

## MEDIA REVIEWS

The Charleston Jazz Initiative. <http://charlestonjazz.net>.

Jazz's origin story is contested terrain. Some scholars, fans, and musicians believe jazz started in Charleston, SC, where the city's proximity to the Gullah made the Africanization of European culture a palpable part of the its soundscape.<sup>1</sup> For them, Charleston did not just inspire the eponymously named rhythm and knee-knocking dance moves of the Jazz Era; Charleston created jazz.

The Charleston Jazz Initiative (CJI) supports such a notion. It was created in 2003 by Dr. Karen Chandler, Director of the Arts Management program at The College of Charleston, and jazz journalist Jack McCray, editor of Charleston's *Post and Courier* until his untimely death in 2011. Chandler, core staff members (videographer Tony Bell and musical director Quentin Baxter), and CJI advisors organize events and artistic projects to fulfill their research mission: to “[document] the African American jazz tradition in Charleston, the South Carolina Lowcountry, and its diasporic movement throughout the United States and Europe between the late nineteenth century through today.”<sup>2</sup> Their website, *charlestonjazz.net*, canvases local contemporary music while linking it to Charleston's vibrant black popular music scene at the turn of the twentieth century.

Although New Orleans occupies jazz history's popular imaginary, the CJI website shows Charleston has a longer and equally lively tradition of jazz. Users are treated to the following: 1) a summary of CJI's current events, publications, artistic projects, and community network; 2) oral histories and biographies of past and present Charleston musicians; and 3) a small digitized portion of the rich collections documenting early black jazz, held at the Avery Research Center of African American History and Culture at the College of Charleston. A majority of the site content focuses on the Jenkins Orphanage Band (JOB) from the 1890s through the 1930s and its contemporary legacy.

Introductory pages explain how integral JOB was to the development of early jazz in the United States. The home page features one of the few surviving images of the JOB and a quotation by historian Jeffrey Green encouraging scholars to tend to the “Charleston contribution to the arts of America.”<sup>3</sup> On this page, too, is the most illustrative item on the site: a three-minute digital excerpt from a 1928 Fox Movietone News Story, the earliest extant sound recording of the young boys of

<sup>1</sup> Mark Jones, *Doin' the Charleston: Black Roots of American Popular Music & the Jenkins Orphanage Legacy* (Charleston, SC: East Atlantic, 2013); Benjamin Franklin V, *Jazz and Blues Musicians of South Carolina: Interviews with Jabbo, Dizzy, Drink, and Others* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008); Jack McCray, *Charleston Jazz* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2007); Jeffrey Green, *Edmund Thornton Jenkins: The Life and Times of an American Black Composer, 1894–1926* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> “About,” Charleston Jazz Initiative, <http://charlestonjazz.net/about-main/>; Karen A. Chandler and Jack McCray, “‘... But the Greatest of These is Charity’: The Charleston Jazz Initiative's Study of the Jenkins Orphanage Bands,” *Journal of Arts Management, Law & Society* 34, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 306–18.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Green, “Home,” *Charleston Jazz Initiative*, <http://www.charlestonjazz.net>.

JOB practicing.<sup>4</sup> The “About” page features “CJI history,” which tells the story of Reverend Daniel Joseph Jenkins (1862–1937). Born into slavery, this entrepreneur opened the Jenkins Orphanage in 1892 and created a brass band to raise money for educating parentless children. Before long, “The Famous Piccaninny Band” had exported Charlestonian entertainment to the St. Louis Exposition of 1904, the inaugural parades of Presidents Roosevelt and Taft, and the Anglo-American Exposition in London in 1914. By the 1920s, several members, including Tommy Benford, Jabbo Smith, William “Cat” Anderson, and Freddie Green, moved on to record with famous bandleaders such as Jelly Roll Morton, James P. Johnson, Duke Ellington, and Count Basie. The site bios of JOB members, who stocked Broadway orchestra pits and dance bands, shows how Charleston-trained musicians made formidable contributions to US musical culture.

