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EPISTROPHY



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When the Blues People sang America to France

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It was the guns of August 1914 that announced the opening of the 20th century. On a hot summer day, Europe blasted itself into the world's first modern, industrial war. Responding to the exigencies of deadly, impassable trenches, the British invented the battle tank, which could only exist because of the recent invention of the internal combustion engine. The German's developed the flamethrower as well as some of the world's most powerful long rang guns. The recently invented airplane gathered intelligence over the battlefield and bombed supplies. Miles of barbed wire which had been created a few years earlier to constrain cattle now stretched across the battlefields to constrain men. And of course there was that deadly weapon of mass destruction, the indiscriminate killer, chlorine gas. This was modernity.

By 1914, a Manichean America, formed by 18th century Virginia Slave Codes rode into the new century on the back of a modern form of slave codes known as "Jim Crow" laws. D.W. Griffith's 1915 blockbuster film, *Birth of a Nation*, articulated the perverse logic of Jim Crow, arguing that the main occupation of otherwise ridiculous and cartoonish black men was to pursue sex with white women. The film's message engendered the rebirth of a moribund Ku Klux Klan. It was a nationwide hit. President Wilson screened it at the White House.

D.W. Griffith's 1915 film, *Birth of a Nation*.

That same year, 1915, saw the beginning of the Great Migration ... black men, women and children fled the South, fleeing the terror of lynching, rape, joblessness, dispossession of property, substandard housing and education, unlawful imprisonment. In 1915, 454,000 ran North ; another 800,000 by 1920. And between 1930 and 1960 nearly 3,348,000 had fled the inhumanity and terror that gripped the South.

One oasis of integration was Washington, D.C. But with the 1912 election of Woodrow Wilson to the presidency, the first southerner to win the office since before the Civil War, Washington was quickly re-segregated through Jim Crow laws by executive order.

Not only was America divided within itself, it also lived in isolation from European affairs. That did not restrain Germany from encroaching on American affairs. The sinking of the *Lusitania* by a German submarine in 1912 was but one such event. Then there was the interception of the Zimmerman telegram in 1917 promising territorial rewards to Mexico if they joined them in a military alliance, while revealing German plans to begin unrestricted submarine warfare against any ship passenger or cargo under the American flag. On April 7, 1917, a month after the telegram was authenticated, President Wilson and the U.S. Congress declared war against Germany.

America goes to War ... "over there".

Through all of its major wars ... from the Revolutionary War in 1776, the War of 1812, the Civil War, to the Spanish-American war of 1898 ... the U.S. government relied upon federalized state militias to provide for the nation's defense, which always included black soldiers. On April 6, the standing U.S. army was made up of a constabulary force of 127,151 soldiers with a National Guard of 181,620 men, hardly a military sufficient to go to war. So on May 18, 1917, Congress passed the Selective Service Act requiring all men between the ages of 21 and 30 to register for the draft, an age limit that was later extended to 45 years old. This included black men.

The 15th Infantry Regiment, New York National Guard

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The black radical effort to form its own militia can be traced to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. This law levied a fine of \$1000 (about \$30,000 today), against anyone who did not capture or return a run-away slave to the South. All law officers were obliged to track down suspects. The law led to the mass arrest of black men and women. In New York, the black population decided that to invest in military service would be worth the risk of injury or death in order to fight against this official injustice. They met in April 1861 with a goal of encouraging young men of Brooklyn and Williamsburg of the need to introduce military science tactics as part of the educational process for their own defense and for the nation as well. This is the seed that would bloom into the 15th Infantry Regiment which would become famous as the 369th Harlem Hellfighters.

Not only were black men not allowed to integrate white Guard units, the commander of the New York National Guard, Major General John F. O' Ryan was openly and vehemently opposed to the formation of a black infantry regiment. To the very end he made every effort to kill it. In June 1913, despite his strong opposition as well as opposition from the U.S. War Department, New York Governor William Sulzer authorized the formation of a black New York National Guard infantry regiment. It would take three more years, until May 25, 1916 for New York Governor Whitman to authorize the unit's organization. The first day of enrollment for the new 15th Infantry Regiment of the New York National Guard, under the command of Col. William Hayward was on June 29, 1916.

Even so, these soldiers would not be allowed to integrate and parade along Fifth Avenue when New York's 42nd Infantry Division, the famous Rainbow Division, went off to war because as they were told "black is not a color of the rainbow". Nonetheless, these black soldiers, the Harlem Hellfighters, would ultimately be the first combat soldiers to engage in the Great War.

They sang America to France

The only possession the enslaved black men and women, these blues people, could retain after their arrival in Jamestown from their West African home in 1619 was their voice. All other semblance of their humanness ... family, name, agency ... all ... would be stripped from them as they were slowly but surely relegated to the status of livestock.

