics of earlier African American art forms and transformed them into a mechanized and modernist aesthetic. To borrow the language of John J. White, when the Italian Futurists embraced primitivism, they looked to American culture as a model. Theirs was “a modernist primitivism,” which was not “backward-looking” but rather seeking “to create a new sensibility appropriate to its own culture, especially those elements of the modern world” that pointed “towards the future.”⁴³

Boccioni used the metaphor of the primitives as a way to link the world of contemporary American culture to his vision of a possible future for Italy. He defined the modern city as an “industrial jungle” full of machines. In his treatise *Pittura e scultura futurista* (1914) he depicted this “techno jungle” as full of “café-chantant, gramophone, cinema, neon signs, mechanistic architecture, skyscrapers [...] nightlife [...] speed, automobiles and airplanes.”⁴⁴ In short, the Futurist concept of the urban, mechanistic landscape of the modern age was firmly grounded in the popular culture and technological advances of the United States. The “new and completely transformed sensibility” of the Futurist, as Boccioni described it, looked to the urban environment that cultivated and disseminated early jazz. As Przemysław Stozek describes it, “the rhythm of life and of new forms of popular culture were encompassed in the rhythm of an operating machine.” This, above all else, was “the Futurist experience” of primitivism in “the industrial age.”⁴⁵ More importantly, this was also what motivated the Futurists to embrace early on African American dance styles like the cakewalk, and later musical genres like ragtime and, eventually, jazz. “It is this passionate love of Reality,” Boccioni wrote in 1914, “that makes us prefer an American cakewalk dancer to hearing the Valkyrie, that makes us prefer the events of a day caught on film to a classic tragedy.”⁴⁶ As Boccioni explained, it was technology and its relation

to contemporary popular music, above all else, that had the power to capture the modern Italian aesthetic:

The gramophone, for example ... is according to us a magnificent natural element for bringing to life psychological realities. We enjoy it when its beautifully lucid metal trumpet sounds and blows in a nasal tone a little mechanized song that always extends beyond the musical art of the philistines' modest salon.⁴⁷

One cannot help but wonder if Boccioni was being wholly sincere when he wrote these words. Did he truly embrace African American dance and its related music, or was he simply trying to shock partisans of traditional European culture? Either way, the outcome was the same: the cakewalk had captured the Futurist imagination. As Marinetti noted in *Il manifesto della danza futurista* (1917):

We Futurists prefer Loie Fuller and the cakewalk of the Negroes ([for their] utilization of electronic light and mechanical movements). One must go beyond the current muscular possibilities in dance and aim for the ideal of the multi-part body of the motor, which we have so long dreamed about. Our gestures must imitate the movements of machines, assiduously paying homage to steering wheels, tires, pistons, and so preparing for the fusion of man with the machine, achieving the metallization of Futurist dance.⁴⁸

This early fascination with the cakewalk, as shown in the writings of Boccioni and Marinetti, was likely sparked by their exposure to contemporary film. Although the origins of the cakewalk in the United States date back to the mid-nineteenth century, the dance did not make its mark on European popular culture until 1902, when it was performed in Paris by the Nouveau Cirque as part of a pantomime called *Les Joyeux Nègres*. This performance started a French craze, which was soon captured in films distributed across Europe. During the early decades of the twentieth century, film served as a powerful medium for lending meaning to various types of cultural phenomena. As Matthew Jordan has noted: "Several early filmmakers noticed how well film conveyed rhythm, and they turned to dance and the new rhythms of the Cake-Walk as subject matter for their short films."⁴⁹ It was likely through films such as these that the Italian Futurists first experienced the cakewalk. In 1903, several French films featuring the dance were screened in Milan and Rome; these included *Le Célèbre Cake-Walk per Elks* and *Dwarf's Cake-Walk* produced by Pathé Films, *Le Cake-Walk* released by Alfred Lubin, and most notably George Méliès' *Le Cake-Walk infernal*, which presented a strangely captivating interpretation of the dance.⁵⁰

In this rendition, the cakewalk undergoes a cultural transformation during a performance in Hades, under the watchful eye of Pluto (played by Méliès himself). The film is just over five minutes long, and as Méliès's plot summary reveals, his primary goal was to introduce viewers to the frenetic rhythms of dance and reveal its obliterating effect on traditional European culture:

Pluto, having seen the world [above], comes back home amazed by the success of that popular dance, the Cake-Walk. He has brought back with him two well-known [African American] dancers, who begin to perform their favorite dance amidst the flames. A strange and ugly creature attempts to join in the dance, but his limbs break away and dance off on their own, far away from him. All the inhabitants of His Majesty's underground realm are seized with the irresistible mania for dancing and start performing an unbridled folk dance. When Satan sees this, he conjures up an enormous blaze, which annihilates everything around him. He then disappears among the flames.⁵¹

The visual effects of this short film are mesmerizing, especially when one considers the technical limitations of the time, and it was modern imagery such as this that led Marinetti to proclaim "the cakewalk of the Negroes" to be an art form similar in its innovative effects to the dances of Loïe Fuller. Fuller was not African American, but she was often paired with them in European descriptions of avant-garde dance, due to her captivating use on stage and screen of newly patented, multicolored lights and flowing, voluminous silk costumes. The films of both Fuller and various cakewalk dancers offered early-twentieth-century viewers a technological blending of light and frenetic movement, body and machine, that for Marinetti represented a clear embodiment of the modern age via art. Equally appealing must have been the implied message of Méliès's *Le Cake-Walk infernal*: Modern art requires an annihilation of the past. With his primitivist cakewalk, Méliès's Satan ignites the purifying inferno.

