

# JASON MORAN: JAMES REESE EUROPE AND THE HARLEM HELLFIGHTERS *THE ABSENCE OF RUIN*

SAT  
NOV. 6

8 PM

Cullen Theater,  
Wortham Theater Center

7:15 PM Pre-concert conversation with Jason Moran

*Selections to be announced from the stage.*

Jason Moran, piano

Tarus Mateen, bass

Nasheet Waits, drums

Darryl Harper, clarinet

Logan Richardson, alto saxophone

Ingrid Laubrock, tenor saxophone

David Adewumi, trumpet

Chris Bates, trombone

Reginald Cyntie, trombone

Jose Davila, tuba

Contributions from John Akomfrah

Visual materials from Bradford Young



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There is great beauty in the life of Lieutenant James Reese Europe. Within the scholarship of who he was and what his music is, it becomes clear that the history surrounding him is a complex and tightly woven knot. Each strand of the cord holds a uniquely American history, a history that also births another complex knot, JAZZ.

Europe becomes a freedom fighter. He learns aspects of this at an early age as his violin teacher is the son of the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass. An early lesson he understands is that sound and freedom aid one another. With his violin he arrives New York on a mission. Much of this mission revolves around music, but his greater mission will be that of demanding equality of African-American performers,

PEOPLE. He finds fame by producing music for many societies: dances, parties, ceremonies, concerts. In 1910 he formed the groundbreaking Clef Club, a union for African-American musicians. His 1911 standing room only Carnegie Hall premiere of the Clef Club Orchestra was a sensation. His work developing dance music with the famous dancing duo, Vernon and Irene Castle, innovated the fox trot tempos and other dance steps. With each of these developments Europe always found a larger stage. The “stage” will always be a portal, a place to test what is real and surreal.

In WW1 he found his largest and most dangerous stage. When he joined the New York’s 15th Regiment, later becoming the 369th Infantry Harlem Hellfighters, he knew African-American

soldiers could not fight alongside white soldiers. His writing partner Noble Sissle was shocked Europe signed up. Sissle asked Europe if he could get out the war, would he? Europe replied “If I could, I would not. My country called me and I must answer. And if I live to come back, I will startle the world with my music.”

He indeed startled the world. 100 years later we celebrate a brave individual among a company of soldiers, The Harlem Hellfighters, who predict a thought Martin Luther King Jr. would write some 47 years later in his letter from a Birmingham jail: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Hear We Are.

—Jason Moran

The story of Benny Goodman’s 1938 concert at Carnegie Hall, in which he performed with a racially integrated band for what is considered to be the first jazz concert to be held at New York’s venerable concert venue, is one of the landmark events in jazz history. A recording of the performance—featuring Goodman’s big band with numerous guests including members of the Ellington and Basie bands and a trio consisting of Goodman, Lionel Hampton and Teddy Wilson—became available in 1950, and the event is celebrated in virtually every jazz history narrative.

Not so widely celebrated—in fact all-but-forgotten—is an event that took place 26 years earlier at Carnegie Hall, when band leader James Reese Europe and his Clef Club Orchestra, consisting of more than 100 African-American musicians, played to a sold-out house that included both black and white patrons. The music was not quite jazz as we know it today, but neither was it derived from the European classical tradition. The Clef Club Orchestra exclusively played music written by black composers. As Europe said at the time, “We have developed a kind of symphony music that, no matter what else you think, is different and distinctive, and that lends itself to playing the peculiar compositions of our race...” There are no recordings of this orchestra.

James Reese Europe was born in Alabama in 1881; his father had been born a slave. When he was nine, the family moved to Washington D.C. Both his parents were musicians, and they encouraged him to learn to play the violin and piano and to read music. At the age of 22, Europe moved to New York, where he formed a group called the Memphis Students. George Gershwin recalled sitting outside a club in Harlem as a young child listening

to this band play. In 1910, Europe co-founded the Clef Club, a fraternal organization for African-American musicians that also functioned as a booking agency and trade union. Europe was the club’s president and symphony director, bringing in more than \$100,000 a year—equivalent to around \$2.8 million in today’s dollars—in bookings. He also served as the band director for well-known white dancers Vernon and Irene Castle, who popularized the fox trot while acknowledging that African-American dancers had been performing similar steps for many years.

