

WHAT IS "JAZZ?"

Now that W. Franke Harling (white) has made a so-called jazz transposition of that melodious Negro spiritual, "Deep River," and in his explanatory notes that in it "jazz rhythms abound in operatic style," the question of the composite make-up of "jazz" has received a new impetus.

A few weeks ago, Paul Whitehead (white), famous orchestral conductor, made the assertion that "jazz" came to this country with the first shipment of Negro slaves, who wove into their songs a broken rhythm which depicted their woe and anguish.

What is "jazz?" Is it a new or old rhythm? By what peculiarities does it identify itself, and is its origin pure or adulterated? We would say, and with greatest respect for all the opinions which have been thrown into the musical melting pot of syncopation, that jazz is the child of "Ragtime" and the grandchild of a semi-broken rhythm which attended the early efforts of white musical writers to musical minister to their comic descriptions of Negroes.

Then so-called days of "coon-shouter" probably marked the embryo period of jazz. May Irwin, singing "I'm a Little Alabama Coon," and "When I go That Levee Round," was probably one of the forecasters of the jazz period. Next quickened syncopation made possible by the physics governing the playing of mandolins and banjos brought about the idea of a jerky syncopation which could be reduced to musical scripts.

Negroes contributed no little part to this banjo-mandolin vehicle of the new and catchy rhythm. When Bert Williams and George Walker took the road with the "Sons of Ham," the broken rhythm featured several of their songs. In the meantime, white music writers were feverishly copying the new syncopation and moulding it into tunes like "Dixieland," "Feter Piper" and other original syncopation.

Then, Will Marion Cook, our own greatest artist, came out with a clean cut melody, "Emancipation Day," which, in our humble opinion was one of the cornerstones of dignified ragtime or jazz. The period of changed rhythm was then on in full. Shelton Brooks, Will Cook, Will Vardry, William Tyers, Smith; and others of the Race, along with white contemporaries the country over put out song after song into which deft pianists and other instrumental performers put their fullest zeal and talent in an effort to "shake it down" without promptly aborting very musical law ever set up.

There was but one step further to make the jazz age musically complete.

The wood wind and brass instruments such as the clarinet, bassoon, and saxophone, therefore but mere adjuncts and embellishers in orchestra fantasies, were given thematic parts. The change has been complete. Jazz is a race of aborted syncopation and intransigent. It is probably here to say, in order to appease the exotic period which recreation seems to demand nowadays.

Its origin cannot be definitely described. It has no limitations. It is the "chop suey" of the musical world but the world seems to want more and more of it, sad though that fact be; and it is a blessing that Schuman, Mozart and Mendelssohn are not present to hear it, for they would think, indeed, that they had lived in vain.