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Ray Ventura, Jazz and French Chanson: an Ambiguous Americanization

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In the 1930s, Ray Ventura and his Collégiens established themselves as a model of French chanson, while the category of "stage jazz", which they nurtured and perfected, made them a powerful school of Americanization. This article examines what it is in the music itself that feeds this paradox and makes this double entente possible.

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At the end of a successful decade (1930-1940), Ray Ventura (1908-1979) was seen as both a founder of French chanson as well as France's answer to the Swing Era's great American bandleaders. *Downbeat* magazine dubbed him "the Glenn Miller of France" in 1955 and, twenty years later, "the French equivalent of Paul Whiteman". The band's name was based on an American song, *Collegiate*, by Fred Waring and His Pennsylvanians, one of the first electrically recorded hits (4 April 1925). Paradoxically, despite the American influence, the group's onstage hodgepodge of American and French songs was quickly perceived as a uniquely French way of making popular music. The contemporary press sometimes panned them for being cosmopolitan. Most of the titles they performed during their amateur period (1928-1931) were American hits, but the proportion was reversed as the band became more professional.

Période amateure	
LIEU	TITRE(S) (+ solistes principaux)
Paris, 1 December1928	WL1317-1 I'm Afraid of You (EF, JA, CA, PM, voc)
	WL1318-1 Sweet Ella May (Lou Abelardo, voc)
Paris, 23 February 1929	KI2214-2 Let's Do It (EF, JA, CA, PM, voc)
	KI2215-1 You're the cream in my coffee (CA, voc)*
	KI2215-2 You're the cream in my coffee (CA, voc)*
Paris, 19 March 1929	KI2262-2 Makin' Whoopee! (CA, voc)
	KI2263-1 If I had you (EF, JA, CA, PM, voc)
Paris, 16 May 1929	KI2385-1 I want to be bad (CA, voc)
	KI2386-2 Button up your overcoat (EF, JA, CA, PM, voc)
	KI2387-2 Lover come back to me (?, voc)
	KI2388-2 Louise (CA, voc)
Paris, 27 September 1929	KI2631-2 You'll want me back again (Grace Edwards, voc)
	KI2632-2 I'm doing what I'm doing for love (Grace Edwards, voc)
	KI2634-1 Some Sweet Day (EF, JA, CA, voc)
Paris, 19 october 1929	KI2677-1 With a song in my heart (Bart Curtis, voc)
	KI2678-1 Can't we be friends? (Grace Edwarts, voc)
Bal Bullier, Paris, June 1930	3157BKP Mais ton sourire (w/ Robert Burnier, voc)
	3158BKP Tokay (w/ Robert Burnier, voc)
	3159BKP Great day (vcl trio)
	3160BKP When you're smiling (CA, voc)
Paris, 28 June 1930	KI3493-2 Thank you Father (CA, voc)
	KI3494-2 C'est un chant d'amour (Robert Burnier, voc)
Paris, 25 October 1930	KI37-30 My future just passed (Misraki, voc)
	KI3731-1 Good for you, bad for me (R. Barry & trio, voc)
	KI3732 Vivons nos rêves (Burnier, voc)
	KI3733 Tout doux, tout doux (1) (Burnier, voc)

