

Jazz Music and Civil Rights: John Levy, Musician and Manager

Lesson Guide

Objectives:

The students will be better able to:

- Describe the experience of segregation under Jim Crow laws.
- Describe the impact of jazz music on race relations in the mid-1900s.
- Obtain information from a variety of primary sources.

Time:

- *First Person Narrative*: 10 minutes, 35 seconds
- *Analysis Questions*: 6 minutes

Grade Level: 6th–12th

Vocabulary:

The first-person narratives contain several words that may be unfamiliar to 21st-century readers. Whenever these words are used within narratives or primary sources, the Web page will include definitions for those words. Good historians always have a dictionary nearby when doing research or writing, so students should as well.

Here is the list specific to this activity:

- *segregation* – the separation or isolation of a race, class, or group (as by restriction to an area or by separate schools)
- *streetcar* – a passenger vehicle that runs on rails and typically operates on city streets
- *sound check* – preparation that takes place before a concert, speech, or similar performance to check the speakers, microphone, and stage

Materials:

- Computer with Internet access (with MP3 player and Adobe Reader)
 - John Levy Web site (full URL is http://www.smithsonianjazz.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=619&Itemid=134 cap-sensitive shortened URL is <http://bit.ly/JohnLevy>)
 - Transcript of the audio clips (http://www.smithsonianjazz.org/documents/oral_histories/Levy_Classroom_Transcript.pdf)
- Student Worksheet PDF (print or digital) (http://www.smithsonianjazz.org/documents/oral_histories/Levy_Classroom_Transcript.pdf)
- Printer (recommended)



Preparation:

1. Visit the John Levy page of *SmithsonianJazz.org* to preview the content.
2. Download and print the transcript for the John Levy recordings. Consider making copies for students.
3. Print the student worksheet to distribute to students.

Standards:

NCHS 5–12 United States History Standards

Era 8, Standard 1B: The student understands how American life changed during the 1930s. (Explain the cultural life of the Depression years in art, literature, and music.)

Era 9, Standard 1B: The student understands how the social changes of the postwar period affected various Americans.

NCHS 5–12 Standards in Historical Thinking

2B: Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage

2C: Identify the central question(s)

2F: Appreciate historical perspectives

4B: Obtain historical data from a variety of sources

4F: Support interpretations with historical evidence

Common Core Literacy in History/Social Studies (Grades 6–8)

1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

Introduction:

In order to better understand events and people of the past, historians examine many different types of primary sources. Government records, letters, photographs and artifacts are just a few examples of primary sources.

First-person narratives are a very valuable type of primary source since they are the words of people who actually lived through the events they speak of. The audio recording used in this lesson is an oral history of an individual who lived through these events.

Historical Context:

Between the end of the Civil War in 1865 and the Civil Rights Movement's achievements in the 1960s, many parts of the South had laws requiring that public places be racial segregated. Legislation known as Jim Crow laws separated people of color from whites in schools, housing, jobs, and public gathering places.

Overlapping with this period, from the early 1900s through the 1950s and 1960s, jazz music swelled in popularity. With its roots in African, Caribbean, and Latino musical traditions, jazz sat at the center of America's cultural crossroads. African American and white Americans often found themselves integrated while listening to or performing jazz music and this shared cultural experience was sometimes a bridge to breaking down racial barriers.

Task:

Students use their listening skills to discover important information from the oral history, then work with several supporting primary sources to answer questions about John Levy and/or his experiences.



Questions:

1. What early experiences helped to develop Levy's interest in music?

Levy's family was involved in their church and participated in music at the church. In New Orleans there were also parades that took music out onto the street, so Levy developed an interest in the instruments being played in those parades.

2. Cite one or more example of segregation in Levy's life. What is the significance of the signs and how do you think Levy and other African Americans would have responded to seeing one of those signs?

Levy's childhood wasn't extremely affected by segregation because his neighborhood was mixed. He did remember one specific incident where he had to follow Jim Crow laws and that made him feel very hurt and rejected. These signs are ones like Levy might have seen on the streetcar.

3. From Levy's recorded words and at least one other source, in what ways did jazz cross racial lines? Cite one instance where Levy's band pushed against the institution of segregation.

From Levy's interview, he says that many different kinds of people liked jazz music. Although many places were segregated, either de facto or de jure, jazz was something that could be more integrated. In fact, Levy's bandmate George insisted on not sitting at clubs where the audiences were segregated to show that he thought it was unfair. From looking at the photograph, we know that the band itself also included both white and black musicians.