That voice, what we call "call and response", reproduced the stories and tales of Africa. They sang of life as a piece of property in a forsaken land. Today we know that song as country blues, classic blues, gospel, swing, ragtime, jazz, fusion, and now hip-hop. Their songs are the confirmation of their history. "Music", as Amiri Baraka wrote, "was explaining the history as the history was explaining the music". "This is where we trace", he continued, "from the railroad of human bones ... at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, the very path and life and development, tragedy, and triumph of Black people". This song plays a strong role in the ideology of black radical resistance, creativity and resilience going back to Gorée Island.

Amiri Baraka (LeRoy Jones) sings « Africa »

Among the more gifted of those blues people was a young African American violinist and pianist born in Mobile, Alabama in 1880, James Reese Europe. His father had been among the enslaved. When James was 9-years old, his family moved to Washington, D.C. Then in late 1902 or early 1903, the young prodigy moved to New York, the mecca for Black musicians. He quickly made a name for himself as an organizer, a leading figure in black musical comedy and inspiring musician. Vernon and Irene Castle heard him play and hired him on the spot as their musical director. Europe's name was known in society circles along the east coast. In May, 1912 he held a sold out concert at New York's Carnegie Hall to rave reviews.

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When the 369th was formed, its commander, Col. William Hayward asked New York's most popular musician to form "the best orchestra in the Army". With that Lt. James Reese Europe stepped into history as one of the leading figures in introducing jazz to France and the world.

That story begins when the 369th landed at Brest on the west coast of France on January 1, 1918. The first American infantry regiment to arrive. On that day, Lt. James Reese Europe assembled his 48-piece orchestra on the dock and led his orchestra as they played the French national anthem, the "Marseillaise"... in ragtime !

The Trenches

After two months of arduous labor, building the wharf at Brest for the rest of the American Army to land, and railroads, General Philippe Pétain was able to convince General John J. Pershing to "loan" these 2000 soldiers to the French army. With that the 369th was integrated into the 4th French Army, 16th Division. They were issued the French "Adrian" helmet, the French rifle and by March 1918 were in training as front-line combat soldiers. And, much to the chagrin of American authorities, they were welcomed with open arms by their fellow French soldiers. When the war ended that November, the 369th would have been in combat for 191 days with no relief ... longer than any other American military unit. The entire unit earned France's highest military award, the Croix de Guerre. 171 of them won individual "*Croix de Guerre*". The first was Private Henry Johnson for his heroic efforts in single handedly holding off a German patrol. It would take another 100-years before America recognized his heroism. It wasn't until Barack Obama was president, that Private Johnson was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

The 369th was one of four African American units to participate and earn acclaim in the Great War. There was also the famous 370th from Illinois, with its own heroes serving with the French 34th, 36th and 59th Infantry Regiments. The 371st and the 372nd Infantry Regiments who fought with the famous French 157th "Red Hand" Division.

This story spread among African American communities across the U.S. as an oral history. Black Americans knew there was a country and a people who welcomed them as fellow members of the human community. When they returned home they were quickly reminded that they were no longer in France. After the 369th's great victory parade up 5th Avenue to Harlem, the joy quickly recedes to the horror of carnage, rioting, and murder against America's black community in 1919 known as "Red Summer". The stage for these riots was primarily Chicago and St. Louis.

But the legacy that these soldiers left opened a cultural avenue between black America and France that resonates until today.

Following these soldiers to France were such African American scholars as W.E.B. DuBois, who convened the first Pan-African Congress in Paris in 1919 ; Alain Locke conceived of the idea of the Harlem Renaissance while in Paris in 1920. Eugene Bullard, the African American soldier who first fought with the French Foreign Legion and was wounded at Verdun, went on to fly with the French Escadrille. Having learned to play drums from Louis Mitchell was a key figure at the celebrated night club, the Grand Duc, in Montmartre. A young Josephine Baker, having witnessed the murder of black people as a child in East St. Louis, found a home in France. Sidney Bechet made his name in Paris ; and as the years passed others such as Richard Wright and James Baldwin arrived. Most recently in 2011, UNESCO, headquartered in Paris, officially designated April 30 as the International Day of Jazz, chaired and led by the French Director General of UNESCO, Audrey Azouley and legendary African American jazz pianist and composer, Herbie Hancock, UNESCO ambassador of Intercultural Dialogue.

And the echo of that song lives on and on.

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Post-scriptum :

Curtis Young, an American resident of France, earned his Masters and DEA in European cultural and intellectual history from the University of California. He is a lauréat of the Chateaubriand Fellowship in Humanities and Social Sciences and a professor of American literature at ESSEC Grandes Ecoles. He is now actively engaged in research that examines the role played by African-American soldiers of the 369th Infantry Harlem Hellfighters. In 1918 these soldiers were permanently attached to the 16th Infantry Division of the 4th French Army under the command of General Henri Gouraud. Young focuses on the social and political America that produced these soldiers with an equally close reading of their reception in France and the cultural space their presence opened, creating a link between France and African-American music, art and literature which has lasted until today. He is the originator of an exhibit that will highlight these events and is development for a documentary film on this subject.