For the Futurists, film served as an important, although ultimately misguided, entry into African American culture. Through film, they found a persuasive blend of primitivism and modern technology that defined African American dance as a visually rhythmic phenomenon. That being said, it is important to remember that the Futurists' first impressions of the cakewalk were limited to the purely visual, and that their exposure to jazz as a sonic experience did not occur until later, when American troops reached Italian shores. Of course, ragtime music and dances like the foxtrot were not completely unknown before the war. There were a few dance instructors in Rome and Turin who posted notices in local newspapers

offering lessons in “one-step, two-step and rac-time” [*sic*] as early as 1915.⁵² In fact, the first documented Italian bandleader who tried to make a name for himself playing American dance music was Umberto Bozza. Today, Bozza is best known as Benito Mussolini’s violin teacher – more about that in Chapter 3 – but long before he encountered his infamous student, Bozza served as one of the most respected performers of light, café music in Rome, where his performances of the fox-trot at the Apollo Club met with little resistance. Mixed among his repertoire of waltzes, polkas and mazurkas, the fox-trot entered his repertoire in 1915 and was embraced immediately as a civilized, energetic dance. I mention this because the lack of criticism early on was in stark contrast to the reception of another “New World” dance, the tango, which Bozza had attempted to incorporate into his repertoire a few years earlier. Whereas Italians originally embraced the fox-trot as a modern, “white” commercialized dance that had evolved from the “primitivism” of African American dances like the cakewalk, the tango, which arrived in Italy just prior to the war, was roundly criticized for its barbarity and overt sensuality. Pope Pius X publicly questioned the embrace of the tango by Italian youth, asking: “Why don’t they dance the Furlana [a fast-paced North Italian folk dance in duple 6/8 meter], which is so much more beautiful?” The Archbishop of Ferrara’s response was not as diplomatic. On January 24, 1914 he publically condemned the tango as “a manifestly obscene form of entertainment,” which he described as being both “barbaric and detestable.”⁵³

Thanks to the arrival of American troops, dances like the fox-trot, one-step and two-step continued to fare well in Italian popular culture. As the extreme hardship of the immediate postwar period subsided and the economic life of Italy’s major cities returned to normal, the nation’s leisure activities experienced something of a revolution. As noted earlier, enthusiasm for all things American fueled the establishment of numerous Italian nightclubs during the early 1920s. Not surprisingly, the Futurists were involved.

The Rise of the Italian Nightclubs

Within the space of two years, four nightclubs designed and run by prominent Futurists opened in Rome: the Bal Tic Tac, the Gallina a Tre Zampe (The Hen on Three Feet), the Cabaret degli Indipendenti (Cabaret of the Independents) and the Cabaret del Diavolo (Devil’s Cabaret). Giacomo Balla was the first Futurist to jump on board. His Bal Tic Tac began serving

patrons in 1921, and as the bandleader Ugo Filippini noted, the club's jazz ensemble offered listeners something new:

The orchestra [at the Bal Tic Tac] was made up of two violins: me and [Pietro] Leonardi, who had been playing with the orchestra of Umberto Bozza. On banjo was Alfredo Gangi ... he had also cut his teeth with Bozza. On piano [Antonio] Jannone from Naples, and on drums Lorenzetti. To these was soon added a tenor saxophone. I got him from a [marching] band sponsored by the local police. This instrument also caused quite a sensation. It was the first time that one encountered a saxophone in a Roman nightclub.⁵⁴

The underground location of the Bal Tic Tac also offered patrons a new experience, as Filippini explained:

The locale where we performed ... was not at street level. To enter one had to descend a staircase. There was a long corridor, enormous, then a large room. At the end of the corridor there hung an electric sign that said: "If you don't drink champagne, go away!"⁵⁵

As to the music, the primary activity was dancing. Filippini continues:

The young aristocrats ... came to dance and dance. It was madness! The early American dances, the fox-trot, the one-step, the shimmy ... Ladies retained by older aristocrats, Luigi Medici del Vascello and others, spent the whole night dancing. They danced three, four hours straight. And they paid ten times the cost for a bottle of champagne ... and so we went down there to play. I remember the good tips that came. Yes indeed, one surely made good tips!⁵⁶

The Bal Tic Tac quickly became the place to be, and as a reporter noted a few weeks after the opening, the club's interior overwhelmed the senses almost as much as the music:

The hall's decoration is a triumph of skillful imagination, and the Futurist painter Balla is its ingenious creator. The very walls seem to dance: the great architectural lines appear to interpenetrate each other with their clear tonalities of light and dark blue. They create a luminosity that looks like a carnival in the sky ... Red, white and blue pillars exude the *bonhomie* of a convivial Bastille Day. The spiral staircase presents a joyful harmony of red and yellow, making it as appealing as a cheerful Hell. This inventiveness, together with the atmosphere of spontaneous joy that is totally suitable for the location, creates a perfect harmony out of the whole. It introduces a truly new character to avant-garde art, which previously irritated so many unsympathetic eyes with its clashing chords.⁵⁷

