Smoking and all that Jazz

In a dimly lit basement club a small jazz combo plays for a semi-attentive audience. A low conversational murmur, punctuated by the occasional clinking of glasses, provides the musicians with a permanent drone over which they weave their improvised counterpoint. A thick pall of smoke hangs over the entire proceedings, undiminished by the fruitless aspirations of the air conditioning system. The pianist, small beads of perspiration forming on his brow, plies his trade with a cigarette permanently drooping from the corner of his mouth; likewise the drummer. Since neither of them require their mouths for their work the ashtrays carefully positioned on their instruments become increasingly full as the evening wears on, the level of discarded butts signifying in inverse proportion the time remaining for this particular engagement. The saxophonist and trumpeter are also smoking, but each must wait for the other's solo before their next inhalation, their cigarettes kept close at hand by being wedged in their instruments, ready for a swift drag in the break afforded by a few bars' rest…

This image, albeit stereotypical to the point of cliché, will appear familiar to many as a result of the myriad films, photographs and other media which present jazz musicians in settings similar to the one evoked above. Yet, like all stereotypes, while such images may embellish or exaggerate the facts, they contain kernels of truth. The evolution of jazz, that quintessentially 20th-century musical genre, is indeed intertwined with the increasingly widespread use of tobacco products over the course of that century. Cigarettes, cigars and even pipe-smoking have all played their part in creating and sustaining the images we have of jazz musicians, stereotypical or otherwise, and the role of marijuana – particularly in the 1920s and '30s – is especially significant.

Moreover, the tobacco industry influenced the early development of jazz not only through the consumption of its products, but also because the paraphernalia associated with smoking appears to have furnished some musicians with rudimentary instruments. Jazz literature supplies us with several anecdotes of jazz and bluesmen of limited means utilising cigar boxes, particularly, to this end. Sidney Bechet, at the tender age of 13, is reputed to have fashioned such a box into a crude instrument, and played it in a club.[1] Elsewhere, Big Bill Broonzy recounted a similar tale to Alan Lomax:

> I hung around Old Man See-See Rider till I figured out how his guitar and fiddle were made. Then I went to the commissary and they give me a cigar box and a big wooden box, and me and my buddy name Louis made a guitar out of the big box and I made a fiddle out of the cigar box. Then I went to the

> woods and cut a hickory limb and I stole thread from my mama to make a bow. Way we got strings, me an Louis would go to the picnics and barrelhouses and wait for See-See Rider to break a string. We would tie them broken strings together and put them on our home-made instruments.[2]

Among the impoverished underclasses of the southern United States cigar boxes were clearly a valuable resource, and could be put to use in ways far beyond their manufacturer's expectations.

The origins of jazz remain controversial. While few dispute that it evolved in New Orleans in the first decades of the 20th century, the common assertion that it arose in the whorehouses of that town's red-light district, where prototypical jazz musicians would be employed to entertain clients who were not otherwise engaged, is rather more contentious. Certainly Bechet, whose significance in those early days rivalled that of Louis Armstrong, disputes this view. He writes in his (not always accurate) autobiography:

> People have got an idea that the music started in whorehouses…[But] the musicianers [*sic*] would go to those houses just whenever they didn't have a regular engagement or some gig they was playing, when there was no party or picnic or ball to play at […] All that what's been written about you got to play your instrument in a whorehouse, it's all wrong […] How can you say jazz started in whorehouses when the musicianers didn't have no real need for them?[3]

Notwithstanding Bechet's observations, however, the musicians who constituted this early jazz fraternity were invariably tainted by their association with pastimes which were deemed either illegal, immoral, or both. Gambling, promiscuity, and the consumption of alcohol – the latter often to excess even in prohibition times – were activities frequently associated with the musicians of the day, and not without good cause. Alcoholism was a particular problem and disrupted a number of careers, notably that of the great cornettist Bix Beiderbecke. Yet it was difficult for early jazz musicians to avoid the temptations of these disparate vices, since much of the illegal traffic in them occurred in the settings where the musicians themselves worked. This was true not only of the brothels and other nefarious institutions of New Orleans, but also later in the clubs of Kansas, Chicago and New York, to where many of the musicians migrated during the 1920s and '30s.

