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The Culture and Music of American Cabaret

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A DEPARTMENT HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE
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Chapter 1: Before American Cabaret

My thesis will explore the history of American cabaret with purposeful attention given to the music. The first chapter will discuss the origins of cabaret in Europe and the music that defined each movement of cabaret. The majority of the thesis will discuss American cabaret and will include three chapters: one chapter discussing the American cabaret movement and its history, one chapter dedicated to the music of American cabaret from the early 20th century to World War II, and a small chapter discussing the current neo-cabaret movement currently happening in the United States.

A cabaret is a place of entertainment that offers a wide variety of showmanship, food, and drink. There is often dancing both on stage and on the floor, which naturally creates a great demand for music.[1] Theatrical skits and singing provide an essential connection between performers and patrons. The word "cabaret" stems from the French *cambret, cameret,* or *camberete,* for wine cellar, tavern, or small room, but ultimately comes from the Latin *camera,* for chamber. Indeed, cabaret could not exist without space, for it is, at its simplest, a performance. In their earliest days, cabarets were performance venues. They were places of spectacle, but also places of intimacy where people could smoke, eat, drink, and be entertained.[2] Eric Bronner gives a general description of what cabaret is: "Cabaret is the unique and titillating genre in which artistic experimentation and expression meet social commentary, political criticism, and popular culture."[3] Cabaret is an

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[1] Klaus Wachsmann and Patrick O'Connor, "Cabaret," *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed March 26, 2014, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/04505.

[2] Lisa Appignanesi, *The Cabaret* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 9.

[3] Eric Bronner, "Cabaret for the Classical Singer: A History of the Genre and a Survey of Its Vocal Music," *Journal of Singing: The Official Journal of the National Association of Teachers of Singing* 60, no. 5 (2004): 453.1

abstract idea that transcends mere performance or space. It implies a certain type of atmosphere ripe with possibilities for innovation and avant-garde experimentation. Cabaret is an attitude, an underlying spirit, which gives body to decadence, improvisation, satire, and music.[4]

American cabaret was the last great extension of a celebrated movement that began in the cafes of Paris and Berlin. It adapted an interpretive performance tradition that reflected the reaction of an artistic intelligentsia to European political and social realities into a variant that was expressive of the vibrancy of newly emerging jazz styles, the optimistic energy of Northern U. S. urban centers, and the uniquely American ways in which its society negotiated issues of social mores and race.

Cabaret in Paris: 1881-1900

Like any genre of music, artistic cabaret, or *cabaret artistique*, was a reflection of what preceded it socially. The rough transition from the Third Empire to the Third Republic in Paris in the 1870's following the Franco-Prussian war resulted in an atmosphere of discontent and restlessness. Creative endeavors outside of official institutes were a way to circumvent the repressive social environment. Artists and literary figures began to gather in cafés to discuss art, literature, politics, the social climate, and to present their recent work to fellow bohemians. These forums gradually became organized clubs, the most notable of which was the Hydropathes (Wet Apostles), founded by Emile Goudeau at the Café de la Rive-Gauche in 1878. Figures like the famous *chansonnier* Jules Juoy,

[4] Klaus Wachsmann and Patrick O'Connor, "Cabaret."

illustrator and painter Adolphe Wilete, humorist Alphonse Allais, and poets Charles Cros, Albert Samain, and Jean Richepin all belonged to this organize club of artists.[5]

Before cabaret, *café-chantant*, later renamed *café-concert*, was established in a wine cellar named *Café des Aneugles* (Café of the Blind) in the mid 19th century. The Café hired an orchestra of blind men to play during dinner. The show was expanded to include singers and dancers and the idea caught on. Guests could enjoy light music and small dance numbers, with optional partaking, while dining. Imitation *café-concerts* started popping up everywhere. However, the music was limited to second-rate musicians playing or singing patriotic or sentimental songs with poorly tuned pianos and small platform stages. Nevertheless, the *café-concert* was cabaret's closest and most influential ancestor.[6]

After the Franco-Prussian war, Montmartre quickly became a home to artists and entertainers. For the next two decades, this rural section of Paris became the center of bohemian life and avant-garde intellectual and artistic life. One of the defining features of this flourishing community was the availability of cafés and cabarets. France was the first European country with universal manhood suffrage, and this idea of equality was promoted in Montmartre most of all, as artists sought to breach the high/low cultural dynamic.[7] In short, this was the ideal place to establish what became the most famous cabaret in the world – le Chat Noir (The Black Cat).[8]

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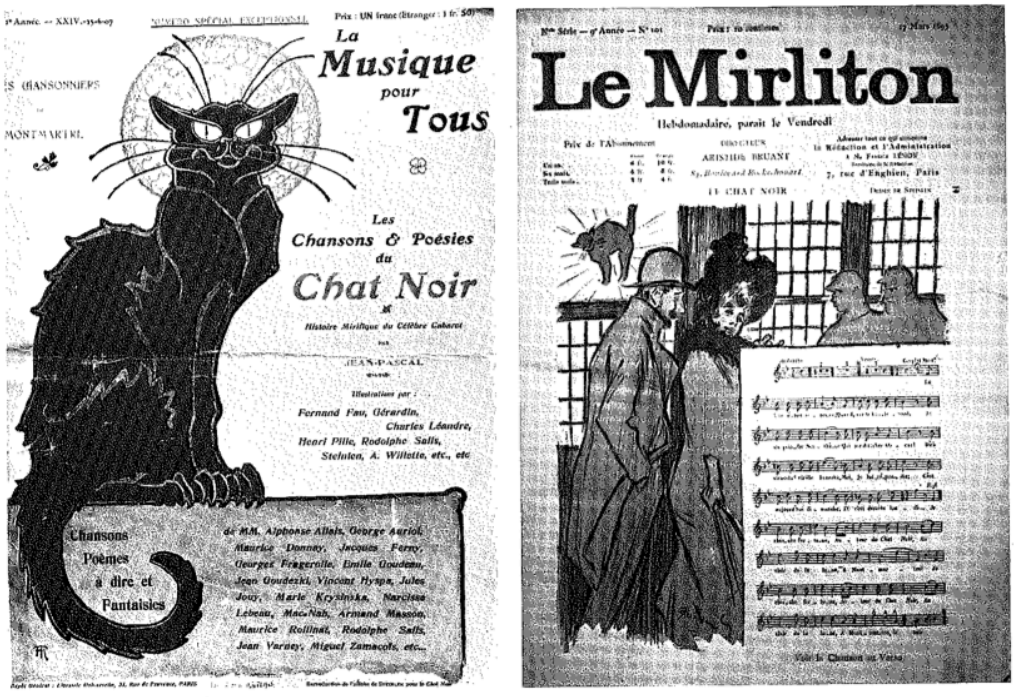
[5] John Houchin, "The Origins of The "Cabaret Artistique," *The Drama Review: TDR* 28, no. 1 (1984): 5.

[6] Houchin, "The Origins," 6.

[7] Armond Fields, *Le Chat Noir: A Montmartre Cabaret and Its Artists in Turn-of-the Century Paris* (Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1993), 7-9.

[8] Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 29.

The Hydropathes lost their building in December of 1881 due to noise violations and general debauchery. Meanwhile, Rudolf Salis, an aspiring yet unsuccessful artist, was opening a cabaret in Montmartre located in an abandoned post office at 84 Boulevard Rochechouart. When Salis learned that the Hydropaths no longer had a home, he invited them to move in, and le Chat Noir became the first cabaret *artistique* – a place for artists to share their work in a public space.[9]



Left: Poster by Théophile Alexandre Steinlen advertising the Chat Noir. Musée du vieux Montmartre. **Right**: The Chat Noir theme song illustrated by Steinlen. Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris.

The name "Chat Noir" comes from an Edgar Allen Poe short story of the same name. A sign put outside to help patrons locate the establishment was designed by Adolphe Willette. Cut from sheet metal, it featured a black cat sitting on a silver crescent moon. The sign remains as popular, if not more so, than the cabaret itself. The cabaret started as a

[9] Houchin, "Cabaret Artistique," 6.

small and tentative undertaking, open only to performers, artists, and literary folk on Friday nights.[10] However, as its reputation grew, so did the crowd - both in size and diversity. Some came in hopes of sharing their own artistic talents while others simply wanted to fit in with the "regulars." Salis installed a piano a few months after opening and the popularity of the cabaret boomed.[11]

The original Chat Noir cabaret. Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris.

A night at the cabaret was unlike any other experience. Beer and wine were available for men, while tea and coffee were reserved for women. Finger foods, including French fries, were served. Drinks were served by waiters dressed in uniforms of the Academy - short braided jackets and knee-length pants. The décor was seemingly random,

[10] Houchin, "Cabaret Artistique," 7.
[11] Fields, *Le Chat Noir*, 12.

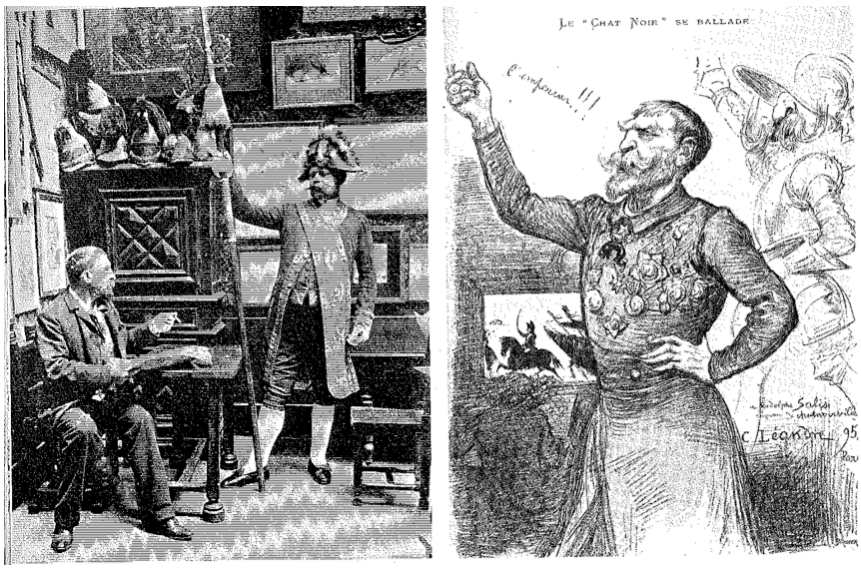
but was, in fact, carefully designed by Salis and his colleagues. Much of the interior featured furniture and artifacts inspired by the Louis XIII period, with grotesque and dark twists. The paneling of the doors and tables and chairs were also of the Louis XIII era. The tables were small and sat four, but could be moved to accommodate more. The walls were mostly green and covered entirely by paintings, drawings, and prints by local artists. The ceiling was home to wrought iron chandeliers and a cacophony of hanging bric-à-brac, including pots, pans, and medieval armor. An immense stone fireplace occupied a corner with a mantle covered in pottery and copper jugs. Numerous candelabra gave lighting to the entire cabaret. A small room in the back called "L'Institut" overlooked the courtyard. Adorned with the same small tables and chairs, regulars would meet there to plan material for the cabaret's weekly journal and critique material for performances.[12]

Salis completely revamped his approach to dinner entertainment. He served as the master of ceremonies for all acts at the Chat Noir and was an attraction in and of himself. He developed a penchant for parodies, particularly at the expense of his audience members.[13] As for music, Salis' shows consisted entirely of acts presented by independent artists and he left musical control to them. He created a haven for those wanting to speak out against bourgeois values and traditions. Performers addressed such issues as the harsh lives of the poor, current affairs, corruption in the government, as well as making fun of the conventional mores of the 'fashionable' elite of the city.

The *chanson* became the primary musical element of cabaret performances. There were many sub-genres of the *chanson* that proliferated on the stage of le Chat Noir, as will be discussed in Chapter 3, but some of the most popular were the *chansons réalists* about

[12] Fields, *Le Chat Noir*, 12-14.
[13] Houchin, "Cabaret Artistique," 7.

street artists and Montmartre and patriotic *chansons françaises*. However, there were also *chansons parodies* and *chansons mélodies* spoofing the grandiose music of opera, particularly that of Wagner, and *chansons satiriques* that made fun of politicians and social figures.[14]



Left: Rodolphe Salis in the "Salle de Conseil" of the Chat Noir. Musée du vieux Montmartre. **Right**: Rodolphe Salis as the conférencier in the Théâtre d'ombres, by C. Léandre, in *Le Rire* (1895). Courtesy of the British Library.

