



Jazz in America Student Handout–Lesson Plan 6–American History Essay

The Great Depression, World War II, and the Post-War Period, 1929-1949

Americans experienced fast and far-reaching changes between 1929 and 1949. Events inside and outside the country made many Americans think that the world was either ending, turning upside down, or starting all over. The Great Depression, World War II, and the war's aftermath made the United States a very different place by the 1950s. Gnawing fears of economic collapse and war gradually gave way to hope and cautious optimism in the post-war period.

When the Great Depression began in 1929, the U.S. economy collapsed almost overnight, and millions of Americans lost their jobs. Unemployment hit African Americans especially hard. "The Depression brought everybody down a peg or two," remarked Langston Hughes, "and the Negro had but a few pegs to fall." Black sharecroppers and tenant farmers in the segregated South saw the price of cotton fall from 18 cents a pound in 1929 to six cents four years later. In large cities like Chicago, New York, and Atlanta, half of all African Americans were out of work. After 1932, President Franklin Roosevelt began many government programs to create jobs, but even massive federal spending was not able to end the Great Depression permanently. Joblessness was like a giant fire that kept roaring back the moment a firefighter stopped pouring water on it.

[Link: The Library of Congress, *Learning Page*, "Great Depression and World War II, 1929-1945." <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/features/timeline/depwwii/depwar.html>>.]

America's entry into World War II on December 8, 1941, created the economic conditions that finally brought an end to Great Depression unemployment. One day after Japanese bombers killed more than 2,400 Americans at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, the United States began to mobilize its people and economy for war against Japan and its ally, Germany. More than 15 million men and women enlisted in the armed forces by 1945, including almost 500,000 African Americans. The U.S. economy shifted into high gear as American factories began producing airplanes, tanks, ships, guns, and other instruments of war. Wartime production achieved what Roosevelt's New Deal programs had not: massive job creation. [Link: National D-Day Museum, New Orleans, "America Goes to War: The Homefront." <http://www.ddaymuseum.org/education/history_war.html#07>.]

Mobilization and production for World War II led to significant migration flows in the 1940s, drawing millions of Americans to jobs in war factories in northern and western cities. Because so many men had gone overseas to fight, women entered the work force in record numbers. About 750,000 black southerners were among those who moved to California, Michigan, and Ohio hoping to get jobs in defense industries. [Link: *Picture This: California Perspectives on American History*, "World War II: Post War Era: 1940s-1950s." <http://www.museumca.org/picturethis/4_8.html>.] Another 35,000 black "Okies" left the Dust Bowl – drought-stricken areas of Oklahoma and the Great Plains – and resettled in the fruit and vegetable growing San Joaquin Valley of central California. [Link: Public Broadcasting Company, American Experience, "Surviving the Dust Bowl." <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/dustbowl/>>.]

African Americans did not get a fair share of these new jobs, however. To ensure that war factories with government contracts hired black workers, A. Philip Randolph, longtime leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, threatened to march on Washington, D.C. unless President Roosevelt eliminated hiring discrimination. Roosevelt feared a massive protest would embarrass the country at a time when he was building public support for his claim that Nazi Germany was



persecuting Jewish people. In exchange for Randolph calling off the march, in June 1941, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, which ended discrimination in hiring for defense industries and government. [Link: We the People, *100 milestone documents*, "Executive Order 8802: Prohibition of Discrimination in the Defense Industry (1941)."
<<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=72>>.]

American soldiers returning home in 1945 from World War II found that racial barriers were beginning to break down in many parts of the United States. Black G.I.'s played an active role in promoting racial equality by refusing to accept second-class treatment, especially after being welcomed as heroes in France and Germany. Other African Americans had supported a wartime "Double-V" campaign, calling for "victory abroad" (over Hitler) and "victory at home" (over discrimination). Civil rights groups like the NAACP, with nearly half a million members by 1945, continued to press for racial equality in the nation's courts and legislatures. [Link: Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, *Black Wings: African American Pioneer Aviators* <<http://www.nasm.si.edu/interact/blackwings/hstory/index.html>>. See especially "4. The Quest for Equal Opportunity." and Public Broadcasting Service, *The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords, "Newspapers: The Pittsburgh Courier"* <http://www.pbs.org/blackpress/news_bios/index.html>.]