An overview of the entertainment sections of local newspapers from this period reveals that performances at the Bal Tic Tac quickly set the tone

for other Roman nightclubs. By 1922, the spectrum of entertainment possibilities ranged from “Arabian belly dancing to Spanish flamenco, from a *Patriotic Cotillon* to a *Grand ‘Surprise’ Show*, from a *Tea Dance* to the *Sound of the Jazz-Band*.”⁵⁸ And as one reporter noted, at the Bal Tic Tac, one found “ladies in *décolleté* and gents in tails rubbing shoulders with the sober blackshirts of the Fascists and the blue uniforms of the Nationalists.”⁵⁹

This reference to the Fascists and Nationalists is telling, for the rise of jazz and the rise of Mussolini, though disconnected at first, happened simultaneously. To give a quick overview: After being wounded in the war, Mussolini moved to Milan, where he served as editor of his own newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*. As a wartime editor, Mussolini no doubt encountered notices about the new jazz clubs run by Mirador in Milan and the Futurists in Rome. He also learned a great deal about the power of propaganda in gaining the support of the masses. Mussolini ran for, and lost, a seat in the Chamber of Deputies during the 1919 elections, but this did not deter his efforts to strengthen the power of the Fascists. A turning point came in December 1920 when D'Annunzio and his followers were driven from Fiume, and the Italian nationalists turned to Mussolini as their new leader. Championing economic liberalism and an improvement in the conditions of workers, Mussolini formed the National Fascist Party (PNF) in 1921, and finances began to pour in from industrialists, both Italian and foreign. Membership in the PNF grew quickly, from 20,000 in 1920 to 300,000 in 1922. After much political turmoil, King Victor Emmanuel III granted Mussolini control of the government on October 29, 1922, after 30,000 of Mussolini's supporters made their symbolic “March on Rome.” As the new Prime Minister of Italy, Mussolini formed a coalition government of Fascists, Nationalists, Catholics and right-wing Liberals. Notably younger than the politicians who preceded them, these “blackshirt Fascists and blue uniformed Nationalists” proclaimed the promise of a modern, energetic Italy – a state of being that seemed to come alive all at once in new nightclubs like the Bal Tic Tac.

The theme of the show at Balla's Bal Tic Tac changed every week, but this appeared to have little effect on the “immense audience” that streamed in night after night. As one reporter noted, by 1922, “the beautiful and characteristic venue” in the center of Rome had become “the preferred nightclub of the better public, who find here every convenience and enjoy the comfort of an elegant, fresh ambience.”⁶⁰

The success of Balla's club spurred other Futurists to follow suit. In 1922 Anton Giulio Bragaglia opened the Gallina a Tre Zampe and the Cabaret degli Indipendenti, while Fortunato Depero founded the Cabaret

del Diavolo, which was laid out on three floors in imitation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*: "Paradise" on the top floor, "Purgatory" a level below, and "Hell" at the very bottom. These clubs became the favorite locales of Rome's avant-garde artistic community, and among the wide array of entertainment, which included theater, pantomime, dance, poetry readings, and so on, one found American jazz in its early guises (ragtime and Dixieland) mixed with the experimental "noise music" more commonly associated with Futurism. The general mood and atmosphere of the various Futurist clubs varied. Whereas Bal Tic Tac catered to a broad clientele with a popular, variety-style program, Bragaglia focused a bit more on avant-garde performances. Depero's club was the most exclusive. Resembling more a dining club than an American-style nightclub, it served as a meeting place for Rome's intellectual elite.⁶¹ A review of a party hosted by Depero in his Casa d'Arte in Roverino in January 1923 gives us a sense of what his jazz-infused performances entailed. It begins with a description of the club's interior:

In the salon reserved for women, huge orange lampshades diffused an intense light. Dyed the same color were the scarlet wisteria [patterns] on the extremely original cabaret furniture from Rome.⁶²

We then discover that the evening's activities had been meticulously orchestrated. Through a series of signals played by the orchestra, guests were told when to dance and when to sit quietly. A full cast of assistants had been employed to manage the events, and these "young friends of Depero, striped in red, bustled to and fro through the halls in a friendly, diligent manner."⁶³ After two sets of dance music, the evening's central spectacle began:

A young man with a trumpet passed through the halls and announced repeatedly: "Directly from Peking – Depero!" Meanwhile, another nice fellow striped in red and sitting at the drums, announced, with the help of a bell, the proximity of the train while other young Futurists bustled into the great hall yelling: Clear the track! Clear the track! Then the giant black machines arrived, puffing and whistling, heralded by a cannon shot. After a tour around the hall ... with musical comments from piano and drums ... they departed with the same serious rhythm, sustained and solemn, with which they had entered, saluted by intense and vigorous applause.⁶⁴

But this was not the end of the evening: "Shortly thereafter, by now it was quite late, the same Depero re-entered, again from China, this time seated in a little yellow carriage." He pretended to read articles from a Chinese

newspaper, much to the chagrin of his guests. And when it appeared the evening had begun to fizzle to a close, Depero presented his final delight:

The orchestra began to play again, but it was no longer the one from before. In fact, no one had suspected that Depero's young Futurist friends knew how to play. They prepared a surprise for us: the "Jazz-Band!" With great expansion of the drums (woodblock, gong, cymbals, castanets, drum, xylophone, whistles, triangles, milk bottles, etc.) and diminution of the strings, they played a rhythm of incalculable joy with a nonchalant precision that gave the party the ultimate finishing touch and defined the magical environment to perfection.⁶⁵