In 1913 and 1914, Europe made a series of recordings for the Victor Talking Machine Company that could be considered the missing link between pre-jazz ragtime and the fast-evolving New Orleans jazz sound that became known as Dixieland. Then, in 1914, at the peak of his popularity, Europe joined the Army. He was commissioned a lieutenant in the colored regiment of the New York National Guard. After he secured funding to recruit top musicians, he went on to lead the regimental band to great acclaim, and he persuaded his protégé Noble Sissle to join him in uniform. But Europe insisted he did not join the Army to play music; he joined to help the United States be victorious in World War I. His unit, which had been renamed the 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, arrived in France on New Year’s Day, 1918, with the band intact. In the spring of 1918, they performed for British, French and American troops as well as French civilians. Because black soldiers were not allowed to serve in combat roles in the American army, the unit was assigned to the French 16<sup>th</sup> Division, where after undergoing accelerated military training they saw heavy action in the trenches and earned the sobriquet the Harlem Hellfighters from the French soldiers for their bravery.

Following the Armistice, Europe and his musicians returned to the United States in February, 1919. In March, the band recorded twenty sides for the Pathe Freres Phonograph Company, a New York label with French backing. These 20 sides, along with four others recorded in early May, constitute the main body of Europe's recordings available today. In 1996, the 24 tracks were reissued on CD by the Memphis Archives label with the title *Lieut. Jim Europe's 369<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry "Hell Fighters" Band: The Complete Recordings*. In May of 1919, the band launched a triumphant tour of the Northeast to promote the new records. Pathe put out a flyer announcing in bold type, "*Eleven records of the world's greatest exponent of syncopation just off the press. Jim Europe's jazz will live forever.*" On the tour's final night, Europe was stabbed in the neck with a pen knife by one of his drummers, who had become angry when ordered to leave the dressing room due to his unstable behavior. Europe, who had survived mustard gas attacks in no man's land between the trenches in France, thought the wound was minor. He told the band to play on without him, and he would see them the next day. But the knife had struck his jugular vein, and doctors were unable to stop the bleeding. Europe died that night at a Boston hospital at the age of 39.

The next day, newspapers carried the headline "Jazz King is Dead." W.C. Handy, the Memphis-based "Father of the Blues" two of whose compositions Europe had covered, wrote, "The man who had just come through the baptism of war's fire and steel without a mark had been stabbed by one of his own musicians... The sun was in the sky. The new day promised peace. But all the suns had gone down for Jim Europe, and Harlem didn't seem the same." At the time of his death, Europe was the best-known black bandleader in the U.S. and he was given a public funeral. But his music faded into obscurity as the next generation of African-American innovators including orchestra leaders Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington and instrumental soloists Sidney Bechet and Louis Armstrong elevated concepts pioneered by Europe to establish a standard of creative brilliance that has stood the test of the time for 100 years. Predictably enough, the most popular artist of the so-called Jazz Age in the 1920s was the white orchestra leader Paul Whiteman, whose symphonic approach to proto-jazz also had a precedent in James Reese Europe and who became known as "The King of Jazz."

*The Harlem Hellfighters: James Reese Europe and the Absence of Ruin* is Jason Moran's "meditation" on the life and legacy of James Reese Europe. The program consists of Moran and his long-running trio, the Bandwagon, joined by a six-piece horn section playing Europe's original compositions and other pieces from the era, as reinterpreted with the awareness of a hundred years of musical and cultural history and, in particular, avant-garde free improvisation. The live music is supplemented by photos of Europe and his orchestra, film footage of the returning troops parading up the street at the end of WWI, and other scenes that augment the moods of the music. The project was commissioned by 14-18 NOW, a UK arts program commemorating the

centennial of the first world war, and premiered in 2018 with concerts in Britain as well as Jazzfest Berlin and the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C., where Moran serves as the artistic director for jazz programming.

The project's subtitle, "The Absence of Ruin," is taken from a novel by Caribbean-born social commentator Orlando Patterson, which in turn took its title from a poem by Derek Walcott. Writing in the American Collections Blog in 2018, Francisca Fuentes Rettig declared, "The novel proposes music as a potential solution to this problem of historical rootlessness associated with New World black memory. The syncopation, improvisation, and encoded messages of jazz in particular are proffered as a language for modern black memory that isn't based on the traditional archaeologies of knowledge and memory. Weaving together these various concerns—black memory, historical absences, James Reese Europe's overlooked legacy, the black language of jazz in its social context—Moran followed in Europe's footsteps as a bandleader and educator..."