Many composers and performers passed through the Chat Noir. Performers like Jules Jouy, known for his caustic songs and flamboyant performances, became the models for future cabaret performers. Composers such as Charles de Sivry, Georges Fragernolle and Albert Tinchant got their start by providing incidental music and accompaniments to skits.[15] Two notable composers greatly shaped the musical output of la Chat Noir and later cabarets. Aristide Bruant, known as the father of the cabaret *chanson,* was famous for his

[14] Bronner, "Cabaret," 454.
[15] Fields, *Le Chat Noir*, 15.

depictions of harsh street life.[16] He incorporated *argot* (Parisian street slang), into his music, and his "Le Chat Noir Ballade" aptly captured the unique atmosphere of the world's first cabaret. Erik Satie was ahead of his time and his music foreshadowed trends in twentieth century music. While he was born to a bourgeois family and studied at the Paris Conservatory, he drifted toward the bohemian life of Montmartre. He composed for Chat Noir and other cabarets. He collaborated with artists like Cocteau and Picasso and is "credited with inspiring the development of impressionism in Debussy and Ravel, the neoclassicism of Stravinsky, and even anticipating twentieth century minimalism."[17]

In 1884, the Chat Noir had outgrown its original space and an expansion attempt proved to be ineffective. In 1885, the new Chat Noir relocated a few blocks away to a four-story renovated hotel at 12 rue de Laval. The original sign of the black cat followed, as did much of the original décor. The first two floors contained ballrooms for artists to perform in. The fourth story, possibly an attic space, became the new "L'Institut."[18] The third floor was known as the Théâtre d'Ombres and became the main attraction when Henri Somme built a small puppet theater and hung a simple tablecloth behind the stage. One night, as Jouy sang a *chanson*, the painter Henri Rivière moved cutouts in front of a light, and the shadow play was born. Such plays grew more elaborate with time, eventually costing up to 20,000 francs and lasting three hours.[19]

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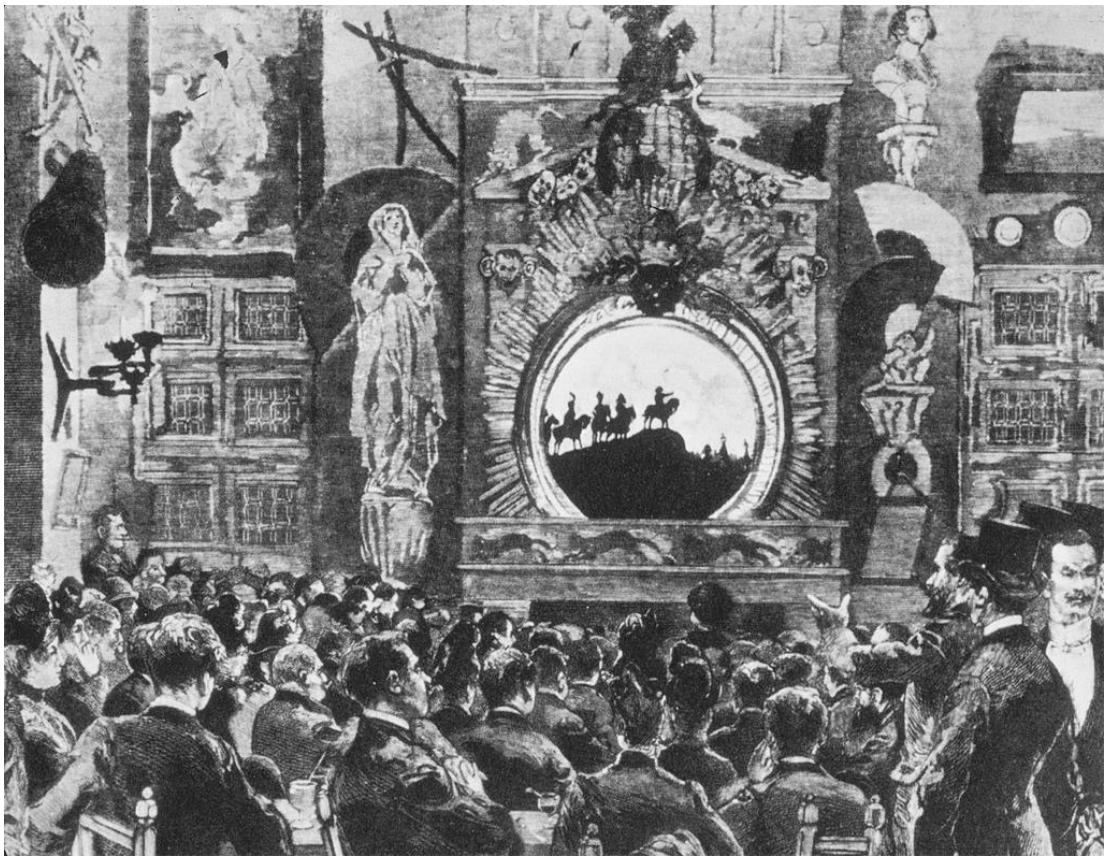
[16] Examples provided in Chapter 3.
[17] Bronner, "Cabaret," 455.
[18] Fields, *Le Chat Noir*, 16-19.
[19] Houchin, "Cabaret Artistique," 8-9.



View of the interior of the Chat Noir during a shadow play (1887). Musée du vieux Montmartre.

Salis died in 1897 and the Chat Noir closed a few months later in the absence of strong leadership. However, through his advocacy, cabaret had become the dominant form of popular entertainment in Paris and it was not long until cabaret spread to Germany.[20]

Cabaret in Germany: 1900-1933

Cabaret's transition from Paris to the Berlin of the Wilhelmine Empire was not smooth due to the repressive social and political conditions, and it took a couple decades before German cabaret was firmly established. In 1900, social, cultural, and political freedoms were in short supply. Bourgeois society stressed conformity and duty to one's family, business, and state. Consumerism was rapidly becoming the biggest measure of

[20] Fields, *Le Chat Noir*, 36.

success, as Berlin took its place as the third largest city in Europe after London and Paris. Government corruption was everywhere and there was strict censorship of the arts. Court artists were reduced to reworking Baroque and Classical forms on themes limited to religious and mythological subjects, or anything that honored the Kaiser.[21]

An emotionally detached attitude paired with high consumerism was reflected in the arts. Trends and fashions in music, literature, and the visual arts were fleeting. Georg Simmel, a writer and lifelong observer of Imperial Berlin, noted that Berlin's rapid development from a large city to a major world capital resulted in a nervous exhaustion in its people. That malaise led to a search for new, yet short-lived, stimulation. There was new energy directed toward finding an art form that adequately captured the spirit of the big city. Cabaret, an offspring of the variety show, or *Variété*, ultimately became that art form.[22]

One of the antecedents to cabaret was the variety show. It was a form of urban entertainment that originated in England as the music hall, in the first half of the nineteenth century. It spread to all parts of Europe as well as to America, where it was known as vaudeville. Shows consisted of an assortment of unconnected, yet "specialized" acts, including songs, popular opera arias, skits, acrobatics, magic tricks, tableaux, and even animal stunts.[23]

One of the more elevated forms of entertainment was the unconventional innovation of the avant-garde that took performances to a level not easily understood by the general public. Berlin needed something that fell between the mindless entertainment

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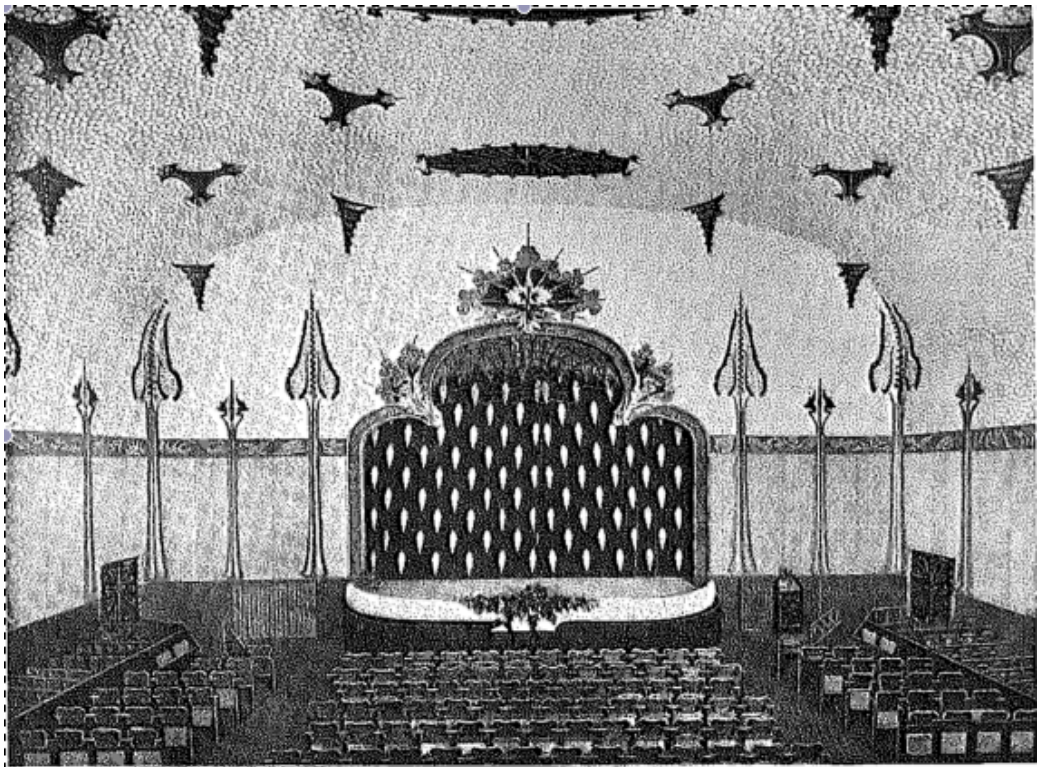
[21] Bronner, "Cabaret," 455.
[22] Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*. Studies in Cultural History (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 17-20.
[23] Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 20.

of the variety show and "incomprehensible esoterism of the avant-garde."[24] Ernst von Wolzogen set out achieve this by creating the *Buntes Theater* (Motley Theater) also known as *Überbrettl*, in 1901. *Überbrettl* received high praises on opening night, but the audience was particularly drawn to its dramatic and risqué songs. However, rather than capitalizing on this, Wolzogen incomprehensibly removed such experimental works from his cabaret performance. Within months, he was overwhelmed by competing cabarets that were still using cutting-edge and risqué material. With no money and the loss of his lease, he was forced to move his cabaret into a commissioned theater by August Endell. However, even that could not save *Überbrettl* and it closed in 1902, less than a year and a half after opening night. [25]



The stage and auditorium of *Überbrettl*, designed by August Endell (1901). From the Resource Collections of the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities.

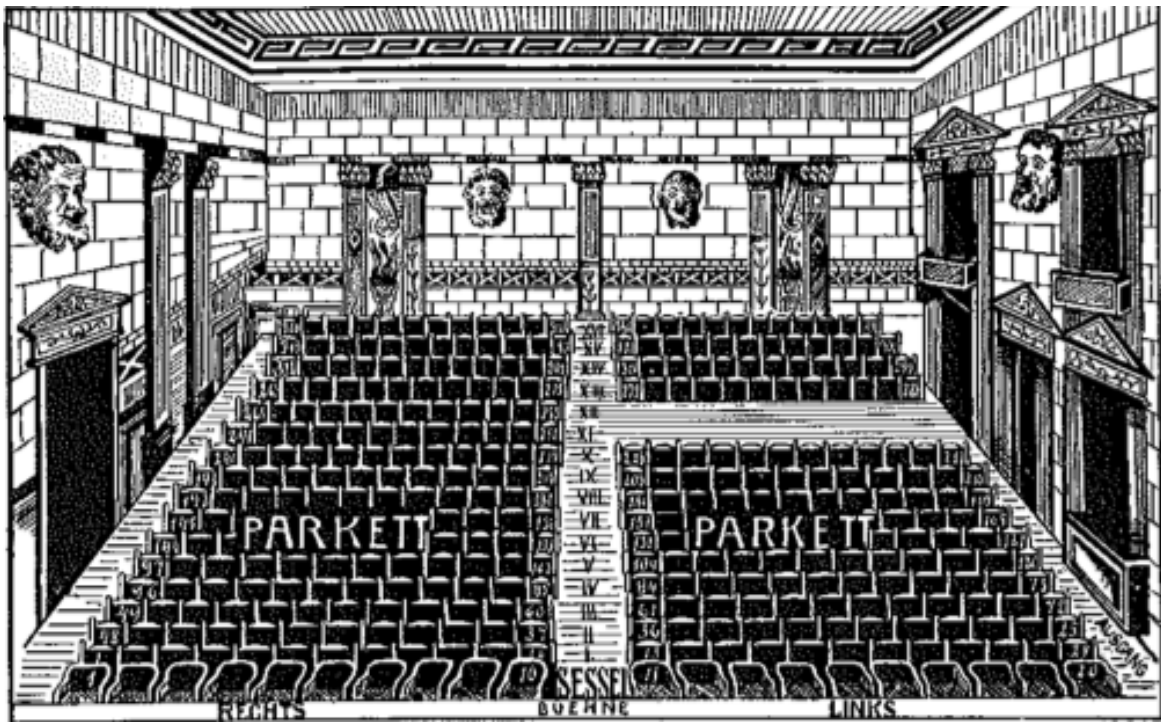
[24] Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 26.
[25] Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 36.

Despite its failure, *Überbrettl* helped launch the careers of composers Oscar Straus and Arnold Schoenberg, who both served as in-house pianists and composers. Straus was largely responsible for the success of the Motley Theater's opening night. The audience called for many encores of his song and dance numbers, particularly the song *Die lustige Ehemann* (The Merry Husband). He is most remembered for his operettas and later composed the famous *A Waltz Dream* and *The Chocolate Soldier*. Schoenberg, who later became famous for his atonal compositions and the twelve-tone row, served as Kappellmeister of *Überbrettl*. Schoenberg composed eight cabaret songs, but only one was performed. The others were too musically difficult or technically demanding for the singers at *Überbrettl*. The songs were rediscovered in the 1970's and have become concert favorites. The texts are from Otto Julius Bierbaum's *Deutsche Chansons* anthology, and are risqué, suggestive, or contain political satire.[26]

Überbrettl differed from Chat Noir in many ways. Wolzogen was less willing to "play bartender" and balked at the casualness of the Parisian cabaret culture. With Wolzogen's cabaret, tickets had to be bought in advance, the audiences did not interact with the performers, and there were no intimate tables, but rather a main stage with seats arranged in rows. Instead, Wolzogen set the stage to look like an intimate room with sofas and a piano, with an orchestra pit further separating the audience from the performers. There was no beer or wine service and Wolzogen's role as master of ceremonies included introducing the performers and then taking a seat to watch. Furthermore, censorship largely prevented *Überbrettl* from including the "political or erotic audacity of the Parisian

[26] Bronner, "Cabaret," 456.

cabarets."[27] All poetry, lyrics, and scripts were to be read and endorsed in advance by a government official, and any material considered provocative, immoral or offensive to the government was prohibited.



The interior of *Schall und Rauch*, designed by Peter Behrens (1901). From Benno Jacobson, *Das Theater* (Berlin: N. Israel Album, 1906).

While Wolzogen's cabaret failed, his chief competitor, Max Reinhardt's *Schall und Rauch* (Sound and Smoke) briefly achieved great success. When *Überbrettl* was reduced to mere vaudeville and later to a stage for one-act plays, *Schall und Rauch* embraced the plays. Because Reinhardt's shows did not have the risqué element of Wolzogen's, his shows were not as censored. *Schall und Rauch* began to give performances for theater connoisseurs. Reinhardt held his audience's attention with theatrical parody and political satire. When

[27] Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 45-46.

that novelty began to wear off, he switched to one-act and full-length plays but retained the vitality of and vigor of his cabaret acts.[28]

Despite their differing styles, Wolzogen and Reinhardt had started a revolution, albeit a fragile one. Numerous pub-cabarets based on the Parisian model showed promise as they "sought to achieve an atmosphere of liberality and expression" appropriate to the Wilhelmine Empire. The successful ventures shared a theme – mirroring society's reaction to repression. There was also an effort to reflect on the futility and pessimism of urbanization. The singer Claire Waldoff embodied the lower-class persona popular on nineteenth-century stages and was considered the ideal "Berliner." Rudolf Nelson's cabaret drew a wealthy and refined audience by playing urbane music, while the Metropol-Theater revues painted Berlin as a modern and fashionable city. However, unbroken success was not to last for any cabaret.[29]

When war broke out in August of 1914, German cabaret ground to a halt. Satire and parody ceased as censorship came under military control. Cabarets either shut down completely or were reduced to patriotic music halls. Liberal and democratic artists were left voiceless and without an audience. Yet, this was not the case everywhere.[30]

Satire and parody found a temporary home in Zurich, Switzerland, during the war. In 1916, performers Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings opened the legendary Café Voltaire. It was named after the French philosopher, François-Marie Arouet (known as Voltaire), a staunch defender of freedom and expression. Ball had been a theater colleague of Reinhardt's in Berlin and relocated to Zurich after the war started. Ball and Hennings were

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[28] Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 62.
[29] Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 85.
[30] Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 118.

important figures in the developing Dada movement. The idea behind Dada was simple: "mankind was turning itself into machines." Dada rejected reason and logic, exalted nonsense, and embraced irrationality and intuition. It was a genre of comedy-tragedy that was abrasive and meant to offend, ironically, considering that the world was in the midst of destroying itself. Ball and his fellow Dadaists were associated with the German expressionist movement and their poignant cabaret performances bridged the gab between public performance art before and after WWI.[31]

Dada Dancers. Courtesy of Mrs. Hans Arp.