Of course smoking itself was never prohibited, and neither, in its earliest days, was marijuana. Thus, as the jazz tradition moved from the south to the north, so this mildly hallucinogenic drug appears to have become increasingly popular among jazz players.

Although initially more prevalent among white musicians than black[4] it quickly became established on both sides of the colour divide. It was comparatively cheap, since it could be cultivated under back-yard conditions, and appears to have been introduced in the Chicago area by migrant Mexicans and southern Blacks.[5] It was referred to by a variety of monikers such as 'the mezzes,' 'muggles,' 'tea,' or 'weed,' and was smoked in the form of cigarettes called 'reefers', which were available both on the streets and in the clubs and dance halls where musicians were usually employed. Users were referred to as 'Vipers', and many of these slang terms found their way into the titles and lyrics of pieces composed at the time. Fats Waller's *Viper's Drag,* Louis Armstrong's *Muggles,* and other numbers such as *Golden Leaf Strut, Chant Of The Weed* or *Smoking Reefers,* to give just a few examples, all testify both to the widespread use and popularity of marijuana at this time, as well as the musicians' readiness to pay homage to it in their music.

There is some debate as to how much it was actually smoked in performance, with much of its use apparently occurring in the socialising of musicians away from specific performance events. Those musicians who do admit to having used it seldom suggest that they actually played while under its influence. Hoagy Carmichael, for example, claims to have smoked marijuana only during social gatherings.[6] Many musicians suggest that it stifled creativity, or at least, reduced their musical abilities in some way.[7] However, given the many references to joints being rolled backstage or in intervals between sets, it is inconceivable that certain musicians were not under the influence of the drug during at least some of their performances. One significant individual certainly suggests this the case, and in fact goes so far as to claim that marijuana was extremely beneficial to his musical performances: his name is Mezz Mezzrow.

Mezzrow is a key figure in the relationship between jazz culture and marijuana, as he was one of the major suppliers to musicians and others in the 1920s and '30s. Indeed, he was so closely identified with marijuana that it was from his name that the euphemistic description of the drug as 'the mezzes' evolved. Mezzrow's talents as a musician are much disputed; the bass player Pops Foster later wrote that Mezzrow 'just stands up there and goes toot-toot-toot. I like him, but man he can't play no jazz.'[8] Thus Mezzrow is perhaps remembered less for his playing (although he made numerous recordings) than for his highly stylised autobiography *Really the Blues*, a work written in sometimes comical Runyon-esque language which nevertheless conveys a colourful if often fanciful memoir of his life and times. Mezzrow was a white musician of Jewish stock, although he attempted his whole life to deracinate his origins by affecting the mannerisms and particularly the jive talk which was common among coloured musicians of the time. Indeed, so obsessive was his pursuit of 'negrification' that he later came to believe that he had actually, physically, begun to turn black.

Mezzrow was frequently to be found in bars and brothels, and demonstrated an unabashed fondness of the low life. But his openness surrounding his relationship with both marijuana and other musicians is illuminating. He expounds at length his belief that the drug, which he describes here as 'tea', could only enhance a musician's performance:

> Tea puts a musician in a real masterly sphere, and that's why so many jazzmen have used it. You look down on the other members of the band like an old mother hen surveying her brood of chicks…The most terrific thing is this, that all the while you're playing, really getting off, your own accompaniment keeps flashing through your head, just like you were a one-man band. You hear the basic tones of the theme and keep up your pattern of improvisation without ever getting tangled up […] You hear everything at once and you hear it right. When you get that feeling of power and sureness, you're in a solid groove.[9]