When Jason Moran arrived at the Manhattan School of Music in 1993 after graduating from Houston's High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, one of his teachers was the under-appreciated piano genius Jaki Byard. "When I first started studying with Jaki, he gave me a list of names of artists I should seriously look into—Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, Art Tatum, James Reese Europe..." he says. "I knew the others, but I didn't know the name James Reese Europe. He was not mentioned in jazz history classes. I did not look into it further at the time. Then, fifteen years later, Randy Weston gave me a day-long lecture on the importance of James Reese Europe! Randy is a *griot*, an historical story-teller. He told me, 'You need to see how serious I am about this history'."

So when Moran heard about 14-18 NOW, he put together a proposal for a commission to re-imagine the music played by Europe's Harlem Hellfighters—the first large ensemble to perform music described as jazz on the European continent—with his trio and a horn section composed of a tuba, two trombones, a trumpet, a clarinet and an alto saxophone. Moran credits Europe with setting the stage for the foundational elements of jazz that came into full focus in the 1920s: The idea of the orchestra as a vehicle for sophisticated African-American musical expression, "a black sonic canon," as Moran describes it; and the emergence of the improvising instrumental soloist, expressing individual virtuosity within the context of a group. He further points to Europe's role as a social activist, seeking to improve working conditions for black musicians through the Clef Club. While Europe's name may have been left out of jazz history books, those musicians who came immediately after him knew his importance. Moran refers to a photo of the young Duke Ellington laying flowers at Europe's gravesite, an homage he recently re-enacted.

That said, Europe's music as heard on the available recordings is best appreciated as an immediate precursor to jazz, not jazz itself. The Harlem Hellfighters were, after all, a military band, and while there are brief instrumental solos, it is not the main



focus of the music. In terms of the sheer power of the brass sections, Moran says a more apt comparison might be to a marching band at a historically black college. He recounts how the 369<sup>th</sup> Regiment marched 80 blocks in their 1919 New York homecoming parade. When they started out in downtown Manhattan, the band played popular tunes recognizable to white listeners. But when they crossed into Harlem, they began to play in a style familiar to the community they represented. Several of the songs recorded by Europe — *Memphis Blues*, *How You Gonna Keep 'Em Down on the Farm*, *St. Louis Blues*, *Ja Da*, *Darktown Strutter's Ball*, *Clarinet Marmalade* — have survived in the jazz and/or popular music canon. Another, *Jazz Baby*, was revived in the 1966 movie *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, where it was sung by Carol Channing.

What Moran has done is to turn this source material into something at least partly unprecedented — you could call it avant-garde ragtime — with atonal horn solos coexisting with stately ensemble passages and syncopated wood-block rhythms coalescing into hard-driving swing powered by Taurus Mateen on electric bass and Nasheet Waits on drums. There is no piano on Europe's 1919 recordings, so Moran had a wide-open field to imagine his own parts, though he says he is guided by the melodies and the sheet music for Europe's compositions. "Piano players always think everything works on the piano," he says with a laugh. He credits his teacher, Jaki Byard, and Charles Mingus, with whom Byard played, as guiding spirits for how to time-travel through jazz in a single piece.

Jason Moran grew up in Pleasantville, a middle-class, historically-black neighborhood on Houston's near east side. His father, Andy, was an investment banker, and his mother, Mary, was a teacher. He began taking classical piano lessons at age 6, surrounded by his father's enormous collection of jazz, classical and popular albums.

In the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, Moran enrolled in Houston's High School for the Visual and Performing Arts, where he studied with Dr. Robert Morgan. "The Morans raised all three of their sons in an incredibly stimulating home environment," Morgan says. "[They were] surrounded by contemporary art of all genres, including large sculptures, a huge record collection, trips to the Houston Symphony, the Alley Theater, and on and on."

Upon graduation from high school, Moran moved to New York to continue his jazz studies at the Manhattan School of Music, thereby pioneering a Houston-to-New York migration of HSPVA-trained musicians that continues to this day. Early on, Moran realized that he had arrived in New York better prepared than some of his fellow music students. "What a lot of us found when we left Houston was that we had our skills together," he told me in an earlier interview. "I remember listening to the drummers in the practice room, thinking, 'Oh, no. Y'all are not happening. Just wait 'till Eric Harland comes up here next year.' The thing about being from Texas, there's a pride that comes with that. Of course, it's kind of ignorant, as well..."