[31] William Farina, *The German Cabaret Legacy in American Popular Music* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2013), 21-22. For more discussion on Dada as it relates to theatrical expression.

Dada appeared in Berlin immediately after the war, but proved to be short-lived. The freedom of post-war culture of the Weimar Republic led to a new style of cabaret. Eric Bronner said it best, "The Weimar era brought not only a lifting of censorship but a lifting of skirts as well."[32] This is both literally and figuratively true. The end of censorship brought freedom to the German cabaret. Dada set the stage for both true *avant-garde* expressionism and the introduction of American entertainment and music.[33]

The 1920's witnessed a flood of emotional and powerful cabaret music in Berlin. Max Reinhardt reopened *Schall und Rauch* with Friedrich Hollaender as his music director and Kurt Tucholsky as his house writer. Hollaender left behind a voluminous collection of cabaret songs that blended his formal composition training with popular music styles.[34] Tucholsky, a renowned satirist, provided witty and biting texts for many cabaret composers, including Hollaender, Rudolf Nelson, Misha Spoliansky, and Hanns Eisler.[35]

American music infiltrated German cabaret after WWI. Jazz rhythms and the fox trot began to dominate. Ragtime, blues and other "Negro" music became the norm. Two memorable revues featuring black performers included the *Chocolate Kiddies* with Sam Wooding playing Duke Ellington, and Josephine Baker and Louis Douglas' staged show at Rudolf Nelson's cabaret in 1926. To the Germans, this reinforced the idea that the U.S. was both the most modern and the most primitive nation of the modern world. Modernity was represented by the country's technology whereas primitiveness was embodied in its black

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[32] Bronner, "Cabaret," 457.
[33] Bronner, "Cabaret," 456-457.
[34] Example provided in Chapter 3.
[35] Bronner, "Cabaret," 456.

population. Germans saw the black culture as a "form of vital 'primitivism' appropriate to modern urban life" that brought vital energy to a war-weary nation.[36]

Poignant music and black styles were not the only new characteristics of Weimar cabaret. *Nackttanz* (nude dancing) also flourished. In 1922, the dance troupe Ballet Celly de Rheidt was taken to trial after the public and the police were outraged by rumors of prostitution and of underage girls dancing in the shows. A major part of the debate was whether the shows had artistic merit. The courts established that nudity would be allowed if the figure in question remained immobile.[37] The rise of nudity in a public forum indicated a return to primitivism that embraced the liberation of the body. Such bold acts of defiance became increasingly common as people sought to reclaim their public voice in the Weimar Republic. It cannot be disputed, however, that this is the point in German history where the strip club truly rose to fame.[38]

As the Nazi regime grew, so did its aggressive political nature. The Great Depression and the dawning of the Nazi regime put an end to the popular political cabarets. Some opted to silence themselves and close, while others like Hollaender's Tingel-Tangel underestimated the dangers of insulting Hitler and were forcibly closed or destroyed and their owners exiled. The only successful cabarets were those dominated by the Communist Party for whom cabarets were a public venue to forcibly demonstrate against Nationalist Socialist literature.[39]

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[36] Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 154, 165-170.
[37] The debate on "artistic merit" in such shows continues today.
[38] Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 154, 158-164.
[39] Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 187.

While German cabaret flourished after WWI with the influence of American jazz, American cabaret itself was just beginning. “Black and tan” cabarets took Chicago by storm while New York nightclubs found a place amongst vaudeville and the Broadway revue. As in Germany, jazz proved to be an unstoppable force that propelled American cabaret through the Roaring 20’s and Prohibition and onward. Broadway ballads became a staple of cabaret music repertoire. American cabaret had the intimate atmosphere and openness of Parisian cabarets with the *avant-garde* spirit of the Weimar Republic that attracted people of all social classes, races, and nationalities. It started with big music in small spaces and continued on for decades until the age of television.

Chapter 2: Cabaret in America

While sharing avant-garde performance practices, intelligent musical material, and intimate settings, American cabaret differed in looks, sound, and feeling from its European predecessors. Parisian cabarets prided themselves on their disregard for class and social status; American cabarets developed their own disregard for racial segregation. Jazz was the new exciting sound in America, and the two centers of cabaret culture, Chicago and New York, embraced it with as much gusto as Germany did after WWI. Chicago tended towards the small, intimate setting of a performer with no boundaries between them and the audience. New York embraced the Broadway ballad from its neighbor down the street. The attitude was blithe and the atmosphere was charged.

Cabaret in Chicago

Jazz was the sound that started Chicago's cabaret movement, led by black musicians and quickly spreading to all parts of the city. A mass migration of African Americans took place between 1914 and the 1920's due to labor shortages and economic distress in the rural South. An estimated 500,000 African Americans moved north between 1916 and 1919 alone. The African American population in Chicago doubled within 10 years. Much of the African American population settled in the city's South Side, which would later host Chicago's most popular cabarets.[1]

Cabaret had existed in Chicago on a smaller scale before 1918 when neighborhood saloons hired young female singers for entertainment. Saloons were small bars that occasionally featured small music ensembles, but were known more for their alcohol service than their entertainment. These early cabaret predecessors existed in mixed

[1] Derek Vaillant, *Sounds of Reform: Progressivism and Music in Chicago, 1873-1935* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 202.

residential and commercial areas and catered almost exclusively to white populations, including soldiers coming back from Europe with sophisticated tastes. Only a few actual cabarets existed in the city before the 1920's and they typically featured black musicians playing new jazz styles of music, poignant singers, dance shows, friendly serving girls, and witty skits. After the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment and the establishment of prohibition in 1920, cabarets became more popular for two reasons. In some cases, cabarets found ways to keep the alcohol flowing, typically by bribing local officials. On the other hand, people needed, and actively sought, another form of entertainment at night to regale their attention without alcohol. Thus, both alcohol-friendly and non alcohol-friendly cabarets thrived.[2]

Derek Vaillant, author of *Sounds of Reform: Progressivism and Music in Chicago, 1873–1935*, perfectly describes why cabaret was so appealing to the masses. They "offered a novel form of public, yet intimate entertainment." This generation of youth and adults was used to public drinking and dancing, listening to music, and socializing amongst or with strangers. Cabarets had the affordability of saloons with the added benefit of live music, dancing and "sensual theatricality" not available at mere dance halls.[3]

Chicago cabarets readily dissolved conventional boundaries. Cabarets took on the intimate setting of the Parisian cabarets, rather than the formal theater style of German cabarets. The boundary between performers and audiences vanished because audience members were often encouraged to interact with the performers. Singers and dancers, backed by small bands or ensembles, performed on a small stage in front of seated or dancing patrons. Most cabarets featured a single open space with chairs and tables around

[2] Vaillant, *Sounds of Reform*, 202-203.
[3] Vaillant, *Sounds of Reform*, 203.

the perimeter, a stage at one end, and a clear area in the middle for dancing or floor shows. The performers were never more than a few strides from the audience and often left the stage to continue amongst the dancers, or improvise on songs in response to audience interest. Female singers would roam around, touch patrons, flirt, or even bring audience members up on stage to be a part of the show.[4]

Another boundary was that of conventional mores. Cabarets "embraced bawdiness and sexual interplay between customers as part of the night's entertainment." Indeed, patrons themselves often served as the public spectacle, particularly when racy or titillating routines invited audience participation. Public displays of sexuality became both common and extravagant. In this regard, American cabaret showed influences from its own early predecessors, the musical revue and vaudeville.[5] The musical revue was a multi-act, theatrical entertainment that combined music, dance and skits. Dating back to 19th century America, it was most famous for its visual spectacle. American vaudeville, like German vaudeville, was a descendant of early variety shows in England. However, American vaudeville often featured "cleaner" presentations of variety entertainment, while saloons, music halls, and burlesque houses catered to those with a taste for the risqué.[6]

Cabarets catered to a diverse clientele. Chicago's most famous cabarets, the "black and tan" cabarets, included drinkers defying prohibition, interracial couples, homosexuals, bisexuals, gangsters, "slummers," and white thrill-seekers, amongst others. Even men seeking prostitutes were amongst the norm in the cabaret. Unlike most public leisure venues, black and tan cabarets provided an alternative to the segregated and conventional

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[4] Vaillant, *Sounds of Reform*, 203-204.
[5] Vaillant, *Sounds of Reform*, 204.
[6] Bernard Sobel, *A Pictorial History of Vaudeville* (New York, NY: Bonanza Books, 1961), 22.

sexual environment restrictions. Same-sex couples, blacks, and whites could socialize and dance at black and tan cabarets without "fear of censure or harassment."[7]

Chicago's "black and tan" cabarets date back to 1912. They were named such because they featured whites and blacks performing together and were open to both races. The area of town in question was also called the Black Belt and was a long, narrow north-to-south strip that paralleled Slate Street on the west. Most cabarets were between 28th and 35th, on or near Slate Street. Neighbors of the Black Belt included a white, working-class neighborhood to the west, stockyards a mile out southwest, and railway yards a mile out northwest. Audiences were typically local and came by trolley or by foot. However, audiences became less local as the cabarets became more popular.[8]

Black and tan cabarets attracted music lovers fascinated by African American jazz, from white music connoisseurs to bohemian intellectual college students. Black performers were limited to cabarets in the Black Belt, especially in the early jazz years. Patrons of all races and nationalities started to travel across the city to join the locals in hearing legends like Joe "King" Oliver, who was also a regular grandstand performer at Comiskey Park during White Sox games, Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, Alberta Hunter, and Johnny and Warren "Baby" Dodds.[9] Unlike cabarets in the North or West sides of the city where floorshows or dancing were the main attraction, people flocked to the South Side to hear the music. Even white jazz artists like Art Hodes, Eddie Condon, Milton "Mezz" Mezzarow,

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[7] Vaillant, *Sounds of Reform*, 209.
[8] Ted Vincent, "The Community That Gave Jazz to Chicago," *Black Music Research Journal* 12, no. 1 (1992): 44-46.
[9] Vincent, "The Community," 46.

and Benny Goodman came to admire, or even learn from, the African American jazz artists.[10]

Former heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson opened Chicago's first black and tan cabaret in 1912. Appropriately named the Café de Champion, Johnson's cabaret was the first to welcome both races. Located on the Southside, Johnson hired the Elite Dance Band, a premier jazz band, and a chorus line of African American showgirls to perform "Africanized" dances. Johnson himself was intimately involved with the running of his cabaret and took up the double bass in addition to regularly singing, dancing, and acting in the musical revues. Jack Johnson was a talented singer. Later, he would even land a part in Verdi's *Aïda* at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York.[11]

Despite its immense popularity, the Café de Champion did not last very long. Johnson was tried and convicted of violating the Mann Act when he slept with his white common-law wife after having taken her across state lines. Though Johnson had not in fact been living with the woman in question for two years - thus not considered to be wed in common law - the jury convicted him anyway. Johnson skipped bail and fled to Mexico.[12]

Chicago's cabaret scene boomed and cabarets popped up everywhere around the city, reaching as high as eighty-three at one point. This trend would continue from 1917 to America's entry into World War II. Chicago further benefitted from the continued influx of African American laborers from the South and gained a new crop of jazz musicians from New Orleans in 1917 when the legendary nightlife district Storyville was shut down.[13]

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[10] Vaillant, *Sounds of Reform*, 208-209.
[11] Vincent, "The Community," 44-45.
[12] Vincent, "The Community," 45.
[13] Vincent, "The Community," 45.