This glowing description, which appeared in the Socialist newspaper *Il Popolo*, says much about the importance of jazz to the Futurists. As in all their performance art, they saw in this music a mechanized energy – luxurious and free from tradition – that explored a modernist aesthetic through spectacle, surprise and most importantly improvisation. The Futurists didn't simply host jazz performances, they evoked the essence of the music in countless other genres: paintings, poems, short stories, theater works and essays. In addition to supplying interiors for Italy's newest night-clubs, Futurist artists illustrated the sheet-music covers of jazz-inspired compositions (For example, Nino Formoso's *Ti-ta-tò. One Step*, 1918; Otto Weber's *Futurismo Foxtrot*, 1921; Virgilio Mortari's *Fox Trot del Teatro della Sorpresa*, 1921) and captured the "noise" of jazz in onomatopoeic texts, as heard in Ivan Jablowsky's "Jazz-tazzine-tazúm" (1923); Diavolo Mari's "Jazz Band" (1925); "Sensualità meccanica" (1926) by Fillia (Luigi Colombo); Vladimiro Miletti's "Jazz-impressioni" (1933); and "Newyorkcocktail" (1933) by Farfa (Vittorio Osvaldo Tommasini), to name just a few.⁶⁶ Futurist composers became equally enamored of jazz. In 1920, Alfredo Casella composed "Fox-Trot for Four Hands Piano" that he published in 1922 with a dedication to the French music pedagogue, Marthe Morhange. Similarly, his "Cinque Pezzi, Op. 34 for String Quartet" features a fox-trot. Casella also referred to jazz in his critical writings from this period. In 1921, he noted his recent discovery of several American gramophone discs, which introduced him to extraordinary performances by black jazz musicians:

Recently, I've had the opportunity to hear from abroad certain extraordinary American gramophone discs, in which one can hear some fantastic Negro jazz musicians improvise in an improbable way around the modest texture of certain fox-trots. And I thought, upon hearing such sumptuous rhythmic polyphony adapted to several well-known dances from the wonderful inventive genius of those performers, that one could indeed draw from a simple fox-trot a polyrhythmic, polyphonic monument that holds a candle to any Bach fugue.⁶⁷

Where did Casella come across such recordings? Most likely the American Academy in Rome (AAR). Founded in 1894, AAR began offering prizes in music composition in 1921, and in its early years, Casella served as an important advisor to the fledgling music program. Leo Sowerby, a composer from the Midwest, who had studied in Chicago, was the first Rome Prize Fellow in musical composition. As Carl Engel noted in *The Atlantic Monthly* in August 1922, Sowerby had been “guilty of sounding the jazz note in his chamber music and in a piano concerto.” Convinced that it offered “a more comprehensive expression of the *modern* American spirit,” Sowerby no doubt picked up his abiding interest in jazz during his stint as a bandleader in France during World War I.⁶⁸ One can imagine that Sowerby might have brought some of his favorite gramophone discs with him when he moved to Rome. Perhaps he was the one who first exposed Casella to the wonders of American jazz. A perusal of the AAR Archives from this period reveals that Casella was the primary member of the institution’s “Musical Circle” – a group of local Italian composers and musicians invited to participate in AAR events in order to expose American composers to Roman musical life. As the First Professor in Charge of the AAR Music Program, Felix Lamond later noted in a report on the Music Program’s inaugural years, the participation of Italians like Casella in AAR activities was especially important since “the eager working out of theories of these modern composers was very instructive to our fellows; it was a lesson in what to imitate and what to avoid.”⁶⁹

In 1922, Casella’s AAR contacts facilitated for him a trip to the United States, where he participated in a series of music concerts sponsored by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge and sought out live performances of jazz. He reflected on the latter experience in articles published in both Italian and English shortly after his return to Italy:

Among all the sonorous impressions that a musician may have experienced in the United States, that which dominates every other by its originality, its force of novelty and even of modernism, its stupendous dowry of dynamics and of propulsive energy, is, without doubt, the Negro music called jazz.⁷⁰

Casella attempted to define in his writing, although with some difficulty, what made jazz such an exceptional font of inspiration for modernist composers: “To explain what jazz is, is impossible with an ordinary vocabulary,” he noted, because it is “an art made solely of continuous improvisations, of incessant rhythmic force, of constant energetic mobility.”⁷¹ Casella noted that the “occasional decadent examples of jazz,” which he had encountered “here and there in Europe,” did not give “even faintly, an idea of that most

curious music.” Although Casella continually defined American jazz as “Negro” music, he curiously offered the performances of a white Jewish musician, Ted Lewis,⁷² as the epitome of the new modernist sound:

Hear, for example, the jazz of Ted Lewis . . . If this instrumental technic is unusual and bewildering, not less so are the aesthetic values revealed through it. Art that is – art composed, first of all, of rhythm; of a brutal rhythm often; of a rhythm of other times sweet and lascivious; but always rhythm of a barbaric effectiveness which would raise the dead; rhythm, which, on account of its persistency, its tremendous motive force brings to mind not rarely, the more heroic pages of Beethoven or of Stravinsky.⁷³

Casella’s embrace of jazz’s heroic, modernist qualities was not unique. Futurist composers like Franco Casavola wrote similar descriptions of the new music. For example, in his manifesto *La musica futurista* (1924), he described jazz as a fresh step forward for Italian Futurist composers:

The Jazz Band today represents the practical actualization, although incomplete, of our principles: the individuality of its instruments’ singing brings together, for the first time, sonic elements of different character. And the bold and necessary persistence of its rhythms forms the basis of Futurist music.⁷⁴

Casavola also praised jazz as a Futurist art form in his “Difesa del Jazz Band,” published in *L’Impero* in 1926.