Mezzrow's idealistic claims for the drug are taken a stage further when he compares his own circles with those musicians who were overly fond of alcohol, going beyond simply comparing lifestyles and arguing for the greater musical achievements of the 'vipers' over the 'bottle babies':

> We were on another plane in another sphere compared to the musicians who were bottle babies, always hitting the jug and then coming up brawling after they got loaded. We liked things to be easy and relaxed, mellow and mild, not loud or loutish […] Besides, the lushies didn't even play good music – their tones became hard and evil, not natural, soft and soulful – and anything that messed up the music instead of sending it on its way was out with us. We members of the viper school were for making music that was real foxy, all lit up with inspiration and her mammy. The juice guzzlers went sour fast on their instruments, then turned grimy because it preyed on their minds.[10]

Unfortunately Mezzrow's idealism with regard to the beneficial effects of marijuana sit uncomfortably with his biographical details, and his book graphically describes his later descent into opium ('hop') addiction and his struggles to wean himself off this latter narcotic. But while many of his claims are far-fetched, and his association with the musical luminaries of his day probably rather more one-sided than he suggests, there is no doubting his pivotal role in the distribution of marijuana among jazz musicians of his time.

Mezzrow's name is also significant because he was a close associate of, and doubtless regular supplier to, perhaps the most high-profile user of marijuana, Louis Armstrong. Armstrong's own predilection for the drug was well known in the 1920s and '30s, and although he claims to have later given it up – others dispute this – he retained fond memories of its effect. The following reminiscence, made just before his death in 1971, makes this clear. In his inimitable style Armstrong here reveals his own favourite slang word for the drug – 'gage (gauge)' – although he also refers to it as 'Mary Warner'. He suggests that it was the legal penalties for being caught in possession which finally persuaded him to give up:

> As we always used to say, gage is more of a medicine than a dope. But with all the riggermaroo going on, no one can do anything about it. After all, the vipers during my haydays (*sic)* are way up there in age – too old to suffer those drastic penalties. So we had to put it down. But if we all get as old as Methusela our memories will always be of lots of beauty and warmth from gage. Well that was my life and I don't feel ashamed at all. Mary Warner, honey, you sure was good and I enjoyed you 'heep much'. But the price got a little too high to pay (law wise). At first you was a 'misdomeanor'. But as the years rolled on you lost your misdo and got meanor and meanor. (Jailhousely speaking). Sooo 'Bye Bye,' I'll have to put you down, Dearest.[11]

Armstrong, who became increasingly famous through the 1930s, may also have been concerned about his image and reputation, particularly once he attained his later international stardom. And he never forgot that it was his use of marijuana which had landed him in a Californian jail for ten days or so in March 1931, while awaiting trial for possession. Even at this time he was enough of a celebrity for the case to have made the front pages of the Chicago newspapers, with some writers speculating that he was facing a six-month jail sentence. Eventually he was given a suspended sentence, perhaps even to the relief of the detectives who arrested him, since Armstrong later recounted that his arrest and detention was a surprisingly convivial experience, and only instigated after a tip-off from a rival band leader whose business was being affected by the popularity of Armstrong's shows; even the police agreed that the bandleader in question was probably a marijuana user himself.[12]

Marijuana consumption became sufficiently widespread that it established itself as an integral part of jazz culture, even an essential prop in the oral/aural tradition by which musical and technical knowledge was disseminated. The trumpeter Buck Clayton recalls the occasion when he asked Armstrong how he performed a gliss (slide) on the trumpet; this resulted in an impromptu lesson given in a backstage toilet, accompanied by a shared joint:

> And he gave me a cigarette. It was a brown cigarette, not the kind that I had been used to seeing. I looked at the cigarette and I guess he knew that I didn't know just what it was, so he said, 'Here, let me have it.' So he sat on the stool and lit it. He puffed on it and then he said, 'Now I'll tell you'. Then he puffed again and handed it to me, kinda grinnin' like. I took it and I puffed on it too […] I puffed on it again and give it back to Pops, he puffed on it again and gave it back to me. This went on until the whole cigarette was gone.[13]