In 1917, Bill Bottoms, a friend of Johnson's, opened the Dreamland Café. A year later, he financially backed his housemate, Virgil Williams, who opened the Royal Gardens dance hall. Williams set up his venue in the bench-seating style of New Orleans dance halls and featured New Orleans musicians. In 1919, Bottoms, Williams, Frank Preer, another cabaret proprietor of the DeLuxe Café, funded the Chicago *Whip*, a weekly advertisement for Chicago nightlife. Between 1917 and 1921, these three men and their establishments were undeniably the leaders of the cabaret scene and featured the best jazz talent of the age.[14]

In early 1921, Bill Bottoms' Dreamland featured an impressive lineup of talent. Louis Armstrong wowed the crowds and female blues singers like Hunter, Bessie Smith, and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey impressed with raunchy lyrics, beautiful gowns, and flawless showmanship. Door prizes, raffles, and confetti throwing added to the excitement. Alberta Hunter, the lead vocalist in King Oliver's "Greatest Jazz Band on Earth," was so renowned that white jazz and pop artists came from all over to see and hear her talent. Hunter recalled Sophie Tucker sending her maid to scope out the competition and her piano player to take notes.[15]

Chicago had an over abundance of musicians at this point. In addition to the arrival of jazz musicians from New Orleans, performers came in droves for the Chicago University of Music, a renowned conservatory run by soprano Florence Cole Talbert, for the competitive church music scene, or to join the Musicians' Union Local 208, the first American Federation of Labor (AFL) for black musicians. Good musicians were everywhere and artists often moved between fields. For example, Dave Peyton, a popular South Side musician, organized concert music groups, led pit orchestras in the large vaudeville houses,

[14] Vincent, "The Community," 45-46.
[15] Vincent, "The Community," 48-49.

served as a bandleader for jazz cabarets, edited the music and theater section of the *Whip*, and was a columnist for the *Chicago Defender.*[16]

In addition to great jazz music and an open atmosphere, there were other factors that made cabaret successful. The venues were usually small, which reduced rental prices for the black working class that would not have been able to afford it otherwise. The DeLuxe Café shared its building and name with a billiard parlor. The Chinese-American sector of Chicago bordered the northern part of the Black Belt, so many cabarets featured Chinese food as a business partnership. Furthermore, mayor William "Big Bill" Thompson took a "wide open" position towards vice. He had agreements with South Side crime lords, including Al Capone, that insured black votes at election time. In return, he overlooked much of the vice in cabarets.[17]

However, cabarets were not popular with everyone. Anti-vice reformers equated cabarets with prostitution, which had historically been located in the same area due to deals with politicians, police, and organized crime bosses. In spite of the fact that most prostitutes in the area were white and drew a white clientele, it was still considered a black problem. Racists opposed cabarets due to their mixed-race policies and provoking music.[18] Regulators lamented the accommodation of underage drinking, indulgence in public sexual expressiveness, and taboo mixtures of race, gender, and sexual variation on stage and the dance floor.[19]

Dreamland abruptly closed in April 1921 and it heralded the demise of cabaret. Bottoms had hired Anton Lada's Louisiana Five, one of the top white Dixieland bands to

[16] Vincent, "The Community," 46-47.
[17] Vincent, "The Community," 48.
[18] Vincent, "The Community," 47.
[19] Vaillant, *Sounds of Reform*, 212-213.

play at Dreamland. For the first time, a black businessman hired a white act for a mixed audience. This break with convention proved too much. Bottoms released a statement condemning jealous competitors and proclaiming his refusal to "pay the petty graft common to such questionable enterprises." He was murdered at Dreamland two weeks later and the cabaret closed. By the summer of 1921, all of the other premier cabarets had also closed due to "changes" in ownership that left little artistic license to the original owners and performers.[20]

With Bottoms gone, Chicago cabarets lost local community control and were soon controlled by capitalized commercial interests. Effort was reinvested into attracting white "slummers." The result was a flamboyant offshoot of the cabaret known as the "slumming resort." The entrance fee was astronomical, the décor was tacky, the dancers were naked and overly suggestive, and the doormen scared away any potential black patrons. The music was watered down to cater to "musically ignorant whites." However, these resorts also spawned blues and jazz nightclubs that still exist in some capacity today.[21]

Cabaret in New York

New York's early cabarets were also closer to the Parisian model, though rapid change and divergent trends marred their success. Like Chicago's cabarets, New York's developed around the 1910's, yet their sound, ambience, and character were completely different. After the Victorian era, cabarets emerged as a public place of leisure for the upper middle class. Cabarets started as a mix of restaurant and theater where patrons could participate and/or dance. Public dances were moving away from the austere society dances of the Victorian period and were increasingly influenced by emerging styles of music like

[20] Vincent, "The Community," 50-51.
[21] Vincent, "The Community," 52-54.

ragtime and jazz. There was food, music, and entertainment, but not a complete theatrical performance. The interaction between the performers and audience was both intimate and informal.[22]

The penchant for dancing turned into a frenzy. By 1912, almost all cabarets had a dance floor. It started with exhibition dancers like the ballroom duos of Irene and Vernon Castle and Maurice Mouvet and Florence Walton. Patrons liked the dancers' shows so much that they wanted in on the fun and the floors became a public forum. As everywhere else, African American dance moves like the shuffle step, fox trot, turkey trot, and the Charleston, became popular in cabarets. Ragtime was the popular music and rhythm fueled the masses. Couples could now dance cheek-to-cheek in a tango or a one-step. The dance obsession and variety of music contributed to New York cabaret's increasingly grand and opulent status.[23]

Sophie Tucker, a vaudeville headliner and ragtime queen was the first to achieve a successful career as a crossover artist. Starting in 1916, she appeared in both vaudeville shows and cabarets. By 1922, she had her own Sophie Tucker Room at Reisenweber's, one of the first cabarets in New York to feature jazz.[24] While vaudeville and cabarets both portrayed the performer as the embodiment of success and grandeur, cabarets presented their artists in closer proximity to the audience in a way that emphasized their

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[22] Paul Chevigny, *Gigs: Jazz and the Cabaret Laws in New York City* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), 54-55.

[23] Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 146-153.

[24] Reisenweber's Café, located in Columbus Circle, was a restaurant/nightclub complex. There was a restaurant on the first floor, on the second floor the 400 Club Cabaret (later renamed the Sophie Tucker Room), with the first dance floor within a restaurant found in the Paradise Supper Club on the third floor, the intimate Hawaiian Room on the fourth floor and finally, a rooftop garden.

personalities. The illusion presented to patrons was that the artist lived there and was always a welcoming hostess. However, a forceful personality on stage was needed to overcome the casual atmosphere of the cabaret. Thus, the idea of "friendly entertainer" came to be associated with women like Sophie Tucker that bridged the gap between the happy socialite and compelling stage personality. Cabarets hired these leading ladies to perform, entertain guests, and maintain the friendly camaraderie between musicians and patrons in return for special billing, a portion of the night's cover charges, and publicity.[25]

Vaudeville was not the only genre to share artists with cabaret. Due to the proximity of many cabarets to the Great White Way, cabaret and Broadway artists could have multiple engagements a day at different venues. For example, a singer could do a dinner show around 7:00pm, make a cabaret appearance, do the after-theater show at 11:00pm, and then head over for another cabaret engagement. Some would even perform at the 1:00am show that started in the 1920's. For example, the Castles performed in *Sunshine Maid* and regularly appeared at Louis Martin's Café in 1913. In 1915, they actually starred in *Watch Your Step* while hosting their own cabaret later in the evenings. This naturally led to an incursion of Broadway music in cabaret. With this convenient arrangement, performers had the opportunity to showoff their favorite ballads at close range in a more intimate setting, while patrons had the added benefit of hearing a diverse program of ragtime, jazz, blues, vaudeville, and Broadway tunes.[26]

Prohibition had a severe impact on cabarets in New York. When prohibition was ratified, New York's gangsters stepped in, much as Chicago's had, to make a business out of providing alcohol. Three major ethnic divisions of mobsters stepped in. Owney Madden, a

[25] Erenberg, *Steppin' Out*, 176-199.
[26] Erenberg, *Steppin' Out*, 185-186.

former member of the Hell's Kitchen Gopher gang and a major liquor supplier, led the Irish faction. He also had interests in Broadway's Silver Slipper and Harlem's Cotton Club, a whites-only club that featured the best black jazz musicians in New York, including Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong. The Italian mafia controlled the cabarets and nightclubs in Italian areas, including Greenwich Village. Jewish gangsters like Arnold Rothstein owned parts of Broadway and Harlem clubs and supplied money to small businessmen to open more on their behalf. It was in this environment that speakeasies, a hybrid between a bar, a cabaret, and a dance hall, developed.

To circumvent prohibition laws, even cabarets started to take on the name "nightclubs" and issued membership cards. These cards allowed "members" to drink together as if at a private gathering rather than a public establishment. As the 20's progressed, there were over seventy of these other forms of nightclubs, not including speakeasies. East Side showrooms, Greenwich Village dance venues, and Harlem nightclubs were some of the most popular.[27] As the number of competing clubs grew, nighttime entertainment gradually became more lavish and grandiose to draw in clientele. There was also a decrease in the quality of the music, with some of the clubs presenting mainly bawdy material to attract men willing to pay for a cheap laugh. Songs like *Little Richard's Getting Bigger* and *Every Girl I've Ever Known Has Had One* became popular enough to be found in record stores in the 1930's.[28]

In 1934, Max Gordon opened the Village Vanguard in Greenwich Village and tried to inject some sophistication back into the cabaret scene. To manage his low budget

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[27] Erenberg, *Steppin' Out*, 238-242.
[28] James Gavin, *Intimate Nights: The Golden Age of New York Cabaret* (New York, NY: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991) 8, 17-20.

establishment, he tapped electricity from the hall lights of his upstairs neighbors to light his club and the exhaust fan went through a sidewalk grating. With very little money, patrons sat on barrels rather than chairs, but no one minded. The crowd was a pleasant mixture of bohemians, musicians, prostitutes, and neighborhood people that came for good conversation, news, and the occasional poetry reading. The cabaret was so successful that Gordon was able to move north to a more modern and upscale location in late 1934 to Seventh Avenue South. Money was still scarce, so the walls were covered with sheet music and magazine pages and cartoons covered the ceiling. In 1938, he hired the Revuers, a song-and-comedy quintet featuring Judith Tuvim (later known as Judy Holliday), Betty Comden, Adolph Green, Alvin Hammer, and John Frank. Their original musical numbers boldly confronted show business, life in New York City, and human weakness from an urban perspective. The example below is a parody on the literary condensations featured in *Reader's Digest*.[29]

> In these days of hurly-burly everyone must hurry
> There's no time for reading books, but you don't have to worry
> You may not have the time, but perhaps you'll
> Learn to take your culture in a capsule
> For though the field of literature's immense
> There's a magazine that knows how to condense
> Don't sweat for weeks and weeks over just one book
> The *Reader's Digest* gives it to you in one look
>
> *Les Misérables:*
> Jean Valjean, no evildoer
> Stole some bread 'cause he was poo-er
> A detective chased him through a sewer
> THE END!
>
> *Gone with the Wind:*
> Scarlett O'Hara's a spoiled pet
> She wants everything that she can get
> The one thing she can't get is Rhett

[29] Gavin, *Intimate Nights*, 22-24.

THE END!

War and Peace:
Napoleon did not beware
He attacked the Russian bear
He came home on his derriere
THE END!

Found in *Intimate Nights* (Gavin), p. 24.

While the Revuers were lifting the Village Vanguard to fame, a Frenchman named Herbert Jacoby was bringing some old Parisian elegance to the cabaret business. He served as a press agent for the Parisian nightclub *Le Boeuf sur le Toit* (The Steer on the Roof) and achieved great success by opening an upstairs showroom called Le Ruban Bleu. Americans like Gershwin and Porter were soon urging him to open a replica back home. In 1937, he opened New York's Le Ruban Bleu in a vacant room above Theodore's, an Italian restaurant at 56th and Fifth Avenue. The space was small and filled to the brim with banquettes and tiny tables that could seat up to 125 people. Two grand pianos sat on a small platform in the left-hand corner topped with fresh flowers and candelabras. It had the air of a private club and drew a sophisticated audience. With World War II approaching, many Europeans sought refuge in the United States and those that settled in New York found Le Ruban Bleu to be a congenial place for artists and friends of artists.

Le Ruban Bleu's first lineup included renowned Brazilian soprano, Elsie Houston, Marie Eve, Jimmie Daniels, a debonair black singer who later appeared in several Manhattan clubs, and twin pianists, Cy Walter and Gil Bowers. Jacoby served as the Master of Ceremonies for all his acts. Elsie Houston was the main attraction. She enchanted crowds with Brazilian folk songs, pieces by her composer friend Heitor Villa-Lobos, and eerie voodoo songs sung with the candelabras on the ground for effect. However, she was known

for her erratic performances and fits of temperament, sometimes performing with spirit that moved her audiences and other nights refusing to go on altogether because there was too much smoke or she was just not interested.

In 1938, Jacoby featured Lotte Lenya in her first American performance with songs by her husband Kurt Weill and American composer Marc Blitzstein. Her engagement lasted only four weeks and Jacoby then brought in Vera Sanoff, a memorable character dressed all in white with a white streak in her hair and smoldering French and English torch songs.[30] Some notable examples include *Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man* (1927), and *Lili Marlene* (1938).[31] Later headliners consisted of Mabel Mercer and Greta Keller, an Australian singer who reportedly performed German and American standards with old Viennese charm. Caspar Reardon, a young harpist who studied under Leopold Stokowski combined pop songs like *Honeysuckle Rose* and *Summertime* with blues and classical selections with unusual technical virtuosity and sensuality.[32]

At the end of the 1930's, these intimate cabarets were still few and far between, posing no threat to the finer clubs of the day like the cozy Penthouse Club, which featured a fireplace, a panoramic view of Central Park, and Maxine Sullivan, while Tony's West Side club featured a bar-restaurant and the legendary Mabel Mercer. Most intimate cabarets were unpublicized and unnoticed by the mainstream audience. Barney Josephson, a Jewish shoemaker from Trenton, New Jersey, broke that trend in 1938 when he opened an integrated nightclub called Café Society Downtown in a Greenwich Village basement.

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[30] A torch song is a sentimental love song, typically one in which the singer laments an unrequited or lost love.

[31] Allen Forte, *Listening to Classic American Popular Songs* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 203.

[32] Gavin, *Intimate Nights*, 25-31.

After the shoe shop went bankrupt during the Great Depression, Josephson bounced through several jobs. He was a jazz fan and had spent quite a bit of time in the cabarets of Berlin and Prague, noting in particular the ways in which they melded politico-social commentary with brilliant music and satirical wit. Although he had no experience in entertainment, when he moved to New York in the mid-1930s he'd decided to open a club along the model of the European cabarets.

The club was tiny, but big enough for a small dance floor and a six-piece band. Josephson sent press releases to black newspapers around the country inviting people to visit. His first lineup included Billie Holiday, boogie-woogie pianists Meade Lux Lewis and Albert Ammons, and Jack Gilford, a white comedian who would later star in the Broadway shows *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* and *Cabaret*.

The Harlem Renaissance had been in full swing for over a decade. In that period, writers, poets, painters, and musicians had banded together both to protest the inequities of life in the United Sates, to give voice to the unrest, impatience, and bitterness of the post-Reconstruction African American experience, and most importantly, to celebrate the staggering creativity and diversity of Black life and culture. Significantly, it also brought the cultural achievements to a national consciousness. Barney Josephson, already intrigued with the ways that the cabarets of Prague and Berlin tackled social issues, sought to bring that consciousness to his own stage.

There was an atmosphere of racial tolerance at Café Society and Josephson strove to keep it that way. Any white customers who raised a fuss received their check and were

asked to leave. He took his best singers to vocal coaches and purchased outfits from Bergdorf Goodman regardless of the singer's race, much to the horror of the saleswomen.[33]

Josephson found that he was informing not just his white patrons, but his black performers, as well. One of his 'pupils' was the young Lena Horne:

> The lessons actually started right at her audition. She sang "Sleepy Time Down South," and almost immediately Josephson interrupted her, asking her what she thought were the implications of the song. Lena hadn't thought about the implications—it was a currently popular song. Josephson pointed out that it maintained myths of Southern black contentedness that she ought to know weren't real. Lena thought about her childhood experiences in the South and her recent experience of not being able to go on tour there, and she realized that Josephson was right. She also felt ashamed and angry that a white man had been the one to point out the irresponsibility of singing the song. But it was hard to stay angry at Josephson.
>
> After hiring her, he made it a point to be her instructor in black history, political references, and a great many other things that she'd never thought about before. And because Café Society Downtown, located in Greenwich Village and with a liberal admissions policy, was a center not just of music but of ideas, she found herself in the most intellectual atmosphere she'd ever experienced….Under the tutelage of Barney Josephson and others, she began to learn about Afro-American history, about politics, about social structures, about who she was in relation to the world around her.[34]

Café Society was also the site of Billie Holiday's first performance of the anti-lynching song, *Strange Fruit*. Barney Josephson had heard the song, written by Abel Meeropol, a Jewish schoolteacher from the Bronx, and asked Holiday if she would sing it at the club. After much trepidation, she did, and later recorded what was to become her biggest selling recording.