In this case, the pride proved to be justified. Harland showed up in New York the next year, and both he and Moran started

getting calls to work professionally. In 1997, his senior year at the Manhattan School of Music, Moran was invited to join alto saxophonist Greg Osby's group on a European tour. He remained with the group for several years after graduation, and made his recording debut on Osby's 1997 album *Further Ado*, on Blue Note Records. This led to Moran signing his own deal with Blue Note, and the release of his debut album, *Soundtrack to Human Motion*, in 1999.

That same year, Blue Note sponsored New Directions, a touring group of promising young jazz players signed to the label; Osby and Moran, along with tenor player Mark Shim and vibraphonist Stefon Harris. The rhythm section — with hindsight, the real strength of the band based on the album that accompanied the tour — consisted of bassist Taurus Mateen and drummer Nasheet Waits. The other musicians have gone in separate directions, but Moran, Mateen and Waits are still together in The Bandwagon, Moran's trio for the last 20 years.

"What I have always tried to envision for us is a variety of scenarios so we can stay fresh," says Moran. "Not just jazz society — festivals, concert halls, clubs — but situations for dance, film, literary functions, visual arts."

In 2007, Moran was reunited with Eric Harland in Charles Lloyd's New Quartet, inheriting a piano bench previously occupied by Keith Jarrett in the late 1960s. The New Quartet's first album, *Rabo de Nube*, met with the kind of rapturous critical praise that Lloyd had not experienced since his late Sixties' opus, *Forest Flower*. The quartet's most recent album, *Passin' Thru*, was released in 2017, as Lloyd has been leading multiple groups and Moran has focused on his own projects and programming the Kennedy Center.

In 2015, Moran left Blue Note, for which he recorded eleven albums as a leader in fifteen years. His recent albums — as well as those of his wife, vocalist Alicia Moran — are available on his website, [www.jasonmoran.com](http://www.jasonmoran.com), and through the Bandcamp online record store. These include live recordings, solo piano works, trio albums with the Bandwagon, multi-media pieces, and a duet with the late avant-garde drummer Milford Graves. They are not available on the usual streaming services, on iTunes, or distributed to brick-and-mortar record stores. It is a lower-profile approach to being a recording artist, but Moran says it's working for him because this way he owns his own masters. James Reese Europe would probably approve.

The Kennedy Center has had just two artistic directors for jazz. Moran inherited the role from Dr. Billy Taylor, the respected pianist, educator and radio programmer who died in 2010. Moran recalls a workshop that Taylor gave at HSPVA when he was in high school. "I videotaped it," he says. "He could play the whole history of the piano in jazz, and also play his own music." Moran already had a passionate interest in the more obscure corners of jazz history in as an artist; at the Kennedy Center he has a platform to apply that

vision to projects larger than himself. He is envisioning a major celebration of Duke Ellington in 2024, which would be the 125<sup>th</sup> year of Duke's birth.

"We're not starting from scratch," he says. "I want to acknowledge the hard work that has come before. People have been telling us how to move things forward for a long time, sometimes more effectively than we are." He sees James Reese Europe's embrace of syncopation as an expression in music of this forward-looking movement—"I can't wait any longer, it has to happen now," he says—and as a metaphor for the African-American historical experience.

As Moran observes, James Reese Europe had an awareness of his place in history. It was with brave optimism and hope for a better future that the Harlem Hellfighters went off to fight in the trenches of France. That they returned to a nation even more deeply entrenched than before in the brutal laws of

Jim Crow segregation is a tragedy; that the jazz art form was able to grow and flourish in the face of such injustice is a triumph. We will never know how Europe would have adapted to the Jazz Age in the 1920s. Would he have attempted to compete with Paul Whiteman to retain his title as the King of Jazz in the land of separate but equal? Would he have joined Armstrong and Ellington in the quest for artistic excellence and evolution? Or could he have done both?

But in the absence of ruin, Jason Moran heard portents of future cries for freedom in this almost-forgotten music. Of Armstrong and Ellington, of Charles Mingus and Albert Ayler, of his own standing as a leading artistic and academic spokesperson for jazz in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, all pressing forward bravely with the same syncopated refrain: "I can't wait any longer. It has to happen now."

—Rick Mitchell



**A godsend for  
Houston jazz fans"**  
*Houston Chronicle*

## DACAMERA JAZZ

**NOV. 6**

**JASON MORAN**

JAMES REESE EUROPE and  
THE HARLEM HELLFIGHTERS  
*THE ABSENCE OF RUIN*



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