Americans in the post-WWII period began the process of improving their lives, with many choosing to resettle in new communities. The GI Bill benefited millions of returning veterans by providing low-interest home loans, job training and placement, medical care, and money for college. In 1940s Los Angeles, an important example of a city that had grown from defense spending and substantial migration, black newcomers founded insurance companies and newspapers, landed roles in Hollywood movies, organized unions, ran successfully for public office, and created a thriving jazz culture along Central Avenue. African Americans there faced discrimination in housing and employment, and riot-related violence, but they had greater opportunities to create meaningful lives because integration in West Coast cities brought people of different races together on more equal terms. Americans after the war entered into many more mixed-race marriages. "In the 1940s, Los Angeles had its Club Miscegenation, where multiracial couples and their children could affirm their dual heritages."¹

Jazz in America Student Handout--Lesson Plan VI--Biographies

Central Avenue, Los Angeles Jazz Musicians

Because racial covenants prevented "persons not of the Caucasian race" from buying or renting houses in certain areas of the city, African Americans migrating to Los Angeles in the 1940s lived along Central Avenue. Stretching south for seven miles from downtown to Watts, the Central Avenue district became home to black residents, businesses, churches, and night clubs. Angelenos – rich and poor, black and white – crowded into places like Club Alabam, the Dunbar Hotel, and the Plantation to listen to jazz, blues, and other music.

¹ Gary B. Nash, *Forbidden Love: The Secret History of Mixed-Race America*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, Edge Books, 1999, p. 178



Jazz in America Student Handout--Lesson Plan VI--Jazz Biography 1

William Marcel "Buddy" Collette, jazz saxophonist, clarinetist, flutist, and composer (1921-)
Biography [<http://www.buddycollette.com/biography.html>]

Buddy Collette was born in 1921 in the Watts district of Los Angeles. Jazz music first attracted Collette when he went with his parents to hear Louis Armstrong. The joy of playing music, young Collette thought, far surpassed the rigors of laboring as a railroad worker or a garbage collector, his father's job. Twelve-year-old Collette started his first band – one that included future jazz legend Charles Mingus. After serving as a Navy bandleader in World War II, Collette returned to Los Angeles, performed along the "Avenue," and became one of the city's first bebop players. He recorded several albums, became the first African American to play in a television studio band (on Groucho Marx's *You Bet Your Life*), and tried to end segregation in the music industry. In the 1960s, Collette taught music at several colleges and universities in the Los Angeles area. A stroke in 1998 ended his public performances, but Collette remains an influential figure in the music community.

Jazz in America Student Handout--Lesson Plan VI--Jazz Biography 2

Benjamin David "Benny" Goodman, jazz clarinetist, composer, and bandleader (1909-1986)
Biography [<http://www.redhotjazz.com/goodman.html>]

"Benny" Goodman grew up in Chicago, one of 12 children of Russian immigrants. Enrolled in free music classes at a local synagogue, Goodman received some clarinet training and later studied music formally through a boys' club. Goodman's father, a tailor, died when Goodman was 14 years old, and the young musician began to work to help support his family. By the age of 16, Goodman was playing in a professional Chicago "swing" band, the Ben Pollack Orchestra. He later moved to New York, where he worked as a session musician for many bands and for a late-night radio program, "Let's Dance." When Goodman played in 1935 at the Palomar Ballroom in Los Angeles <<http://www.satinballroom.com/supplements/palomar.html>>, he was welcomed enthusiastically by West Coast fans he did not know he had. His radio program was popular in Los Angeles, where it aired earlier in the evening than it did in New York. By integrating his bands, Goodman made an important contribution to 20th century music and culture, especially since many clubs and dance halls in the 1930s did not allow racially mixed bands to perform. Goodman, who was Jewish, broke down racial barriers by hiring African- American musicians like Teddy Wilson <http://www.pbs.org/jazz/biography/artist_id_wilson_teddy.htm>, Lionel Hampton <<http://www.uidaho.edu/hampton/>>, and Charlie Christian.



Jazz in America Student Handout--Lesson Plan VI--Jazz Biography 3

Charlie Christian, jazz guitarist (1916-1942)

Biography: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlie_Christian]

As a young boy in a segregated, poverty-stricken area of Oklahoma City, Charlie Christian imitated his father, a blind guitarist, by playing "guitars" he made from cigar boxes. Christian advanced to real guitars and became accomplished and well-known, especially for his skills on amplified, or electric, guitars. Benny Goodman's brother-in-law, John Hammond, heard of Christian's talents and arranged for him to audition for Goodman in 1939. That session launched a successful career playing with Goodman's band, doing radio appearances, and making recordings. Tuberculosis cut short Christian's promising career, at only 25 years of age.

Consider the following questions as you read the biographies of jazz musicians who played on Central Avenue in Los Angeles:

1. Why did Central Avenue become a growing African-American community? Can you list at least four reasons?
2. Why did so many different kinds of people – "rich and poor, black and white" – go to clubs and dance halls on Central Avenue?
3. Why did Benny Goodman and Buddy Collette fight racism in the music industry? Can you think of any experiences in their backgrounds that might have caused them to feel strongly about this? Explain.