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[33] Gavin, *Intimate Nights*, 31-36.

[34] James Haskins and Kathleen Benson, *Lena: A Personal and Professional Biography of Lena Horne* (New York: Stein and Day, 1984), 56.

Strange Fruit
Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant south,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

Strange Fruit, written by Abel Meeropol and originally performed by Billie Holiday.

For her performance, Josephson had the waiters silence the crowd as the song started. During the song's long introduction, he ordered the lights to gradually dim. As Holiday began singing, the sole light was from a small spotlight that illuminated only her face. On the final note, all lights went out and when they came back on, Holiday had vanished from the stage.[35] By 1940, Josephson had achieved national recognition for his work in promoting racial equality and opened a second club, Café Society Uptown, at 58th Street between Park and Lexington avenues.[36]

According to James Gavin, "The last interesting café to open before World War II held neither the Continental chic of the Ruban nor the social purpose or musical thrills of Café Society, but it was there that the sophisticated song finally became sophisticated." Spivy's Café was aptly named after its leading lady, Spivy Le Voe, a squat, saucy woman who wore her black hair in a lacquered pompadour with a white streak and donned a black dress with shoulder pads and oversized sequined lapels. She had a fast tongue and a gift for

[35] Stuart Nicholson, *Billie Holiday* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 113.
[36] Gavin, *Intimate Nights*, 31-36.

rhyme. She was known for her mocking references to Elsa Maxwell, plastic surgery, Salvador Dali, and other aspects of upper-class life in New York City. Broadway composer John Latouche was fond of her dexterity with tongue twisters and her comical flair for projecting world-weary and sleep-deprived New Yorkers. He wrote rhyming songs like *The Last of the Fleur de Levys*, shown below. Buster Davis, her pianist who would later go to arrange 40 Broadway shows, proclaimed, "She was magic! There was such glee when she sang…and her energy was boundless."[37]

The Last of the Fleur de Levys
Two men were standing in a swanky hotel bar one day
Their chatter grew more frivolous with each new Dubonnet
A woman who came trickling in incited one to mirth
He giggled and he tittered and he pointed, "What on earth?"
But the other held his arm and said, "Hold on, you'd better not!
Though she's frowsy and she's blowsy and undoubtedly a sot,
Though her eyes are dead and rimmed with red and her nose is bright blue,
She was once the empress of 103rd and West End Avenue!"

The Last of the Fleur de Levys, by John Latouche. Found in *Intimate Nights* (Gavin), p. 36.

However, Spivy was an impresario of the truest kind. She ran her club on a tight budget, avoided bills like the plague, and treated her staff like servants. She was cruel to all but those closest to her and tyrannized her employees. She had no money and borrowed money to pay for her cabaret, which she never repaid. Her cabaret was a reflection of her personality, both in looks and airs. Spivy's was full of mirrors, chrome, and tiny cheap tables, but had a nice terrace overlooking Lexington Ave. and 57th Street. She went through pianists quickly, except for Davis, because she never acknowledged, paid, or thanked them. In 1941, she hired a still unknown Walter Liberace. One night, Spivy was late coming on for a show, and when prodded by her staff, replied in a booming voice, "Oh tell that fairy to

[37] Gavin, *Intimate Nights*, 36-42.

keep playing! I'll be right there!" The entire club, including Liberace heard her. He quit soon afterwards.[38]

The wartime curfew put an end to most of New York nightlife. Many cabarets had to close their doors. A few survived, albeit, with diminished charm. The social and economical stratification that occurred during the war caused a shift in clientele. Many that could once afford nighttime frivolity no longer could, and those with newly acquired money did not know or care about the old talents. They wanted the new and popular. The former grandeur and exclusivity was lost, but that allowed the few survivors, like Jacoby's Le Ruban Bleu, to capitalize on the lack of competition and hire a greater variety of acts and focus more on American talent.

Jacoby opened the successful Blue Angel in 1943 and dedicated his time to finding unknown talent. Among the cabaret owners that closed, Spivy had filed for bankruptcy and fled to Paris in 1951, and was lured back to New York in 1957 to appear at the Blue Angel. However, the younger crowds found her unexciting and her songs meaningless. She never appeared in another New York club again.

With few exceptions, intimate cabarets just about disappeared altogether in the 1940's when New York nightlife once again became synonymous with grandeur, audience participation, and money. As Gavin mentions, "The formula for success: make it big, loud, lavish, and if possible, Latin." People wanted shows as big as the war and music as loud as the gunshots. They got it, but at a price. The true spirit of cabaret had gone out of the city. While intimate nightclubs would continue to go in and out of fashion for several decades,

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[38] Gavin, *Intimate Nights*, 36-42.

the bold attitude of the performers, the cozy spaces, the sheer intelligence of the material became a thing of the past.[39]

[39] Gavin, *Intimate Nights*, 42-50.

Chapter 3: The Sounds of Cabaret

Cabaret was a performance of attitude, of the negotiation of the individual with the society around them, of the reaction of the human spirit to the complexities of urban life. Poetry, skits, comedic monologues worked together to create the perfect combination of intimate atmosphere, feisty attitude, and intelligent performance. However, music was the backbone of cabaret shows, whether it was satirical songs in the Weimar Republic, or smooth vocals and big bands in America. It was the expression of emotion and humanity upon which all other aspects of the show rested. It was also a significant marker of the diversity of styles that differentiate each of the major loci of early cabaret: Paris, Berlin, Chicago, and New York.

The Music of Parisian Cabaret

The *chanson* was the dominant musical force of Parisian cabaret.[1] As previously noted, there were many types of *chansons*, ranging from *chansons d'amours* about romance to *chansons parodies* that spoofed popular opera arias. Le Chat Noir became the center of the Montmartre *chanson,* which glorified the bohemian life of Montmartre.[2]

Aristide Bruant and Erik Satie were two of the most popular, and most prolific, composers of the Parisian cabaret scene. Both worked as composers in residence at Chat Noir for Rodolphe Salis as well as at other establishments. Bruant's music was popular at the Moulin Rouge, while Satie's works were found in fringe cabarets around Paris. Bruant, known as the father of the cabaret *chanson*, was known for his realistic descriptions of

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[1] Any lyric composition set to French words; more specifically, a French polyphonic song of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. Here, it refers to popular songs of the streets, cafés and music halls in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. See Oxford Music Online.

[2] Eric Bronner, "Cabaret for the Classical Singer: A History of the Genre and a Survey of Its Vocal Music," *Journal of Singing: The Official Journal of the National Association of Teachers of Singing* 60, no. 5 (2004): 454.

harsh street life. For example, his *Nini Peau d'Chien* speaks about a lovely prostitute, as described from the male perspective. Reflecting its unpretentious subject, the melody is simple, with a march-like refrain that seems to correspond both to the custom of such women to walk along the area surrounding the Bastille to exhibit themselves, and also creates a rather affectionate hymn-like homage to such familiar city sights.

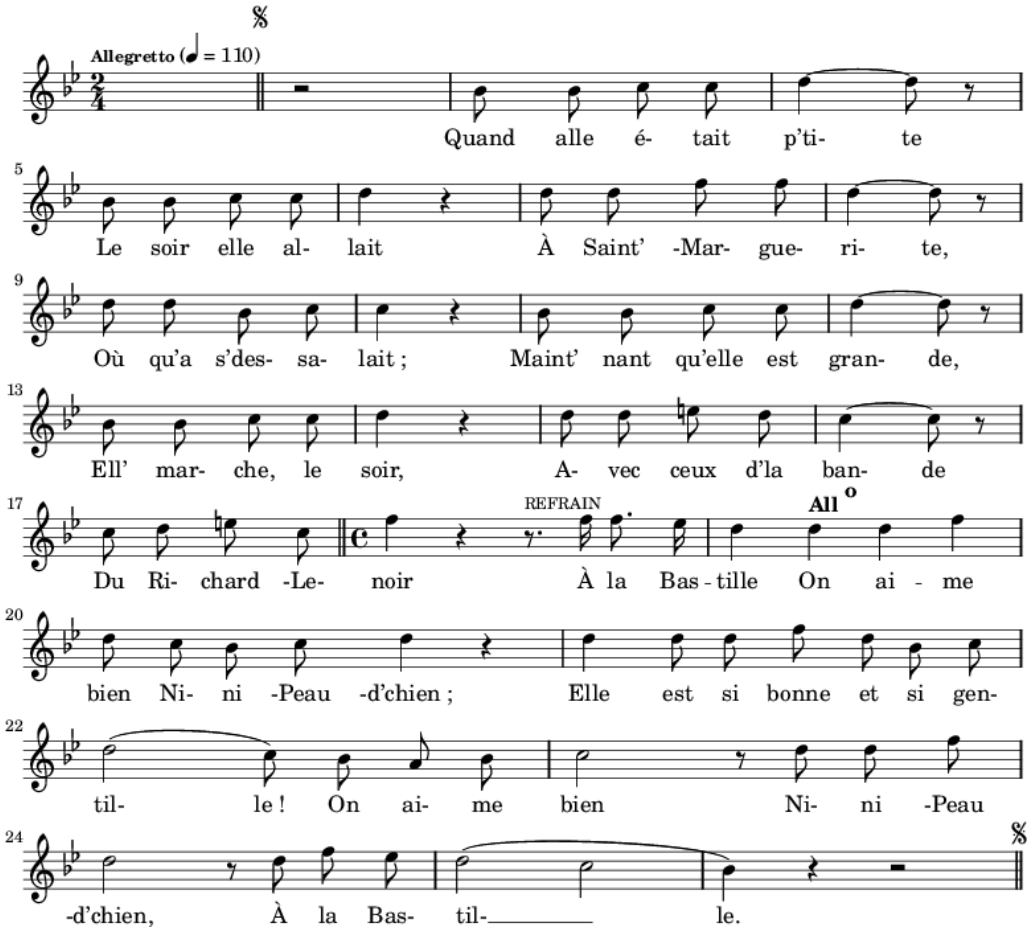
Nini Peau d'Chien

At the Bastille
We really like
Nini-Peau-d'chien:
She is so good and nice!
We really like
Nini-Peau-d'chien,
At the Bastille

She has soft skin,
With freckles,
And the smell of red
That gives a thrill,
And from her pupil,
Of gray-green tones
Love sparkles
In her mouse-like eyes.

Excerpt from *Nini Peau d'Chien,* by Aristide Bruant. Translation by Katy Yachinich and Lauren Falconi.

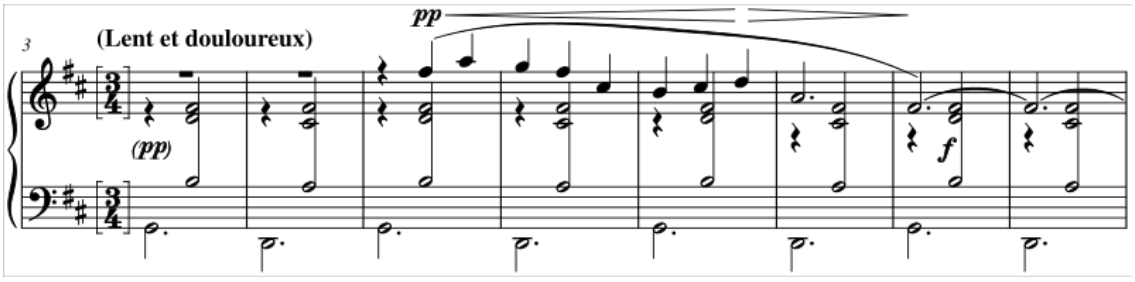
Nini Peau d'Chien. Public Domain.



Erik Satie, on the other hand, was known for more abstract works that served as precursors to impressionism and minimalism. He composed his *Gymnopédies* (1890) while in residence at Chat Noir and premiered all three to great reception. The short, atmospheric pieces were written in triple time and shared a common theme and structure. They were gentle, yet eccentric pieces that defied the classical tradition and moved away from the popular "salon music" style. For instance, the first few bars of *Gymnopédie No. 1*, shown below, consisted of an alternating progression of two major seventh chords, the first on the subdominant, G, and the second on the tonic, D. The melodies of the pieces create deliberate, but mild, dissonances with that progression against the harmony, producing a melancholy effect that matched the performance instructions, which were to play each piece "painfully", "sadly" or "gravely." The poignant ambiguity of the work is furthered by its juxtaposition with the images of J. P. Contamine de Latour's poetic inscription, with which it was published.[3]

> Slanting and piercing the shadows, a bursting torrent,
> Flowed in tides of gold upon the polished floorstones,
> Where atoms of amber that mirror fire
> Mingled their sarabande with the gymnopedia. [4]

Measures 3-10 of Satie's *Gymnopédie No. 1*. Public domain.



[3] Mark Prendergast, The Ambient Century: From Mahler to Moby – The Evolution of Sound in the Electronic Age (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 6.

[4] "Oblique et coupant l'ombre un torrent éclatant, Ruisselait en flots d'or sur la dalle polie, Où les atomes d'ambre au feu se miroitant, Mêlaient leur sarabande à la gymnopédie."

One of the most memorable performers to appear at Chat Noir was Maurice Rollinat, a poet known for songs as dark as his looks. With disorderly hair and unfortunate features, his grave renditions of songs like *The Lady in Wax*, *The Accursed Clock*, *and The Foolish Tramp* left the audience shivering. Another popular act was Jules Jouy. While his performances tended to be outlandish, his biting satires of people and events were received with enthusiasm. An example shown below is dedicated to one Louis Montégut. In it, Jouy sarcastically mocks this man, likely a social or political figure in Montmartre that he or fellow bohemians had taken offence to. His performances were clever and often went over the heads of all but the most up-to-date bohemians.[5]

À Louis Montégut

Louis is the impersonal
Image of renunciation.
The self no longer exists in it (the image);
His being is completely devoted.
For this (his) vast and helping heart,
Drunk from solidarity
The only air that is breathable,
Is the love of humanity.