The JOB history stems from the CJI archival collections and oral histories, but the site hosts only a small number of the pictures, letters, programs, videos, and music manuscripts they possess. Four large collections include the papers of Edmund Thornton Jenkins (1894–1926), St. Julian Bennett Dash (1916–1974), Robert S. Cathcard, Jr. (1909–1992), and James Lee Jamerson (1936–1983). The digital copies of rare photos of jazz and blues bassist Jamerson performing with Jackie Wilson and Stevie Wonder are nothing short of extraordinary. The digitized items of international composer and danceband leader Edmund Jenkins, son of Rev. Jenkins, attest to JOB’s international reach. A highlight for researchers and teachers includes a concert program featuring Florence Price, Will Vodery, and James P. Johnson performing for the Coterie of Friends, Jenkins’s social club for elite black men, on 13 May 1923 in Paris.

There are also four smaller collections, mostly of photographs. Although these images are not available online, the items in each collection are enumerated. Users learn, for example, that Emmanuel Abdul-Rahimnu’s collection includes a Duke Ellington orchestra suitcase and jacket from his time as a percussionist with the band. Aside from these eight collections is a list of “Other Source Material.” From photos of Freddie Green to James Jamerson’s orphanage quilt, the sheer number of items demonstrates the importance of this moment and place in the history of black music.

Some of the CJI’s thirteen video oral histories are also available online. Interviewees are community members who knew JOB players as well as CJI advisors Jeffrey Green, Wolfram Knauer, and A. B. Spellman. Pianist Clifton Smalls, a relief player for Earl “Fatha” Hines and a member of one of the most famous JOB bands, the Carolina Cotton Pickers, explains how the ensemble traveled the United States as a territory band because they were headquartered in Kansas City through Smalls’ connection to Hines.

The CJI’s historical breadth is most evident in the “Musicians” section of more than sixty pages, each one featuring an individual’s biography, an image gallery, selected albums, and videos. Although not all of the musician pages have embedded

<sup>4</sup> A link to the full ten minutes of outtakes is hosted at the Digital Video Repository of the Moving Image Research Collections of the University of South Carolina University Libraries.

videos (supported by YouTube), many do, enriching the archive of Charleston's early jazz scene. The juxtaposition of generations of musicians connected to the JOB foreground the purpose of the CJI websites—to document the past, which has been so vital to Charleston's current music scene.

The CJI is by no means an exhaustive online documentation of Charleston jazz, nor does it pretend to be. If anything, its somewhat small collection speaks to the complexities of archiving black lives in Jim Crow America. At the same time, it evokes wonder from seeing the sheer volume of items related to a small, Southern U.S. city. Despite its paucity, it achieves a singular goal superbly well. The CJI website documents the musical activity of a region many jazz fans, even jazz scholars and musicians, forget was so important. In addition, as digitized collections do, it initiates a dialogue, inspiring users to visit the Avery Research Center in person or to take advantage of the websites of related institutions with digitized resources available at the College of Charleston's Lowcountry Digital Library or the Jazz Artists of Charleston website. The CJI website takes one very successful step towards preserving and revitalizing the history of jazz in Charleston, South Carolina.

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*Journal of the Society for American Music* (2015), Volume 9, Number 4, pp. 515–517.  
© The Society for American Music 2015 doi:10.1017/S1752196315000462

Sō Percussion and Grey McMurray, *Where (we) Live*. Cantaloupe CA21087, 2012, CD.

*Where (we) Live* (2012) is a collaboration between the ensemble Sō Percussion and singer-songwriter Grey McMurray. In the show's live setting, the Brooklyn-based musicians address the "rewarding, frustrating, supporting, [and] damaging" aspects of home and community, as well as the "tangible and never understood relationships" contained therein. On stage, Sō invites additional artists—directors, choreographers, videographers, and painters—to "come on over" and join them. The result is an evocative exploration of the idea of home using a tapestry of percussion, song, spoken word, improvisation, and visual media. The recorded version of *Where (we) Live*, as the liner notes inform listeners, is "a distillation of that performance."<sup>1</sup>

The album is divided into ten tracks that ebb and flow between quasi-improvised interludes and structured, rhythmically dense pieces. McMurray's alternately crooning and hauntingly ethereal voice shines on the tracks "Strange Steps," "Moat," and "Strangers All Along." He sings passionately and with an ease that invites listeners to set aside the intensely intricate rhythms of the underlying music. In "Strange Steps," for example, the musicians establish a complex-yet-buoyant groove that

<sup>1</sup> Sō Percussion and Grey McMurray, liner notes to *Where (we) Live*. Cantaloupe CD CA21087, 2012, CD.