Supporting Primary Sources:

See pages 4 through 6 in this guide.

Additional Primary & Secondary Sources:

- An article from PBS discussing early jazz recording and race records (http://www.pbs.org/jazz/exchange/exchange_race_records.htm)
- Discussion of the 2010 book *Where the Dark and the Light Folks Meet: Race and the Mythology, Politics and Business of Jazz* (<http://news.jazzjournalists.org/2010/12/book-reviews/>)





George Shearing Quintet

The band members pose in 1949. John Levy is pictured top left on bass. George Shearing is pictured bottom left on piano.

Courtesy of Devra Hall Levy





Sign, “for colored passengers”



Sign, “for white passengers”

Restrictive signs were displayed in many public places. They were constant and humiliating reminders with a common message—“stay in your place.”



Top Musicians Divided On Racial Unity, Prejudice In Jazz World

One of the hottest topics in jazz today concerns racial unity and racial prejudice among musicians.

The general opinion is that there is a great deal of Jim Crow — Crow Jim and other forms of segregation, but for the most part it is diminishing as time goes by and social and musical relationships improve.

A basic problem is that of jazz to race — the extent to which jazz has to be the product of one race. The feeling of Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln seems to be that jazz, having been created by the Negro, is a Negro preserve and the white musician in effect is an intruder.

To get at the bottom of the hassle, Downbeat Magazine gathered together three outstanding musicians, two critics and a NAACP official. Participating were George Shearing, Red Mitchell, Gerald Wilson (all musicians); Leonard Feather, John Tynan, critics and James L. Tolbert, attorney, president of the Hollywood-Beverly Hills chapter of the NAACP.

SHEARING SPEAKS

Shearing began the discussion with: "Let me say first that in selection men for my group I do not say that colored person has more drive. There are times when this is true, but it has nothing to do with race; it is the individual. I only ask can the man do the job." Shearing's group has always been integrated, and the personal manager is John Levy, a Negro.

"I don't let promoters or anybody else interfere or try to change the personnel of my group," he said.

"I've been through all this many times, cases where a guy will say, 'I'd love to use your group, but I'd like to suggest that you—.' You know, the old story.

"There isn't anyone in this country who has enough money to change me. I hand pick my group and it is going stay that way."

SHEARING ANSWER

Shearing added that he usually tells the bigot club owner, "When you grow up, I'll come and work for you."

Feather contends that there are many areas in which Negro has not made any substantial progress. "How many Negro musicians are there on staff at all the TV stations in Hollywood-Beverly Hills?" he asked. "Not a single one.

"And even in New York City, altogether, at the three networks, there are only nine musicians: Clark Terry, Snookie Young, and Art Davis at NBC; Jimmy Nottingham, Tryee Glenn, Hank Jones and Specs Powell at CBS; Joe Wilder and Ernie Royal at ABC. This is a pretty poor record."

Feather feels, that there is enough effort on the part of white musicians on staffs to bring Negro musicians in. "There is not enough active effort by white musicians to create a truly interracial scene in every corner of the music business," he said.

According to Tynan, the passe attitude towards Negroes

is existing on television and radio staffs because the white musician will always think of his closest friend for a gig, and who are his closest friends? Other white men.

Gerald Wilson thinks the interracial scene is growing. "I work with my own band every now and then," he said, "and there are times when I'll look up and see only six colored musicians." Wilson has an 18-piece orchestra.

"I hire the same as Shearing does. The other musicians in the band may not be just Caucasian. They may be Mexican or Chinese; I'm interested only in whether they can take care of business or not. Color of skin doesn't matter." Wilson is a Negro.

But discrimination works both ways. As Red Mitchell pointed out: "There was the time a president of a record company told me: 'I'm sorry, but I don't want to do an album with you, even though I signed a contract, because I can't sell white jazz musicians now!'"

All agreed, including Tolbert, that the American Federation of Musicians and the NAACP are organization which should do everything possible to advance race relations.

Crow-Jim is reverse segregation. It is reported that Max Roach, Art Blakey and other large names in jazz refuse to hire white musicians in their groups. Supposedly, they are the poll winners, but white musicians make all the money. This, they don't like.

All deny that Crow-Jim exists.

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