They condemn it (the image): it defies
His judge, fierce and rotten.
What does it matter, to whom he sacrifices
The black stake of Satory?
To his executioners, near the tomb,
His image speaks brotherhood.
What to it, is death? It falls,
For the love of humanity.

Excerpt from *À Louis Montégut,* by Jules Jouy. Translation by Lauren Falconi.

The Music of Berlin Cabaret

Unlike Parisian cabaret, with its standard *chanson* and intellectual wit, German cabaret music was thematically separated by war and no one particular song-type defined it. Music, like Berlin itself, struggled to find the right tone to match its new metropolitan identity before WWI. Musical satire and sociopolitical commentary functioned uncomfortably within the boundaries of censorship. In their struggle to keep doors open,

[5] Armond Fields, *Le Chat Noir: A Montmartre Cabaret and Its Artists in Turn-of-the Century Paris* (Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1993), 15-16.

cabaret owners programmed patriotic songs in the years immediately preceding the war. After the war, music was liberated and became so progressive that it could scarcely be contained.[6]

Two early Berlin composers featured at *Überbrettl* were Oscar Straus and Arnold Schoenberg. Both would later go on to become famous composers in their own right. Straus' song *Die lustige Ehemann* (The Merry Husband) was a rousing success on opening night. The song was a result of Straus' rivalry with Franz Lehár, composer of the *Merry Widow*. However, while his publications were popular during his lifetime, they fell into obscurity after his death.

Of the eight cabaret songs that Schoenberg wrote for *Überbrettl,* only *Nachtwandler*—for soprano, piccolo, trumpet and side-drum—was actually performed. It is unclear as to whether Schoenberg wrote them for a specific performer. Three of the eight have texts by early Berlin cabaret poets, whose cynicism, scornful wit, and overall disregard for authority are reflected in the texts, which alternate between being politically or sexually provocative.[7] Written between *Verklärte Nacht* and the epic *Pelleas und Melisande* at the same time he was composing the even more imposing *Gurrelieder*, the songs are comparatively insubstantial, though by cabaret standards they are technically difficult and vocally demanding. Even *Nachtwandler* was only performed once, possibly due to the difficulty of the trumpet part. *Der genügsame Liebhaber* (The Contented Suitor), one of Schoenberg's more risqué cabaret songs demonstrates the uncompromising level of difficulty for what were usually untrained vocalists. While not outside the ability of the

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[6] Bronner, "Cabaret," 456-456.

[7] Schoenberg accessed the texts in Otto Julius Bierbaum's *Deutsche Chansons* (1912), a collection of cabaret poems written by Berlin poets who were inspired by the Parisian cabaret movement.

cabaret pianist, the accompaniment has a swaying figure that underscores a rather angular melody, whose leaps coincide not only with a more active piano part at measure nine, but also with the more risqué text, "And I have a shiny bald spot…," that confirms what the listener had only imagined could be the meaning of the first two lines about the 'black pussy-cat.' This type of musical accentuation is created with little concern for the technical challenge to the performers, so while these might be considered 'lighter works' compared to Schoenberg's contemporary compositions, they are hardly lightweight.[8]

***Der genügsame Liebhaber* (The Contented Suitor)**

My sweet girlfriend has a black pussy-cat
With soft fur, rustling and velvety,
And I, I have a shiny bald spot,
Shiny and slick and silver.

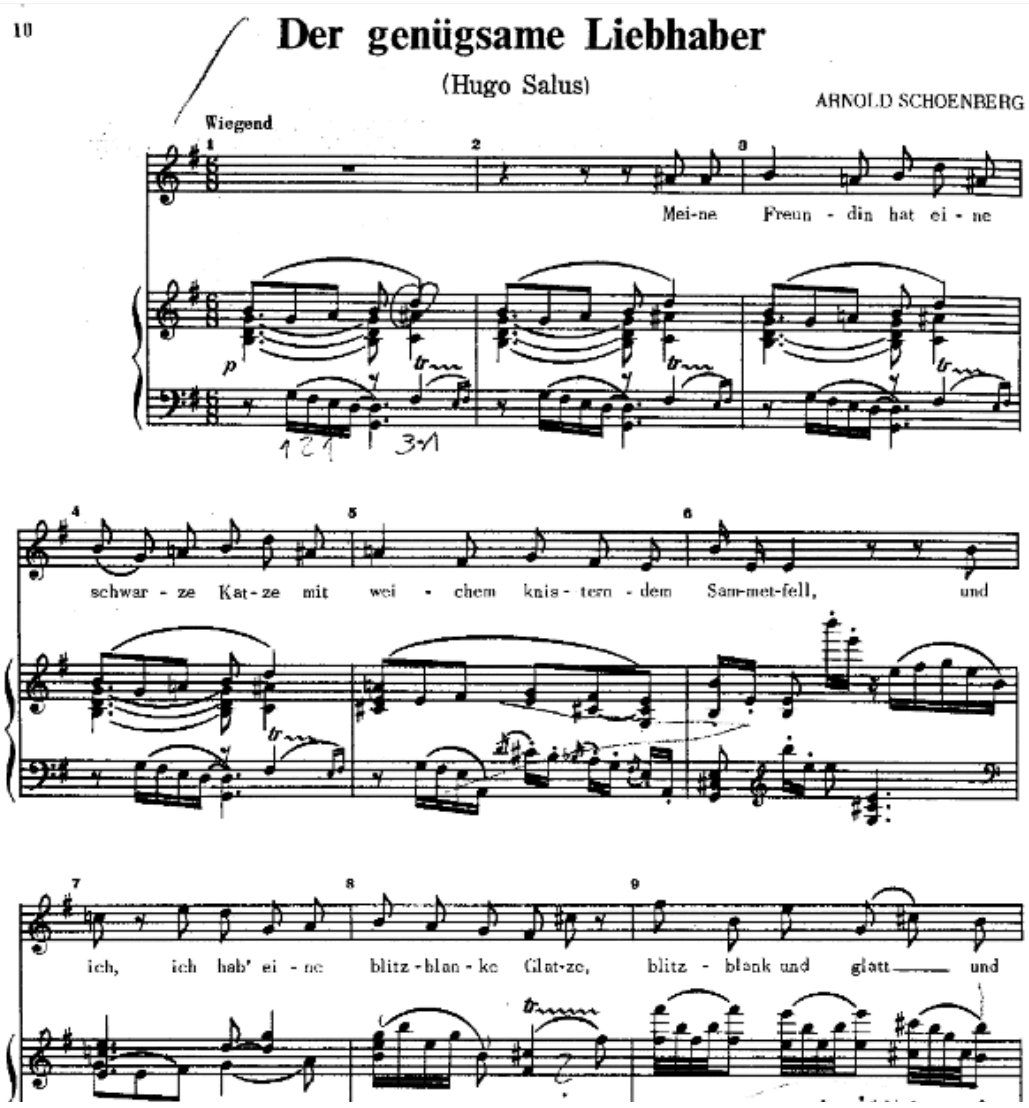
My girlfriend's a lady of the voluptuous sort,
She lies on the sofa the whole year round,
Quite busily stroking the cat's fur for sport,
My God, how she dotes on that soft furry mound.

And when I at evening a visit make,
Then I hear the cat on her lap loudly purr,
While nibbling with her from the honey cake,
It trembles whenever I stroke its fur.

And if I desire to caress my darling
So that she might say "kitchie koo" to me,
Then I place the pussy upon my bald spot
So my girlfriend then pets it and laughs with glee.

Der genügsame Liebhaber, by Arnold Schoenberg. Translation by Martha Elliott (with permission www.recmusic.org).

[8] Bronner, "Cabaret," 456-457.



Score online at classical-music-online.net.

After WWI and the spread of Dada from Zurich, Berlin cabaret music quickly moved into the world of the avant-garde. While salacious music like Schoenberg's had existed before the war, it was taken to a new level post-war. Early Weimar music saw the introduction of elaborate dance routines (sans clothes), a fascination with American jazz, and new song styles.

Two noted composers of the early Weimar years include Friedrich Hollaender and Wilhelm Grosz. Hollaender was one of the most prolific writers of Weimar cabaret music. He wrote for divas like Marlene Dietrich and noted feminist Clair Waldoff. His musical output of over one hundred songs was versatile in both style and emotion, ranging from sentimental to seductive, and from flippant to disconcerting. Hollaender wrote for venues like Reinhardt's *Schall und Rauch* and also established his own cabaret, the Tingel-Tangel Theater, in 1931. His songs achieved international attention in the 1929 film *Die blaue Engel* (The Blue Angel), especially *Ich bin vom Kopf bis Fuss auf Liebe eingestellt* (retitled *Falling in Love Again* in English). *Falling in Love Again* reflects the poignant regret that seems to speak to love in an era of rapid social change.[9]

Falling in Love Again

Falling in love again
Never wanted to
What am I to do?
I can't help it

Love's always been my game
Play it how I may
I was made that way
I can't help it

Men cluster to me
Like moths around a flame
And if their wings burn
I know I'm not to blame

Falling in love again
Never wanted to
What am I to do?
I just can't help it

Ich bin vom Kopf bis Fuss auf Liebe eingestellt (Falling in Love Again) by Friedrich Hollaender. Originally performed by Marlene Dietrich (1930). [10]

[9] Bronner, "Cabaret," 457.

[10] The English version of the song, written by Sammy Lerner and rerecorded by Marlene Dietrich, is not a direct translation of the more erotic original.

Wilhelm Grosz was one of the most sought after composers in Berlin during the 1920s. With a doctorate from Vienna University, his early compositions followed the late-Romantic tradition. He was the first Viennese composer to introduce jazz idioms into classical music, and one of the first to present jazz to Berlin's cabaret scene. He later fled the Nazis to London and wrote popular hits like *Isle of Capri* and *Red Sails at Sunset*. He eventually immigrated to New York and wrote under the pen name Hugh Williams for the Irving Berlin Company. Many of these songs, such as *Harbor Lights*, and *Along the Santa Fe Trail*, were made popular by the Glenn Miller Orchestra and would become popular standards in American cabarets.[11]

As WWII loomed, late Weimar cabaret music began to offer more pointed social and political commentary. Political parties, like the Red Revues and *agitprop* troupes of the communist party, started using cabaret performances to spread propaganda. Aggressive song material included: abortion rights, election reform, unity of the working classes, and caustic criticism of fascism. The example shown below is Bertolt Brecht's and Hanns Eisler's *Ballade vom Paragraphen 218* (The Ballade of Paragraph 218), the first song to ever protest abortion laws.[12] The title refers to the paragraph in the Weimar Constitution imposing severe penalties for abortion. As with much of Eisler's political music, the melody is rather ironically simple, diatonic, and mostly in the minor mode, a conscious choice of Eisler's because he felt it lent a more sinister underlying quality.[13] The simplicity of the melody with its repeated notes allows the text to be articulated clearly and

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[11] Bronner, "Cabaret," 457.
[12] Bronner, "Cabaret," 458.
[13] Albrecht Betz, *Hanns Eisler Political Musician*, trans. Bill Hopkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 76.

conversationally, eschewing an overtly emotional setting in favor of letting the music subtly support and comment on the tensions revealed within the text.[14]

The Ballade of Paragraph 218
"Please, doctor. I've missed my monthly..."
Why, this is simply great!
If I may put it bluntly
You're raising our birthrate.
"Please, doctor, now we're homeless..."
But you'll have a bed somewhere
So best put your feet up, moan less
And force yourself to grin and bear.
You'll make a simply splendid little mummy
Producing cannon fodder from your tummy
That's what your body's for, and you know it,
what's more
And it's laid down by law
And now get this straight:
You'll soon be a mother, just wait.

"But, doctor, no job or dwelling:
My man would find kids the last straw..."
No, rather a new compelling
Objective to work for.
"But, doctor..." Really, Frau Griebel
I ask myself what this means
You see, our state needs people
To operate our machines.
You'll make a simply splendid little mummy
Producing factory fodder from your tummy
That's what your body's for, and you know it,
what's more
And it's laid down by law
And now get this straight:
You'll soon be a mother, just wait.

Excerpt from *The Ballade of Paragraph 218* (1929), by Hanns Eisler and Bertolt Brecht.

Composers Hanns Eisler and Kurt Weill exemplify the musical temperament of the late years of Weimar Republic cabaret. Weill's early works showed late Romanticism and

[14] Eric Bentley and Bertolt Brecht, *The Brecht-Eisler Song Book* (New York: Music Sales America, 1992), 65-71.

early atonal influences. The blending of American jazz idioms and contemporary classical composition techniques became his signature style. He collaborated with the best German playwrights, including Bertolt Brecht. Together, they achieved international acclaim with *Die Dreigroschenoper* (The Three-Penny Opera), which combined radical social commentary with jazz influenced music in a cabaret-derived structure. *Mack the Knife* became Weill's most famous song. Weill later immigrated to America after his works "kindled Nazi retribution" and became a popular Broadway composer with hits like *September Song*. Weill and Brecht's *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (*Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*) was a political-satirical opera that premiered in 1930 and was banned by Nazi authorities in 1933. The score utilizes several styles of music including ragtime, jazz, and formal counterpoint. *Alabama Song*, the first song of the show, is sung in English even when the work is performed in the original German. The song is a commentary on social unrest in Germany under growing Nazi influence.[15]

Alabama Song
Oh, moon of Alabama, it's time to say goodbye
We've lost our good old mama
And must have dollar or you know why
Oh, show us the way to the next little girl
Oh, don't ask why, no, don't ask why
For we must find the next little girl

Or if we don't find the next little girl
I tell you we must die, I tell you we must die
I tell you, I tell you, I tell you we must die

Oh, moon of Alabama, it's time to say goodbye
We've lost our good old mama
And must have little girl or you know why

[15] Bronner, "Cabaret," 458.

Oh, moon of Alabama, it's time to say "Auf Wiedersehen"
We've lost our good old mama
And must have little girl or you know why
You know why, you know why

Excerpt from *Alabama Song* from *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930), by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht.

Hanns Eisler was the leading composer of the *agit-prop* cabaret movement. He collaborated with Kurt Tucholsky and Bertolt Brecht on cabaret songs and stage works. He had studied with Schoenberg at the Vienna Conservatory between 1919 and 1923, but alarmed by the way much of the new music distanced itself from the average listener, he later quarreled with his mentor and eventually broke off the relationship. Eisler's Communist/Socialist themed marches, choruses, and propaganda songs furthered the spread of Marxist ideology in Weimar Germany. *Solidarity Song,* shown below, became a popular militant anthem sung in street protests and public meetings throughout Europe.[16]

Solidarity Song

Peoples of the world, together
Join to serve the common cause!
So it feeds us all forever
See to it that it's now yours.