The Jazz Band is the typical product of our generation: heroic, violent, arrogant, brutal, optimistic, anti-romantic, unsentimental and ungraceful. Born of wars and revolutions. Deny it and you deny us!⁷⁵

Casavola claimed that “the principle features of jazz,” which included “the obstinate rhythm, the tendency towards improvisation, the extravagant formation of the orchestra” and “the search for new and unusual sounds” belonged to “the folk heritage of all nations in general and Italy in particular.” He even went so far as to declare: “To us Futurists it is given to foresee the early developments [of jazz] and then dictate the first laws.”⁷⁶

Casavola’s earliest compositions making reference to his new aesthetic included: “Ranocchi al Chiaro di Luna” (Frogs in the Moonlight) on a text by A. G. Bragaglia and “La Danza delle Scimmie” (Dance of the Monkeys) from the ballet *Hop Frog* for the Teatro della Sorpresa, a touring, Futurist theatrical troupe. He also composed a tango for his Futurist ballet *Cabaret epileptic* (Epileptic Cabaret), an early advertising jingle “Campari” and the *Fox-Trot Zoologico*, all with popular influences.

The Italian fascination with jazz was not lost on foreign observers. Various European critics commented on the Futurists’ connection to the

music, although not always in the most positive light. For example, in 1921, the British journalist Clive Bell wrote:

The great modern painters – Derain, Matisse, Picasso, Bonnard, Friesz, Braque and so on – were firmly settled on their own lines of development before ever Jazz was heard of. Only the riff-raff has been affected. Italian Futurism is the nearest approach to a pictorial expression of the Jazz Spirit.⁷⁷

And looking back in 1927, Piet Mondrian noted in an essay titled “Jazz and the Neo-Plastic:” “Many movements have . . . set out to abolish form and create a freer rhythm. In art, Futurism gave the major impulse.”⁷⁸

Of course, not everyone embraced the Futurists’ avant-garde spectacles. A few articles denigrating jazz for its “primitive” origins and “immoral” tendencies appeared in the Italian press between 1919 and 1922, but they were few in number compared to those articles promoting jazz and the exciting, modernistic atmosphere it had engendered.⁷⁹ In fact, the only Italian contingency that appears to have had a consistent problem with jazz in the early years was the Catholic Church, whose representatives spoke out not so much against the music, but against the dances and scandalous ladies’ fashions associated with them. In an article titled “Ballo, digiuno e astinenza” (Dance, Fasting and Abstinence) published in 1920, a reporter for *Corriere della Sera* drew attention to what local church leaders were saying about the behavior of young women during the season of Lent:

A respected archbishop, whose opinions appear in the latest issue of *Journal Diocesan*, has noted, among other things, the evil and danger facilitated by certain amusements, such as the dances currently being performed in theaters and other public and private places, which go beyond the limits of honesty and modesty. The Cardinal Archbishop speaks especially to Christian women, reminding them of Christ’s word and . . . warning them that they should not consider lawful, the youthful entertainment that includes the forms of immorality found in some modern dances. Nor should they seek to excuse the pretext of all shame and scandal through charitable receipts.⁸⁰

But warnings such as these were no deterrent to the spread of jazz in Italy. As the playwright Massimo Bontempelli noted in an essay titled “Roma sotterranea,” by 1924 the proliferation of nightclubs featuring jazz and cocktails had insured that archeologists were no longer the only ones interested in underground Rome: “We, who feel as different as possible from the archeologist, have descended underground to find the most ultra-modern Rome” – i.e. the numerous nightclubs that now occupied the basements of Rome’s finest theaters and hotels. Bontempelli’s essay offered evocative

descriptions of the modernist delights to be found in these underground locales: the music (mostly jazz), cocktails, dancing and fashion. In addition to the Futurist clubs, he described the Le Grotte dell'Augusteo (The Caves of the Augusteo [Theater]), La Falena (The Moth), and other "minor dens" like The Cozy Cottage. By the mid-1920s, numerous nightspots had taken root across central and northern Italy, and all of them featured jazz. There was the Tim Tum Bal, La Sala Umberto, La Bombonnière, L'Apollo, Il Salone Margherita and Ruel e Calore in Rome; Mirador's, the Ambassador's Club, Sporting Club del Casinò, Il Trianon, Dancing Monte Merlo, Sala Volta and Sala Orfeo in Milan; Rajola in Florence; Belloni, L'Olimpia, Verdi and Giardino d'Italia in Genoa; and Lo Stabilimento Romano, Clubbino, Sala Gay and Cinema Ambrosio in Turin, to name the most popular ones. And with each new club came the need for new bands, which quickly led to a seismic shift in Italy's music culture.