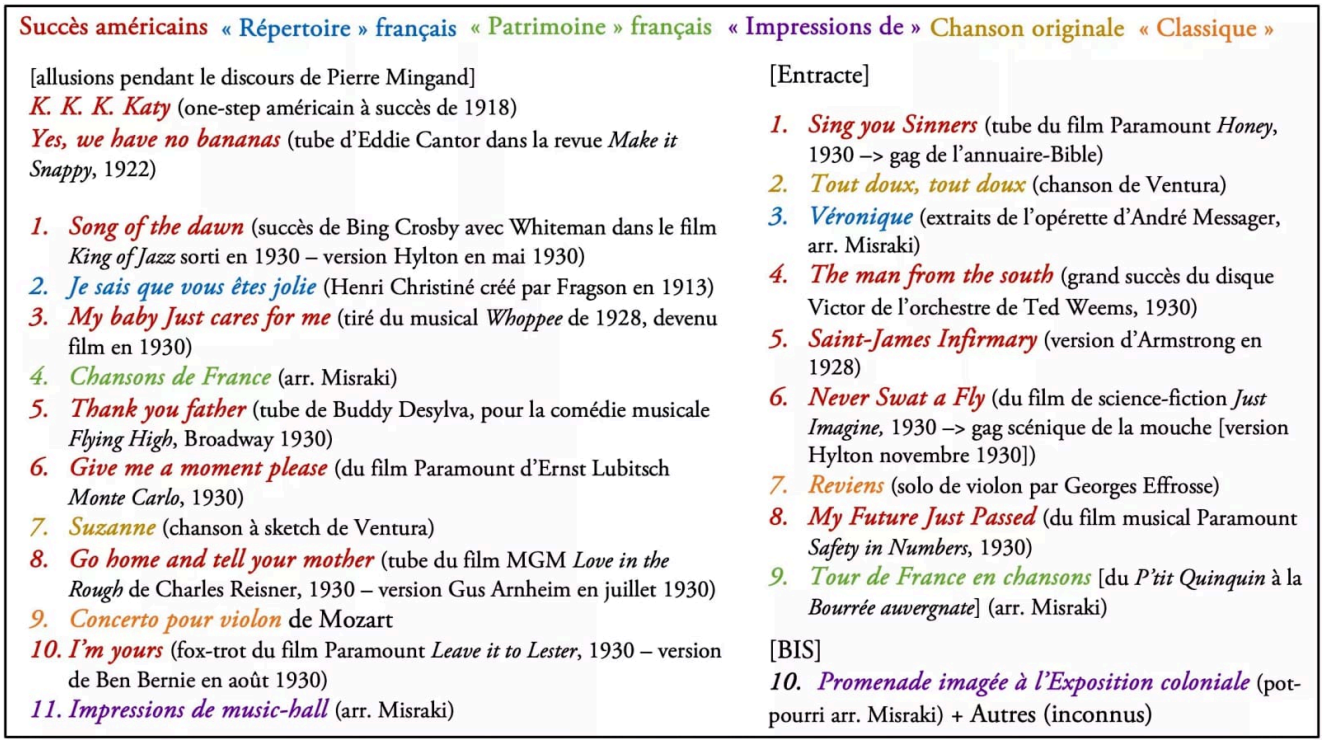
Période professionnelle	
Paris, 23 February 1931	KI4142-2 Quand on tient le coup (P. Mingand, voc)
	KI4143-2 Mon idéal (P. Mingand, voc)
Paris, 18 April 1931	KI4381-2 Reviens
	KI4144-3 Chansons de France, pt 1
	KI4145-4 Chansons de France, pt 2
Paris, 20 april 1931	KI4380 Je sais que vous êtes jolie
Paris, April 1931	KI4598-1 Si l'on ne s'était pas connu (P. Mingand, voc)
	KI4599-2 Quand on s'en va (3) (P. Mingand, voc)
	KI4600-2 C'est près de sa femme (3) (P. Mingand, voc)
	KI4601 - C'est malheureux d'être amoureux
	KI4602-2 Tu reviendras
Paris, May 1931	KI4634-1 Nous sommes seuls (Le million)
	KI4735-3 Déjeuner d'amoureux (Mingand, voc)
	KI4736-3 Le taratata (Mingand, voc)
Paris, ca. May 1931	5201 Love For Sale (CA, voc)
	5202 Three Little Words (vcl trio)
	5203 The girl friend of a boy friend of mine
	5204 I'm yours (CA, voc)
	5205 Reaching for the moon (Misraki, voc)
	5206 Where have you been? (CA, voc)
Paris, May 1931	FILM L'Amour à l'américaine (w/ Stéphane Grappelli)
Paris, May 1931	KI4783-1 Partir
	KI4784-1 Le cœur a ses raisons
	KI4785-1 Plaisir d'amour (Xavier Lemercier, voc)
	KI4786-1 Mama Inez
	KI4787-2 Il faut saisir le bon moment
	KI4788-1 Te bercer, t'endormir
	KI4789-1 Suzanne (Ventura & orch., voc)
	KI4790-1 Goodnight sweetheart
Paris, October 1931	KI5113-2 Des mots d'amour
	KI5119-2 Yes yes
	KI5120-2 Fantastique ! (Mlle Spinelly, voc)
	KI5121-2 I found you