Forward, without forgetting
Where our strength can be seen now to be!
When starving or when eating
Forward, not forgetting
Our solidarity!

Forward, without forgetting
Where our strength can be seen now to be!
When starving or when eating
Forward, not forgetting
Our solidarity!

Black or white or brown or yellow
Leave your old disputes behind.
Once start talking with your fellow
Men, you'll soon be of one mind.

Forward, without forgetting
Where our strength can be seen now to be!
When starving or when eating
Forward, not forgetting
Our solidarity!

If we want to make this certain
We'll need you and your support.
It's yourselves you'll be deserting
if you rat your own sort.

Forward, without forgetting
Where our strength can be seen now to be!
When starving or when eating
Forward, not forgetting
Our solidarity!

Excerpt from *Solidarity Song* by Hanns Eisler and Bertolt Brecht.

[16] Bronner, "Cabaret," 458-459.

The Music of Chicago Cabaret

The cabaret performances of successful venues recognized that cabaret was less a particular genre of music and more of an attitude, a way of thinking about the society and the world, as well as the role of the individual within it. In Paris and Berlin, cabaret songs, skits, dance and instrumental numbers engaged the mind, toyed with the heart, or ignited the spirit. In Chicago and New York, the music of the cabaret did all of that, though to a somewhat lesser extent, while it focused on tickling the ears and feet and electrifying the body. Jazz and blues created an atmosphere ripe with musical possibility in Chicago cabarets. Smooth vocals and catchy tunes lured music lovers to hear legendary performers like Louis Armstrong and Joe "King" Oliver. In an era of nighttime frolickers, nightclubs featured small music ensembles and drew patrons more concerned about a bar than a show, while cabarets featured both big and small ensembles, dance music, floor shows, skits, and awe-inspiring vocalists.[17]

Three distinct performance traditions existed: solo piano music, small combos of unlearned musicians providing improvisatory music of incredible skill and variety, and larger dance bands of classically trained musicians performing arranged music.

The typical combo consisted of a frontline of solo instruments—clarinet, trumpet, and trombone—backed up by a rhythm section of a bass, drums, and a chordal instrument like piano, guitar, or in the early years, a banjo. By the mid-twenties small combos might also have a saxophone. The larger dance bands would have sections of two to three

[17] Not to be confused with dancehalls, which provided background music for dining and highly rhythmic music for dancing.

saxophones, trumpets, and trombones, with a guitar, piano, bass, and drums forming the rhythm section.

Three of the most popular black musicians of the 1910's through the mid 1920's were Jelly Roll Morton, Joe "King" Oliver, and Erskine Tate. Jelly Roll Morton, a pianist originally from New Orleans, played a blend of ragtime, blues, and jazz in small cabarets and nightclubs in Chicago. While there is little historical material to suggest that solo piano music played a major role in Chicago's large cabarets, it would later play a great role in New York cabarets. However, the combination of a single vocalist with piano accompaniment was quite common in Chicago.

"King" Oliver's combos were typically five to eight in number and almost all of their music was improvised. Furthermore, it was just as common to have a small jazz combo accompany a vocalist as a solo piano player. By nature, their music was spontaneous and unconstrained and their embellished solos delighted audiences. Typically, the musicians would talk through a piece, deciding on the tune, key, order of solos, and then feel comfortable enough to allow their creativity to fly freely during performances.[18]

Tate's big bands contained twenty-five to thirty players and played arranged music. Big bands functioned well inside large cabarets, particularly those that featured a dance floor. Their ability to play programmed music was vital for skits and comedy shows, and well as for floor shows with dancers and singers. The ability of these bands to read music

[18] Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 3rd ed. (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997), 382.

also made them valuable for engagements outside of the club and cabaret scene. They provided music for silent films, ballroom dances, and large vaudeville acts.[19]

King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band (1922). Image courtesy of Frank Driggs Collection at pbs.org.

There was a small, but noticeable difference between the jazz styles of black and white musicians in Chicago cabarets during the Jazz Age, and that difference conditioned the atmosphere in the cabaret during performances. The jazz out of New Orleans was raw and physically compelling and many cabarets on the South Side kept this characteristic. Chicago jazz, like New Orleans jazz, retained its strong identity as African American folk music. Black musicians in Chicago typically came from the same racial, social, cultural, and economical background as their audiences, particularly in the black and tan cabarets. This fostered a natural connection between cabaret patrons and musicians.

White jazz musicians, on the other hand, took a different approach. They kept the rhythms, instruments, and energy, but left out the audacious edge of New Orleans jazz. In other words, improvisatory feats of daring were frowned upon. They made it difficult for

[19] Court Carney, *Cuttin' Up: How Early Jazz Got America's Ear* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 57-62.

the group to maintain the impeccable sense of ensemble that was a major part of their signature style. That is not to say that the musicians didn't respect, or try in their own way to emulate the sound of their less literate brothers and sisters. For example, members of the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, one of the premier white jazz bands in Chicago, admired and regularly went to see Joe "King" Oliver and Louis Armstrong at South Side cabarets, but rather than the visceral collective improvisation they were observing, the white musicians' music was a much smoother, more systematized style of improvised jazz.[20]

While instruments dominated jazz bands both big and small, vocal music was the signature sound of cabaret, typically featuring a single lead singer backed by a jazz ensemble. Songs, theatrical skits with music in the background, and even improvised ditties appealed to intelligent music lovers. The vocals could be rough and husky or smooth and flexible depending on the style of the piece, but there was a distinct influence of blues in vocal music during the jazz age.

Milton "Mezz" Mezzrow, a white jazz musician, was "particularly enamored of black women blues singers." Singers like Alberta Hunter, Bessie Smith, and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey often had bawdy lyrics in their blues, but their elegant stage entry, dignified delivery, and dramatically beautiful gowns elevated them above the old ragtime-era tradition of singers performing in minstrel show blackface. Songs like *Downhearted Blues*, recorded numerous times, provide both a social commentary on the reality of being an African American woman and a glimpse into African American culture that was previously unknown to the white population before the Great Migration.[21]

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[20] Carney, *Cuttin' Up*, 61-63.

[21] Ted Vincent, "The Community That Gave Jazz to Chicago," *Black Music Research Journal* 12, no. 1 (1992): 49-50.

Downhearted Blues
My man mistreated and he drove me from his door
Lord, he mistreated me and he drove me from his door
But the Good Book says you've got
To reap just what you sow

I got the world in a jug, got the supper?
Right here in my hand
I got the world in a jug, got the supper?
Right here in my hand
And if you want me, sweet papa
You gotta come under my command

Say, I ain't never loved but three men in my life
Lord, I ain't never loved but three men in my life
'twas my father and my brother
And a man that wrecked my life

Lord, it may be a week and it may be a month or two
I said, it may be a week and it may be a month or two
All the dirt you're doin' to me
Sho' comin' home to you

Lord, I walked the floor, hang my head and cried
Lord, I walked the floor, hang my head and cried
Had the down hearted blues
And I couldn't be satisfied

Downhearted Blues, written by Alberta Hunter (1922).[22]

Louis Armstrong arrived in Chicago in 1922 at the request of his mentor, "King" Oliver. Armstrong was an instant success in the South Side cabarets and was one of the few artists able to move easily between solo piano music, small combos, and big bands. Despite his immense success, Armstrong continued to return to cabarets in Chicago throughout the 1920's and inspired new sounds as well as new musicians for decades to come. Armstrong invented a new approach to jazz by smoothing out the rough rhythms and adding some Chicago refinement to the raucous melodies. With a stint to New York in 1924, Armstrong began singing with his gravelly voice, traded the cornet for the trumpet, and sought out

[22] Although *Downhearted Blues* was written by Alberta Hunter for Paramount Records, it was sold to Columbia Records and made popular by vocalist Bessie Smith.

more arranged styles of music typical of big bands. In 1925, Armstrong also brought scat singing to the general public. While he did not invent scat, his recording of *Heebie Jeebies* with the Hot Five sold tens of thousands of records, became his first hit record, and introduced Chicago-style jazz to the nation.[23]

Heebie Jeebies
Say, I've got the heebies,
I mean the jeebies,
Talking about
The dance, the heebie jeebies,
Do, because they're boys,
Because it pleases me to be joy!

Say, don't you know it?
You don't know how, don't be blue,
Someone will teach you;
Come on, and do that dance,
They call the heebie jeebies dance,
Yes, ma'am,
Papa's got the heebie jeebies dance!

Skatting...

Say, come on, now, and do that dance,
They call the heebie jeebies dance,
Sweet mama!
Papa's got to do the heebie jeebies dance!

Spoken:

Wooh! Got the heebie jeebies!
Whatcha doin' with the heebies?
I just have to have the heebies!

Heebie Jeebies, originally recorded by The Hot Five (1925).

The Music of New York Cabaret

New York's cabaret scene was intimately connected to the publishing business of Tin Pan Alley and its jazz lacked the folk aspect of Chicago's. Jazz music in New York developed from trends already popular with white audiences and featured ragtime

[23] Carney, *Cuttin' Up*, 60-74.

rhythms and vaudeville songs. If jazz bands playing improvised music typified Chicago's jazz scene, then ten to twenty-piece jazz orchestras[24] playing arranged music epitomized New York's. East Coast jazz became popular nationwide and black jazz ensembles played for increasingly white audiences. Almost all cabarets played dance music, even if their dance floors were small and cramped between tiny tables. Solo piano music was common in the sophisticated cabarets in Manhattan and the music publishing industry supported vocal music by making Broadway ballads, jazz standards, and bluesy songs the new standards in cabaret.[25]

Fletcher Henderson Orchestra (1925). Photo courtesy of songbook1.files.wordpress.com.

[24] Jazz orchestras differed more in sound and type of music played than in instrumentation from jazz bands.

[25] Carney, *Cuttin' Up*, 78-81.

While jazz music thrived in New York, its cabarets embraced a wider diversity of styles than Chicago's three main types. The polished dance music of Fletcher Henderson and the extraordinary art music of Duke Ellington were just two forms of jazz to be found in New York's cabarets. Fletcher Henderson's music would later bridge the gap between the Jazz Age and the Swing Era in the mid- 1930's by using sophisticated improvisations of melodies and separating the instruments into sections to contrast their unique timbres. Duke Ellington achieved notoriety by leading the jazz orchestra movement in addition to his popular compositions and piano playing abilities. He successfully blurred the lines between African, American, and European motifs with music combinations of ragtime, party piano, vaudeville, Broadway show tunes, Tin Pan Alley[26] popular songs, and "Chicago jazz growl."[27]

Duke Ellington. Image courtesy of Frank Driggs Collection at pbs.org.

[26] Tin Pan Alley was the name given to the collection of New York City music publishers and songwriters who dominated the popular music of the United States in the late 19th century and early 20th century.

[27] Carney, *Cuttin' Up*, 78-93.

Solo piano music had a strong ragtime influence, reinforced by Scott Joplin's move to New York near the end of his life.[28] Heard in the cafes of Harlem and selected clubs downtown, the "orchestral style" of playing, in which the pianist created a broad, rolling utilization of the entire keyboard, was the stuff of legends and competition for decades. Essentially, the right hand would play melodies supported by full chords, while the left would hammer out bass octaves or tenths emphasizing the strong beats and filling the weak beats with mid-keyboard chords. That left hand motion led to the label "stride piano." Using material from blues, rags, concert piano music, popular song tunes, or original compositions, the performers would improvise on the original music adding embellishments and "blues clusters," striking major and minor thirds or sevenths simultaneously.[29]

Singer-pianists and torch singers abounded in New York cabarets. Like Chicago, vocalists embraced the blues, particularly female performers. Crossover artists between vaudeville, café revues, and Broadway delighted in performing their favorite ballads for small audiences in intimate settings. Ethel Waters made her debut in 1919 at Edmonds Cellar in Harlem, singing bluesy versions of popular standards. Josephine Baker came from St. Louis to New York as a chorus girl in a traveling show in 1923 and quickly found employment at the Plantation Club in Harlem, a competitor of the mafia-run Cotton Club. That same year, Bessie Smith's performances at the new Harlem club, The Nest, were significant in establishing her as an artist; she was offered a Columbia recording contract that year and began a successful run of Broadway and vaudeville performances. Lena

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[28] Scott Joplin is historically credited as the founder of ragtime, dating back to his alleged piano performance at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

[29] Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 396.

Horne was the Cotton Club's youngest chorus girl in 1933, but her looks and voice quickly brought her to the attention of the producers and it wasn't long before she began her solo career.[30]

The singing styles were as varied as the energy, elegance, and maturity of the presentations. Bessie Smith's "dark bluesy performances tended to burrow into your soul."[31] When Lena Horne had been lured from the Cotton Club to become the featured singer in Noble Sissle's band, she'd doubted her ability to meet the standards of her contemporaries, "When I think that really great singers like Ella Fitzgerald were singing with competing bands like Chic Webb's I don't see why Noble wanted me. I couldn't sing jazz and I couldn't sing blues. All I could do was carry a simple tune simply." Indeed, her vivacity and warmth transformed 'simple' singing into moving, affective renditions that drew in the listener.[32] The successful singer was one whose voice was a tool: it could move like an instrument, sometimes soloing, sometimes blending with the other instruments in the ensemble, or in call and response with a piano accompaniment; it could pitch a song in a child's tone or ring out a protest or cry.

Hits became standards when songs became so popular that everyone wanted to hear them and artists wanted to perform them. The publishing industry and radio broadcasting helped achieve this by making music readily available to the general public. The standards then became staples in cabarets. Tin Pan Alley and Broadway contributed

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[30] The Bowery Boys: New York City History, *Lady Day to Lady Gaga: Where 20 Stars got their Starts*; Friday, April 2, 2010. http://theboweryboys.blogspot.com/2010/04/lady-day-to-lady-gaga-where-20-stars.html, Last accessed 14 April 2014.

[31] The Bowery Boys, *Where 20 Stars got their Starts*, np.