The most famous bands in the early years were Mirador's Syncopated Orchestra, Ambassador's Jazz Band, the Black and White Jazz Band, the Imperial Jazz Band and the Orchestra Di Piramo. The director of this last ensemble, Armando Di Piramo, began his career as concertmaster in the Orchestra of the Monte Carlo Opera, and his talent as a classical violinist can be heard on a pair of recordings made with Nicola Moleti (piano) in Paris for Pathé.⁸¹ But upon his return to Italy in the early 1920s, Di Piramo chose the dance hall over the opera house and became a driving force in Genoa's burgeoning music culture, often connecting with musicians who worked on the luxury steam ships that crossed the Atlantic. Di Piramo was one of the first bandleaders in Genoa to organize dance bands specializing in the new music being imported from the United States.⁸² Even more importantly, he was one of the first to record these dances in Italy, initially with the Orchestra Del Cova in 1924, then later as the Orchestra Di Piramo. At first, Italian recording companies, like La Fonotecnica (a label primarily known for recording opera singers), were wary of recording American dance music, believing that the listenership would be limited at best. But Di Piramo soon convinced them otherwise, explaining that his ensemble's prominent use of violins and focus on melody over rhythmic diversity would attract a broad commercial audience. A specifically Italian trait that could be traced back to Umberto Bozza, the jazz violin had only just been introduced in the United States by Joe Venuti. In the years to come, Venuti would serve as an important link between the developing swing traditions in the United States and Italy.

During the 1920s, there was little stability in the personnel playing in Italian ensembles. Bands formed, broke up, then formed again with new

musicians. The demand for jazz raised the “value” of the musicians who could play it. Fees were high, and jazz offered many musicians the chance for social advancement. For example, in Turin, Cinico Angelini’s Jazz Band *Le Perroquet* found themselves in a position most American performers would have envied. As Angelini himself explained: “It was during this period [ca. 1923] when [our] orchestra became the favorite of Prince Umberto of Savoy, who often called on us to play at the dances that were given at the Royal Palace.”⁸³ With opportunities such as these, it is easy to understand why so many conservatory-trained musicians abandoned Italy’s opera houses and concert halls for the chance to play jazz.

One of the most well-known musicians to follow this path was Amedeo Escobar, who resigned from his position with the *Teatro dell’Opera* in Rome after hearing a trio of American musicians – Mons Smith, piano; Eddie Solloway, violin; and a drummer named Harry – at the *Hotel Excelsior* in Rome.

The absolutely new and electrifying music played by this trio convinced me to give up classical music – I was a cellist – for syncopated music. I had never heard anything like it, and I was shocked.⁸⁴

Escobar took up jazz piano and eventually joined the *Black and White Jazz Band*, organized by Filippini in 1922. Over the next few years, he established his reputation as a formidable jazz performer “with a ferocious memory,” who “composed several hundred fox-trots.”⁸⁵ He was the first in Italy to compose works for the standard jazz band configuration (piano, drums, saxophones, trumpets, trombones and bass), and during the 1930s and 40s he enjoyed even greater success as a composer of film scores. As Filippini recalls, Escobar’s talent was augmented by his close connections with powerful figures in Italy’s new political network, most notably Giacomo Acerbo, Baron of Aterno.⁸⁶ A Mussolini ally elected to the Italian Chamber of Deputies in 1921, Acerbo served as a link between the Fascists and King Victor Emmanuel III during the March on Rome in 1922. When Mussolini became Prime Minister, he appointed Acerbo his trusted undersecretary.

Another important Escobar connection, albeit from a different realm of society, was his friendship with Giacomo Puccini. According to Escobar, he first came in contact with the famous opera composer during a tour to Viareggio with the *Imperial Jazz Band* in 1924:

Every evening, while we played, Giacomo Puccini sat next to me. And he was always very interested in what I was doing. He would say to me: “What was that

trick he just did on the trumpet? Will you write it down for me? That ending that the banjo just played, will you note it down on the staff?" Just like that, he took all these little pieces of paper, put them in his pocket and took them home. Sometimes I accompanied him, and we talked a lot. He told me that he wanted to compose a lyric opera using certain musical ideas that he had heard while listening to us play. He was very passionate [about it all]. There was one tune in our repertoire that he especially liked – it was called "Dumbell" – that I had transcribed from a disc by Zez Confrey.⁸⁷

The Confrey tune mentioned here was first recorded for Victor in New York on December 26, 1922.⁸⁸ One year later it was repackaged with a Paul Whiteman tune, "Mr. Gallagher and Mr. Shean," and released in England by HMV, who then rereleased it in Italy under the Grammfono label.⁸⁹ All this is to say that, through the wonders of technology, Italian performers interested in jazz had easy access to recordings being made in the United States and released to an international market.

After Viareggio, Escobar and the Imperial Jazz Band traveled on to Florence, where they had an engagement at the Rajola. While in Florence, the Italians encountered Harl Smith's Lido-Venice Dance Orchestra, an American band that had been brought over by the nightclub's owner, Arturo Rajola. For several nights, the two bands played together, side by side – no doubt an eye-opening experience for both ensembles. For the Italians, hearing the improvised solos performed live by the Americans offered greater insight than any recordings had about how the music could change and evolve, organically, with each performance. For the Americans, there was surprise over how effectively the Italians had appropriated their music.⁹⁰