Comparison of recordings from the amateur and early professional periods of Ray Ventura's Collégiens (red: English titles/black: French titles)

The aesthetics of medley

Their first professional concert (Salle Gaveau, 24 March 1931) was introduced by a prologue in front of the curtain that acknowledged the band's debt to American jazz. The choice of the eleven American songs was striking: almost all of them came from a single source. Ten were from Hollywood movies that had come

out the previous year and only one from a Broadway musical. Films supplied the American songs, which often reached French shores beforehand via disc-recordings by the orchestras of Paul Whiteman and British bandleader Jack Hylton; Ted Weems (whose white suits prefigured those of the future Collégiens); Ben Bernie, who directed one of the first Phonofilms in 1925 and wrote *Sweet Georgia Brown*; Gus Arnheim, whose band was among the first to appear in the earliest Vitaphone films for promotional use in 1928-1929. Beside the American tunes The French songs included *Je sais que vous êtes jolie* written by Henri Christiné in 1913; excerpts from André Messager's operetta *Véronique* (1898); heritage potpourris such as *Malbrough* and *Il pleut bergère*; evocative collages and "impressions" of music hall and the Colonial Exhibition; and two original compositions, including *Suzanne*, the prototype of the band's novelty tunes. There were also two violin pieces (an excerpt from a Mozart concerto and a piece by the band's violinist Georges Effrosse) to satisfy the audience's taste for "classical" music and give the band's horn players time to rest their lips.



Succès américains « Répertoire » français « Patrimoine » français « Impressions de » Chanson originale « Classique »

[allusions pendant le discours de Pierre Mingand]
K. K. K. Katy (one-step américain à succès de 1918)
Yes, we have no bananas (tube d'Eddie Cantor dans la revue *Make it Snappy*, 1922)

1. *Song of the dawn* (succès de Bing Crosby avec Whiteman dans le film *King of Jazz* sorti en 1930 – version Hylton en mai 1930)
2. *Je sais que vous êtes jolie* (Henri Christiné créé par Fragson en 1913)
3. *My baby Just cares for me* (tiré du musical *Whoppee* de 1928, devenu film en 1930)
4. *Chansons de France* (arr. Misraki)
5. *Thank you father* (tube de Buddy Desylva, pour la comédie musicale *Flying High*, Broadway 1930)
6. *Give me a moment please* (du film Paramount d'Ernst Lubitsch *Monte Carlo*, 1930)
7. *Suzanne* (chanson à sketch de Ventura)
8. *Go home and tell your mother* (tube du film MGM *Love in the Rough* de Charles Reisner, 1930 – version Gus Arnheim en juillet 1930)
9. *Concerto pour violon* de Mozart
10. *I'm yours* (fox-trot du film Paramount *Leave it to Lester*, 1930 – version de Ben Bernie en août 1930)
11. *Impressions de music-hall* (arr. Misraki)

[Entracte]

1. *Sing you Sinners* (tube du film Paramount *Honey*, 1930 –> gag de l'annuaire-Bible)
2. *Tout doux, tout doux* (chanson de Ventura)
3. *Véronique* (extraits de l'opérette d'André Messager, arr. Misraki)
4. *The man from the south* (grand succès du disque Victor de l'orchestre de Ted Weems, 1930)
5. *Saint-James Infirmary* (version d'Armstrong en 1928)
6. *Never Swat a Fly* (du film de science-fiction *Just Imagine*, 1930 –> gag scénique de la mouche [version Hylton novembre 1930])
7. *Reviens* (solo de violon par Georges Effrosse)
8. *My Future Just Passed* (du film musical Paramount *Safety in Numbers*, 1930)
9. *Tour de France en chansons* [du *P'tit Quinquin* à la *Bourrée auvergnate*] (arr. Misraki)