[32] Arnold Dobrin, *Voices of Joy, Voices of Freedom* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1972), 83.

such classic standards as *Alexander's Ragtime Band* (Berlin), *I Got Rhythm* (Gershwin and Gershwin), *Ol' Man River* (Kern and Hammerstein), *Stormy Weather* (Arlen and Koehler), *Ain't Misbehavin* (Razaf, Waller, Brooks), *Anything Goes* (Porter), and many more. *Stormy Weather*, seen below, was first performed at The Cotton Club by Ethel Waters but was soon heard in cabarets throughout the city, including an instrumental version arranged by Duke Ellington. The bluesy song speaks of disappointment, as the lyrics, "Don't know why there's no sun up in the sky," show a woman pining for her man to return. The weather is a depiction of the singer's tears and a metaphor for the singer's dark despair.[33]

Stormy Weather

Don't know why
There's no sun up in the sky
Stormy weather
Since my man and I ain't together
Keeps raining all the time

Life is bare
Gloom and misery everywhere
Stormy weather
Just can't get my poor old self together
I'm weary all the time, the time
So weary all of the time

When he went away
The blues walked in and met me
If he stays away, old rocking chair will get me
All I do is pray
The lord above will let me
Walk in the sun once more

Can't go on
Everything I had is gone
Stormy weather
Since my man and I ain't together
Keeps raining all the time
Keeps raining all of the time

"Stormy Weather" by Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler. First performed by Ethel Waters at The Cotton Club in (1933).

Each of the four early cabaret movements had a unique style characterized by social, political, and artistic influences. The music of each cabaret movement reflected these influences. Parisian cabaret music was intelligent and witty, exhibiting the bohemian population's newfound creative freedom after wartime. In contrast, Berlin cabaret music

[33] James Gavin, *Intimate Nights: The Golden Age of New York Cabaret* (New York, NY: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 17-42.

sought to capture the repressed and over stimulated spirit of its occupants. Jazz and blues, styles of music associated with the African American population, dominated Chicago cabaret music. In addition to jazz and blues, New York cabaret music featured Broadway ballads and torch songs from neighboring venues. Intimate settings, spirited attitudes, and crafty showmanship were common among all cabarets, but music was the universal foundation.

Chapter 4: Neo-Cabaret in America

Cabaret did not flourish for long after its early years in America. While performances persisted through the 1950's it was replaced by other forms of entertainment by the 1960's. The rise of television brought televised variety shows into the home, arena concerts became popular, and cabaret went dormant. McCarthyism and the Second Red Scare in the 1950's also likely contributed to the decline of cabaret by discouraging any type of counterculture performance that could be construed as anti-patriotic. An exception was Las Vegas dinner theaters that retained the intimacy and avant-garde performance practice of cabaret, but forwent the comedy segments in favor of showgirls. Stand-up comedy routines and drag show performances also helped to maintain some of the theatrical aspects of cabaret that would contribute to a second cabaret movement in America.

Although there is no known artist or particular show that is associated with the advent of the neo-cabaret movement in America, it can be pinpointed to the late 1980's. Bob Harrington established the Bistro awards in 1985 in his "Bistro Bits" column in the weekly newsletter *Back Stage* to honor cabaret, jazz, and comedy artists in New York City. For the first few years, the awards were merely listed in Harrington's column as notable performances he had seen during the calendar year. The first formal presentation of the awards was held in 1990 at Eighty Eight's, a popular cabaret venue in the West Village. Thus, it can be assumed that there was either a resurgence of cabaret performances in New York in the 1980's or there was a resurgence of *notable* cabaret performances that caught public attention at a time when audiences were ready for a change.[1]

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[1] "Bistro Awards," last modified March 7, 2014, http://bistroawards.com.

Two types of cabaret make up the neo-cabaret movement. The first is the type of cabaret that the Bistro Awards were created to recognize: a solo performance of favorite songs by an established artist. The second type is dark cabaret: a genre that draws on the aesthetics of decadent, risqué German Weimar-era cabarets, burlesque, and vaudeville shows, with the sound of post 1970's gothic and punk music. Its origins are loosely based on the counterculture ethos and disturbing themes exemplified by works like *The Threepenny Opera* by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, with songs like *Moritat von Mackie Messer* (Mack the Knife) that tell the story of a murderous anti-hero.[2]

Solo Cabaret

The modern solo cabaret show is typically delivered in an intimate, private setting and features a variety of songs. Famous singers that want to show off their vocal prowess in multiple genres use these cabaret shows as benefit concerts, private events, or as live recording opportunities. Some famous cabaret artists include: Victoria Clark, Sutton Foster, Audra McDonald, Liz Callaway, Stephanie J. Block, Rebecca Luker, Andrea Burns, Malcolm Gets, Nancy Lamott, Christine Ebersole, Andrea Marcovicci, Christine Andreas, Brian Stokes Mitchell, and more. Recordings taken from live cabaret performances are appealing to a larger audience than some of the other records made by these artists that may be limited to a single show or style of music.[3]

Modern cabaret repertoire can include everything from classic show tunes to pop songs done in a cabaret style. Familiar ballads like *Someone to Watch Over Me* or *What a*

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[2] Mel Gordon, *Voluptuous Panic: The Erotic World of Weimar Berlin* (Los Angeles, CA: Feral House, 2006), 2-10.

[3] Neal Richardson, "Song Types and Structure in Modern Cabaret," accessed March 23, 2014, http://excavatingthesong.org/For_Education_Purposes_Only/Cabaret_Song-Types_and_Structure.html.

Wonderful World can be set to interesting new arrangements. Contemporary theater songs are common and familiar up-tempo songs from before 1965, like *Route 66* or *On the Sunny Side of the Street*, add flavor if done in a jazz or cabaret style.[4] Vocal standards from the 1940's and 50's are popular as well as torch songs sung by seasoned female performers. Furthermore, there is an entire repertoire of modern cabaret music by composers like John Bucchino, David Friedman, Craig Carnelia, Jeff Blumenkrantz, Maury Yeston, and Michel LeGrand.[5]

As Neal Richardson mentions, a good cabaret show has a mixture of familiar and unfamiliar pieces, diverse tempos, and most importantly, different time periods represented. A neo-cabaret audience may have patrons ranging in age from 20-70, all expecting to hear something familiar. Fortunately, while neo-cabaret and the solo performance type of modern cabaret are young, not all of the performers are. Three women in particular have redefined cabaret for the second time in their lives. Rosemary Clooney, Barbara Cook, and Julie Wilson all found success in the 1950's: Rosemary with hits like *Hey There* and movie roles like the one with Bing Crosby in *White Christmas*; Barbara as Broadway's premier comedy ingénue, with a Tony for her role as Marian the Librarian in *The Music Man*; Julie as the quintessential nightclub singer, thrilling patrons at luxurious clubs like the St. Regis Maisonette and the Plaza's Persian Room. With their subsequent return to the cabaret stage in the 1990's, these women and others like them have "returned a singer to a singer's most ancient function – telling a story." In a high-tech age dominated by mass media, small cabaret is once again captivating audiences where the

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[4] Cabaret style: Songs are often lowered so that they are in the speaking range. The role of the piano is to help tell the story. The accompaniment is often changed to help illustrate the specific story the singer is telling.

[5] Richardson, "Song Types and Structure." See for further listings of songs and composers.

"entertainment" is a single person close enough to touch, telling the story of how show business was invented.[6]

Unlike early cabaret, neo-cabaret is not limited to New York and Chicago. However, while Seattle, Philadelphia, Tulsa, Orlando, New Orleans, and Nashville all have flourishing cabaret scenes of their own, New York's is the largest and most active. Some of the most popular cabarets in New York today include: *The Metropolitan Room*, a popular jazz cabaret in Manhattan, *54 Below*, a Broadway supper club owned by four Broadway producers and located in the basement of Studio 54, *The Café Carlyle*, located in the Carlyle Hotel features jazz, Broadway, and pop artists (see interior description below), and *Joe's Pub*, a popular spot for up-and-coming cabaret talent. Whether the music is a new Broadway hit sung by an upcoming artist or an old vocal standard sung by a seasoned performer, modern cabaret venues in New York tend to draw on their Parisian and early American cabaret predecessors for ambiance. Intimate seating and opulent décor create an old-fashioned feeling of luxury for a show with great music, witty commentary, drinks, and good company:[7]

> The Café Carlyle and its neighbor across the foyer, Bemelmans Bar, have their own entrance on Madison Avenue, separate from the main hotel entrance on 76th Street, under a white square canopy with gold lettering. In the foyer, with its black and white marble floor, there is a glass door on either side. You can either turn left or right and see New York the way it used to be. Bemelmans Bar, with its murals by *Madeline* author Ludwig Bemelmans, is on the left, and is usually presided over late at night by jazz pianist and singer Barbara Carroll.
>
> To the right is the Café, presided over at all times with Latin formality by Ambrose, the dark-haired maître d'. It is an intimate room, seating about ninety, close together, on banquettes and gold chairs covered in rose velvet. On pink tablecloths,

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[6] Deborah Grace Winer, *The Night and the Music: Rosemary Clooney, Barbara Cook, and Julie Wilson, Inside the World of Cabaret* (New York, NY: G. Schirmer, 1996), 2-19.

[7] "Best of 2013: Best Cabaret in NYC," last modified December 30, 2013, http://www.timeout.com/newyork/cabaret2013.

> candles flickering in frosted hurricanes light up the surrounding walls covered in blue-and-amber-hued murals of fanciful figures with musical instruments, by the Hungarian-born theatre designer Vertes.[8]

Dark Cabaret

Dark cabaret is characterized by heavy piano and deep male or female vocals. Additionally, the music may center around another instrument such as the cello or accordion. The genre has been influenced by: Kurt Weill, Marlene Dietrich, Alexander Vertinsky, Cole Porter, Danny Elfman, Nina Hagen, PJ Harvey, Tom Waits, Tom Lehrer, Nick Cave, and even Brian Eno, a member of Roxy Music. It seeks to recreate the 1930's flamboyancy of Weimar Era cabaret performance practice with post-1970's punk and goth-inspired music.[9]

The earliest stage of the modern dark cabaret style dates back to 1974, when Nico released her album, *The End*. Her songs, *You Forgot To Answer* and *Secret Side* anticipated the dark cabaret sound. The Tiger Lillies, formed in London in 1989, were one of the first bands to use a style that would now be described as dark cabaret. Weimar-influenced satirical cabaret had been revived by London-based bands such as Fascinating Aïda and Kit and The Widow in the 1980's, but the Tiger Lillies went further and incorporated themes of blasphemy, prostitution and bestiality in their songs, sung by Martyn Jacques in a menacing falsetto voice (example below). Rozz Williams, the former lead singer of Christian Death, took the style in a more fully cabaret and darker direction in the 1990's. His album with

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[8] Winer, *The Night and the Music*, 14.

[9] "What is Dark Carbaret?" last modified June 29, 2006, http://tribes.tribe.net/gypsycabaret/thread/3432775e-1600-46ba-a1da-40ae031d679d#37fd9881-4f08-46dd-8b03-6a05977fbf37.

Gitane Demone, *Dream Home Heartache* (an allusion to a song by Roxy Music) in 1995, was the foundation for dark cabaret.[10]

Lily Marlene
This one's a dodo
This one's a flop
This one's a moron
And I'm fit to drop
Cross-fire chatter
Caught in the slums
She's off to her Chelsea Hotel

Her friend was out...
Another one died
She felt depressed
She almost cried
And then she remembered
She'd left her hat
Back in the Chelsea Hotel

No more Lily Marlene
Boys in the back-room falling in love again
She was an angel
Caught in crossfire
Out of Germany
Before it expired

History is written
The blue angel's gone
And this could be her saddest song
And history is written
The blue angel's gone
This could be her saddest song
Song
Song
Song

Lily Marlene, by the Tiger Lillies. From their 1994 album *Births, Marriages, and Deaths*.

The term *dark cabaret* became popular after the release of a 2005 compilation album entitled *Projekt Presents: A Dark Cabaret* by Projekt Records, a label chiefly associated with the dark cabaret genre. The album included works by Rozz Williams, Revue Noir, Jill Tracy, and the Dresden Dolls, some of the biggest names in the genre. Following

[10] "What is Dark Cabaret?" 2006.

her 1996 debut solo album *Quintessentially Unreal*, San Francisco-based singer/pianist Jill Tracy released her second album, *Diabolical Streak*, in 1999. Canada's *Shift* magazine called the album one of the "Top 10 Neo-Cabaret albums of all time." The Dresden Dolls, a Boston-based band formed in 2000, describe their music as "Brechtian punk cabaret," a term coined by lead singer Amanda Palmer in 2003 in part to preclude being labeled as Goths by the media. Nevertheless, with their nefarious musical style, white face makeup, and period clothing, The Dresden Dolls quickly became the most readily identified with the dark cabaret genre (example below). In addition to *dark cabaret*, other terms like *cabaret noir* and *glam cabaret* are used interchangeably. Additionally, new sects of dark cabaret have emerged from the theatrical influences of the first groups. With a more aggressive style and a punk or metal background, bands such as Stolen Babies, Harlequin Jones, and Birdeatsbaby, are associated with *punk cabaret*. Furthermore, dark cabaret bands may also fall into the genres of punk cabaret, punk opera, neo-burlesque, gothic ragtime, vaudeville, apocalyptic folk, neo-folk, psych folk and others.[11]

The Dresden Dolls. From http://www.dresdendolls.com/history.html.

[11] "What is Dark Cabaret?" 2006.

Coin Operated Boy
Coin operated boy
Sitting on the shelf he is just a toy
But I turn him on and he comes to life
Automatic joy
That is why I want a coin operated boy

Made of plastic and elastic
He is rugged and long-lasting
Who could ever, ever ask for more
Love without complications galore
Many shapes and weights to choose from
I will never leave my bedroom
I will never cry at night again
Wrap my arms around him and pretend...

Coin operated boy
All the other real ones that I destroy
Cannot hold a candle to my new boy and I'll
Never let him go and I'll never be alone
Not with my coin operated boy...

This bridge was written to make you feel smittener
With my sad picture of girl getting bitterer
Can you extract me from my plastic fantasy
I didn't think so but I'm still convincible
Will you persist even after I bet you
A billion dollars that I'll never love you
Will you persist even after I kiss you
Goodbye for the last time
Will you keep on trying to prove it?
I'm dying to lose it...
I'm losing... my confidence
I want it
I want you
I want a coin operated boy.

Excerpt from *Coin Operated Boy*, by the Dresden Dolls. From their 2004 album *The Dresden Dolls*.

Conclusion

American cabaret is a diverse art form with a colorful history. Influences from its predecessors, the Parisian cabaret, founded by a handful of literary Bohemians in the late 19th century, and German cabaret, a musical and theatrical movement that truly established the avant-garde performance practice, can be seen in both America's early cabaret

movement and its current movement. From jazz to Broadway, the music of cabaret has captivated American audiences for the better part of a century. Artists exposed themselves in intimate settings in hopes of expressing shared facets of humanity. Raw emotion, passion, wit, and humor came together to create a style of performance that encompassed the spirit of cabaret. Today, that spirit lives on in the music of solo cabaret and dark cabaret musicians as they continue to present cabaret music across the nation.

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