The best-known figures from this first generation of Italian jazz musicians enjoyed a musical education markedly different from many Americans. With only a few notable exceptions, Vittorio Spina being one of them, the first Italian jazzmen received years of formal training, either in the conservatories or municipal bands, before converting to jazz and beginning their careers in Italy's nightclubs. In addition to Escobar, there was Cinico Angelini (violin, arranger, bandleader), Felice Barboni (saxophone), Pippo Barzizza (piano, composer, bandleader), Carlo Benzi (trombone, saxophone, bandleader), Sesto Carlini (clarinet), Giuseppe Cattafesta (clarinet, saxophone), Armando Di Piramo (violin, bandleader), Gigi Ferracioli (violin, bandleader), Giovanni Fusco (piano, bandleader, composer), Umberto Mancini (composer, bandleader), Luigi Mojetta (drums, trombone), Gino Mucci (drums), Gaetano "Milietto" Nervetti (piano, bandleader) and Potito

Simone (trombone). Simone once noted that it was his discovery of recordings from America, more than anything else, that had convinced him to switch from classical to jazz:

In these years I played the trombone without vibrato, with a firm tone, as taught in the classical school. It was only a few years later, when I began to listen to the American discs, that I learned the vibrato, the phrasing and the jazz intonation of a trombone player that I admired greatly: Miff Mole.⁹¹

From the beginning, this crossover from the classical realm to jazz, this learning from recordings, engendered a subtle difference between the syncopated dance music that was being cultivated in Italy and the music that was coming out of the United States. Almost to a person, the Italians sight-read music fluently and knew music theory. Many had studied composition in conservatory, which greatly facilitated their ability to transform popular tunes from recordings or sheet music into their own fully orchestrated jazz arrangements. No doubt the Italians copied some of the American playing styles in the beginning, as Simone did with Miff Mole, but they never fully abandoned the lyrical phrasing, complex harmonies and approach to large-scale formal structures learned during their formative years in conservatory. Thanks to the archival work of Adriano Mazzoletti and Marco Pacci, we now have an exhaustive discography of the music performed by Italy's homegrown jazz bands during the 1920s.⁹² Although many of the most popular Italian performances from these years featured tunes imported from the United States, by the second half of the decade, a surprisingly large percentage of the music was not just arranged, but actually composed, by native composers. In fact, it was jazz – more than any other genre – that contributed to the growth of Italy's recording and radio industries during the second half of the 1920s.

Recordings and Radio

From its beginning, the record industry in Italy was characterized by fusions with, or takeovers by, foreign companies, all eager to import and sell their own product to an Italian market and to record and export discs featuring Italian singers, both operatic and popular, to a home market.⁹³ Although several Italian companies had been founded in the early years of the twentieth century – Fonodisco Italiano Trevisan (renamed Fonit in 1926), Fonotecnica and Fonotipia – their percentage of the Italian market was small.⁹⁴ Simply put, the Italian record industry was primarily in foreign

hands prior to Mussolini's creation of the state-run label Cetra in 1933. More on that in the following chapter.

As in the United States, where New York served as a hub for the early recording industry, the production of recordings in Italy was centralized. Turin and Milan were the major locations for commercial recording studios, with Rome, as the center of the country's film industry, contributing some recording opportunities as well. In addition to this tripartite geography of record production should be added the major recording centers in other European countries, most notably those in Germany, England and France, where many Italian jazz musicians produced recordings distributed to markets both in Europe and the United States.

The United States was especially eager to capitalize on recording opportunities in Italy. Realizing the large profits to be made in "ethnic" and "race" records, labels like Columbia, Victor, Brunswick, Okeh and Gennett developed a series of specialized recordings for various populations during the early decades of the twentieth century. In addition to records for African Americans, Germans, Hungarians and Irish, these companies produced music, sometimes in collaboration with companies abroad, designed to appeal to the growing number of Italian immigrants in the United States. One of the Italian artists who had the most success recording music for the United States was Di Piramo. In 1926, Di Piramo signed an exclusive contract with Columbia for his Orchestra Italiana. Many of the recordings produced under this contract were intended for distribution in both Italy and abroad. In addition to tunes by Italian and American composers, Di Piramo's Orchestra Italiana recorded tunes in Yiddish ("In Chiedis," "Yahrzeit") and Hebrew ("Jeruscherlajim").⁹⁵ But Di Piramo's most influential recording with Columbia undoubtedly occurred in 1930, when a singer named Romiglioli joined his band for a tune titled "Gigolò." Written the year before by the Italian composer Leonello Casucci, "Gigolò" was first recorded under the title "Schöner Gigolo" in Germany, where Casucci was working as a pianist in a tango orchestra. Enrico Frati supplied the Italian lyrics, which revealed the tragic story of a once glorious soldier whose life had taken a humiliating turn for the worse.

Ridi Gigolò,
 Danza Gigolò,
 Che per questo sei pagato ...
 Oggi non sei più
 Quel che un giorno fu:
 Il bell'ussaro adorato!

Tutto ormai crollò,
 Lo splendor passò!
 A che serve ricordare?
 Taci a tutti il dolor
 Che ti spezza in petto il cuor.
 Sorridi ... e v' a danzare!

Laugh Gigolo,
 Dance Gigolo.
 This is what you're paid for ...
 Today you no longer are
 What you once were:
 The adored grand Hussar!
 Everything has crumbled,
 The splendor has passed!
 What's the use of remembering?
 Don't tell anyone of the pain
 That breaks your heart into pieces.
 Smile ... and go dance.