Not only was smoking 'tea' part of the socialisation of musicians, but those who did not indulge were often under great pressure to conform to the behaviour patterns of those who did. Paul Berliner writes of the bass player Buster Williams that before he embarked on his first professional tour, his father 'took him aside and taught him how to smoke marijuana "without inhaling" so as neither to offend other musicians nor pick up their bad habits.'[14] Another (unnamed) musician gives a similar insight into the peer pressures inherent within jazz culture:

> I didn't go out with the others and hang out and get high. I remember the drummer once saying to me, 'Man. Why don't you ever hang out? You hold yourself apart.' I said, 'I have to play with you. That's my job. It doesn't mean I have to marry you and do what you do'. It's nice when everybody likes everybody in a group, but I'll be damned if I'm going to smoke dope and drink just so other people will think I'm nice.[15]

Nor was this pressure to conform only a characteristic of the marijuana-smoking '20s and 30's; it was also notable in the '40s and '50s, when heroin had replaced 'tea' as the drug of choice. Charlie Parker's many acolytes, for example, felt that in order to play like him they had to share his addiction to hard drugs; a misguided idolatry which in many cases had tragic consequences. Although marijuana is non-addictive and appears to many as a relatively harmless recreational drug, those subscribing to the 'one-thing-leads-to-another' theory of narcotic dependency will find much ammunition for their cause in the historically close relationship between jazz musicians and stimulants of various descriptions.

Indeed, it is possible to read the evolution of jazz in terms of the substances its musicians used and abused at any given time. The brashness and conviviality of the New Orleans tradition is suggested by the central role alcohol played in sustaining it; whereas the smoother, even dreamier improvisations of swing players such as Lester Young appear well represented by the more mellow, reverie-inducing effects of marijuana. The fragmented and frenetic lines of bebop are a musical analogue of the psychotic heroin trips which destroyed the lives of so many jazz players in the post-war decades; and even the more modal lines of

Miles Davies or the abstraction of John Coltrane's later work can be seen as a return to a cleaner, less drug-dependent lifestyle, with both of those artists having rejected their previous extensive use of hard drugs and alcohol (although Coltrane continued to smoke until the end of his life).

Drug usage among jazz players is decreasing as musicians, in common with others in the West, become more health conscious.[16] But it is still possible occasionally to smell the sweet edge of the 'wacky baccy' being consumed backstage at a jazz club, as the smoke drifts upwards to linger in the auditorium among the combined exhalations of a small jazz combo…

Notes

[1] David Perry, *Jazz Greats* (London, 1996), p.77.

[2] Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (London, 1994) p.428.

[3] Sidney Bechet, *Treat it Gentle: An Autobiography* (New York, 1960). Cited in Robert Gottlieb, ed., *Reading Jazz: a Gathering of Autobiography, Reportage and Criticism From 1919 to Now* (London, 1997), p.8.

[4] Burton W. Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz: Music, Race, and Culture in Urban America* (Urbana, 1992), p.139.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Hoagy Carmichael, *The Stardust Road* (New York, 1946), p.53.

[7] See Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz,* pp.140-141.

[8] Pops Foster and Tom Stoddard, *Pops Foster: The Autobiography of a New Orleans Jazzman* (Berkeley, 1971) p.167.

[9] Mezz Mezzrow and Bernard Wolfe, *Really the Blues* (London, 1993), p.74.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Max Jones and John Chilton, *Louis: The Louis Armstrong Story* (St. Albans, 1975), p.138.

[12] *Ibid.* p.133.

[13] Cited in Gottlieb, *The Creation of Jazz, p.*71.

[14] Berliner, Paul, *Thinking in Jazz: the Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago, 1994), pp. 40-41.

[15] *Ibid.* p.438.

[16] See *ibid.* p.453.

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