

BEFORE THE WAR

by Miriam Weisfeld, Dramaturg

By the early 1930's, jazz pianist John Welch had become one of several African-American musicians to flee discrimination in the United States for the vibrant and welcoming art scene in Germany. The warm reception Welch received there mirrors that of Gabriel Gift, the cabaret singer in *Antebellum*. "Before Hitler came to power, the Negro was treated exceptionally well," Welch wrote at the dawn of the Nazi era. "But even

today... the Negro may... go into any bar or visit any restaurant, café or night club and be waited on courteously."

Soon after, the Third Reich came to regard African-American music as a degenerate threat to Aryan purity. From 1937-1945, the Nazis carried out a brutal campaign to sterilize or imprison anyone of African descent who did not escape Germany in time. But even in the darkest hours of suppression, the German passion for jazz and swing refused to disappear. As has often occurred in the United States, racial division was at odds with the irresistible pull of music.

By the mid-1930's, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Marian Anderson—who all enjoyed adoration across Europe—found themselves banned from performing in Germany. This hostility extended to Jews associated with jazz and swing, such as the big band leader Benny Goodman. Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Minister of Culture, launched an assault on African-American and Jewish music as "Negrodom, the art of the subhuman." He officially banned the playing of jazz live, recorded, or via radio in 1937.

However, Goebbels' attempts to stem the craze for degenerate music proved laughably unsuccessful. Nazi propagandist films meant to villainize jazz often

backfired, attracting swarms of music fans otherwise banned from seeing footage of American stars perform. Illicit jazz clubs sprouted up across Germany, and Berlin maintained a lively music scene throughout the 1930's.

One surviving poster from Goebbels' campaign spells "Degenerate Music" across the caricature of a Black musician (pictured below). The saxophonist's lapel pin signals his collusion with Jews, and his earring suggests homosexuality—a deadly nexus of crimes against the Third Reich. Eventually, musicians of Jewish or African descent who remained in occupied Europe found themselves in concentration camps.

Shortly after reporting the courteous reception he received in Germany, the African-American jazz pianist John Welch was accused of acting as an enemy agent.

Interned in a concentration camp, he ultimately suffered the racial hatred that he had fled America to escape.

Hattie McDaniel (left), and Vivien Leigh (right) in *Gone with the Wind*.

IDOLIZED IN BERLIN, SEGREGATED IN ATLANTA

While Germany provided a haven for African-American artists and intellectuals, a wave of nostalgia for the days of slavery swept the United States. Margaret Mitchell's wildly popular 1936 novel *Gone with the Wind* memorialized the Civil War survival story of Scarlett O'Hara, a white plantation-owning daughter of the Antebellum (literally, "before the war") South. The book became MGM's epic film, eventually garnering 10 Academy Awards for its unprecedented lavishness.

The film's white stars traveled to Atlanta—the home of both Margaret Mitchell and Scarlett—for the 1939 world premiere.

America's Jim Crow laws prohibited the movie's African-American actors from attending; this included Hattie McDaniel, who later won an Oscar for her portrayal of Scarlett's "Mammy."

The various layers of irony were not lost on the era's leftist and African-American presses. Howard Rushmore, Communist film reviewer for *The Daily Worker*, was forced to resign over his divisive evaluation of the movie as "a glorification of the Ku Klux Klan." *The New York Times* dispatched these headlines from the scene in Atlanta:

"Rebel Yells for Miss Mitchell Mingle with Applause and Cheers of 2,000 at Premiere"

"Atlanta is Retaken by the Glory of the Past as *Gone with the Wind* Sweeps into City"

"Ladies who were Infants in Sherman's Day Witness Start of March Through Dusk"