In 1931, this tune was published with a less tragic set of English lyrics (by Irving Caesar) and promptly recorded as “Just a Gigolo” by Louis Armstrong for Okeh records, then a subsidiary of Columbia. Bing Crosby also made a recording of the tune in 1931, thus making it the first Italian jazz tune to hit the top of the charts in the United States.

To get a sense of the numbers involved in the output of Italian music by American recording companies: Victor and Columbia produced just over eight thousand discs of Italian musicians (not counting opera) between 1910 and 1940. Although some of these recordings were distributed in Italy, most were sold selectively in record and tobacco stores within, or nearby, Italian American communities in the United States. With the increased popularity of jazz just after the war, American companies were eager to establish production studios and distribution offices in all the major European capitals. And in the case of Italy, that capital was Milan.

As far as quantity goes, Milan was the most productive center for recordings of popular music, due to the city's industrial and commercial status and its geographical location on Italy's northern border. Although World War I slowed production of gramophone discs for several years, companies like Pathè opened “listening halls” so that potential clients could still get access to the latest recordings. As the popular singer/songwriter Rodolfo

De Angelis later noted, these listening studios enabled up-and-coming musicians to hear their own performances:

You had just ten minutes to learn and record every song. The din of the orchestra was so loud, that the one who could cry out the loudest got to make the record. The microphones had low sensitivity back then. Fortunately, the Pathè patent allowed you to hear right away what you had just blasted out. But it wasn't very subtle. A few days after the recording session you could go to the listening hall in the Galleria, which was always packed with people, and listen to the disc through a set of headphones, that is if you paid with a twenty-cent token. Once there, you sat down in front of the unit and requested a number, [which was sent] below, down to the basement, where the young ladies operating the large-horned gramophones played the disc. When the number requested was no longer in the catalogue, they made you listen to the song they wanted to hear.⁹⁶

Milan was also the center of Italy's music publishing industry. Ricordi, Suvini, Zerboni, Curci, Monzino and Garlandini all eventually had their headquarters and central presses there,⁹⁷ which made it all the easier for songwriters like De Angelis to get their product out to consumers both as sheet music and recordings.

Although Italian Radio did not become an established industry in Italy until the mid-1920s, local stations, like Radio Araldo in Rome, had a slight impact on developing listener interest right after the war. In fact, the first documented transmission of a jazz performance in Italy was broadcast by Radio Araldo in October 1922. The ensemble was a sextet called Young Men Jazz, and as their bandleader Giorgio Nataletti later explained, even though they were inexperienced teenagers, the success of their first performance led to two years of regular employment:

We performed in the auditorium of the Piazza Poli, and the radio antenna was between the Palazzo Poli and the back of the pediment of the Santa Maria in Via Church. Our repertoire was made up of tunes like "Dardanella," "Ka-Lou-A" [*sic*], "Pretty Girl," "The Sheik of Araby," "Yes! We Have No Bananas," "Kitten on the Keys," "Tea for Two," "Shine," "Limehouse Blues," "Sugar Blues," a few rags and a few stomps. We were also paid: twelve lire per transmission. Maria Luisa Boncompagni [who was later nicknamed "Auntie Radio" and "the nightingale of the radio"] was entrusted with announcing the program. We remained on Radio Araldo from October 1922 until August 1924, when the band broke up.⁹⁸

When Young Men Jazz concluded their broadcasts in 1924, the listenership of Radio Araldo was still no more than 1,300.⁹⁹ In fact, it was low numbers such as these – combined with the threat of foreign dominance in radio

broadcasting – that led to the state’s formation of *Unione Radiofonica Italia* (URI) on August 27, 1924. URI fulfilled two purposes: in addition to serving as a foundation for a national broadcasting system, it consolidated the various commercial factions willing to invest in it.

URI was not a state-run radio – that would come in 1927. Instead, URI was a private company formed by the union of the *Società Italiana Radio Audizioni Circolari* (SIRAC) and *Radiofono*, and given an “exclusive concession” (e.g. a monopoly) by Mussolini’s government. *Radio Araldo* was intended to have a stake in URI as well, but eventually opted out, selling its shares to the other two stakeholders. SIRAC represented the major Italian and foreign interests in this sector. *Radiofono* had among its shareholders the major Italian production companies of telephone, telegraph and radio equipment, but also representatives of foreign industry such as *Western Electric* and *Ericsson*. Another company represented under the corporate umbrella of *Radiofono* was *SISER*, the company founded by *Guglielmo Marconi*, which was linked to his *Wireless Telegraph Company*.¹⁰⁰

Marconi’s involvement in URI was symbolically important, for it was his innovations in wireless communications that led Italy to declare him as the *Father of Modern Radio*. Using Marconi’s ingenuity as proof of the nation’s place at the forefront of communications technology, the Italian government instituted protectionist measures that kept the price of radios high, thus ensuring the continued perception of the radio as a sign of success and national pride and protecting the burgeoning recording industry, which had taken a hit in countries like the United States where the market had been flooded with affordable radios.

The invention of the gramophone and radio transformed modern culture and led to the quick dissemination of jazz, both in the United States and abroad. Recordings and radio transmissions transformed domestic life by bringing music into the home. While competitive markets in the United States made gramophones and radios affordable for a relatively large portion of the population, the high cost of such devices in Italy limited their use to businesses and the wealthy. For those families who could afford such devices, jazz introduced a completely new tradition of social interaction in Italy. Jazz energized the modern world, and as we will see in the chapter that follows, Mussolini noticed.