Constructing a history from fragments: jazz and voice in Boston, Massachusetts circa 1919 to 1929.

Abstract

Boston is a city steeped in history. Beyond the struggle for abolition, however, the historical experiences of the majority of black Bostonians, especially during the early twentieth-century, are lacking recognition. In this respect, the Jazz Age (represented here as circa 1919 – 1929) serves as a noteworthy case-in-point. For insofar as the impact of jazz music on social, political, and economic climates in cities such as New York, New Orleans, and even Kansas have been recorded, the music’s impact on and significance in Boston is yet to be addressed in any great detail. Simply put, the history of jazz in Boston, and with it an important period for black development in the city, exists in fragments such as discographies, newspaper listings, musical handbooks, potted witness accounts among others. Therefore, the principle aim of this thesis is to piece-together these fragments to form a mosaic history that reveals instances of black struggle, resistance, and progress during a period of heightened racial (Jim Crow segregation), political (the Red Scare), and economic tension. Essential to this process is not only the need to locate the voices of Boston’s black past, whether in text, testimony, sound and beyond, but also to create the conditions to hear them on their own terms. In order to achieve this, emphasis here is placed on tracing instances of voice, and as a by-product heritage, in musical form from the arrival of the first slaves to Boston in the first-half of the seventeenth century and analysing the ways in which these voices were perpetuated through methods of adaptation, appropriation, and evolution. This approach would ultimately assist in enriching the Jazz Age with a black art form that was not only unique but a distinct form of expression for a race lacking a significant voice in America at the time. In this respect, this thesis looks at the ways in which homegrown Boston musicians, such as Johnny Hodges and Harry Carney, and frequenting players, such as Duke Ellington, used jazz music as a way to oppose standard forms of white dominance, cultural elitism, and economic subjugation.

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largely Irish-American police force organized in order to gain not only higher pay, but shorter hours and better working conditions. The Boston Custom House circa 1900. Since the building was constructed on a landfill, the structure is supported by 3,000 wooden piles that extend down to the bedrock. In the early 20th century, increased shipping created a need for expansion of the custom house, so the Peabody and Stearns architecture firm started construction a 26-floor tower on the Custom House in 1913. In 1919, an infamous crime took place in a room at the Buckminster when a bookie, named Joseph “Sport” Sullivan met with the Chicago White Sox first baseman, Arnold “Chick” Gandil, and hatched a plan to fix the 1919 World Series. Proceeds from the sale went to funding affordable housing in Boston. The building was converted into a hotel and features 220 rooms.