[BIS]
10. *Promenade imagée à l'Exposition coloniale* (pot-pourri arr. Misraki) + Autres (inconnus)

The Collégiens concert program with comments, salle Gaveau, Friday 13 March 1931

The concert was mainly a medley of American songs from 1920s Broadway musicals such as *No, No*, Nanette, which a critic described in a review when it was revived in 1935:

> *"When No, No, Nanette burst upon the Paris stage just nine years ago, it seemed like we could not do without jazz and the foxtrot to express our joy. The dance craze, the frantic rhythm that the Americans inoculated us with, perfectly matched our need to externalize the happiness we had just begun to claw back. We were in such a hurry to live life to the fullest that we indulged in simultaneous pleasures; we smoked as soon as the soup was served and danced between courses. [...] No, No, Nanette symbolized an entire period.[...] It is much less a play than a show whose only goal is to entertain the audience in the present moment, to provide mindless fun without worrying about the future. The book's only aim is to connect scenes whose very incongruity is what makes them enjoyable. There is no point in looking for any logic or plausibility; the show does not pretend to have any."* [9]

"Mindless fun" and connecting "scenes whose very incongruity is what makes them enjoyable" were the recipe of the music-hall revue, to which the Collégiens added visual gags.

> *"Malbrough appears with his feathered hat and sword before vanishing, never to return," the Candide critic wrote about the medley of old French songs. "The muted trumpet cries for him. On the Pont d'Avignon, the saxophone goes 'like this' and the clarinet 'like that'. Rain falls on a screen during Il pleut Bergère. Our good old tunes take on a new, comic flavor."* [?]

In the *Sing You Sinners* number, "Coco Arslanian, temporarily turned into a stern pastor, preaches fire-and-brimstone to fishermen with a phone book under his arm instead of a Bible," [?] wrote Hugues Panassié. *Suzanne* began with a phone call where Ventura himself picked up the receiver. In the colonial exhibition number, the band used stereotypical props like Indochinese hats. In *Impressions de music-hall*, Pierre Mingand impersonated Maurice Chevalier.



Olympia productions album, Jacques Haïk Theater, volume II

Source: Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, cote 4-TALB-000



Olympia productions album, Jacques Haïk Theater, volume II

Source: Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, cote 4-TALB-000



Olympia productions album, Jacques Haïk Theater, volume II

Source: Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, cote 4-TALB-000

Acceptable Americanization: between assimilation and Frenchification

Candide critic Jean Fayard was among the first to call this spectacular dimension the trademark of the Collégiens' "successful" or "acceptable" Americanization:

> *"While we are not overly nationalistic in this respect, it is pleasant to note 'that our countrymen can do just as well' and that one does not have to be British or American to play jazz. Better yet, Ray Ventura has understood what makes Americans such successful entertainers. It is one thing to make good light music, but even better to keep the audience rolling in the aisles with a relentless barrage of jokes [and] perform a brilliant sketch in the middle of a song."* [7]

In the early 1930s, the very idea of "French jazz" sounded like an oxymoron, as a journalist wrote the night before the Collégiens' first major concert at the Empire, the landmark music hall where Ventura triumphed from 26 June to 10 July 1931:

> *"We could not imagine an orchestra of this kind being French. It seemed like a totally far-fetched idea, as though we suddenly found out that they have bullfights in Switzerland… This preposterousness has dissipated. With Mr. Ray Ventura as bandleader, we are going to hear jazz performed by our home-grown young people."* [8]

Everything changed with Ventura. On the day after the March 1931 Salle Gaveau concert, his composer and former teacher Louis Aubert said that the bandleader's "rhythmic discipline [...] has the same quality we admire in the great foreign jazz orchestras, plus something hard to define with a Mediterranean breeze blowing through it." [?] After the stunningly sold-out run at the Empire in the summer of 1931, that "hard to define" Mediterranean quality became thoroughly *French*. The press opined that French musicians avoided "slavish imitation" (a lexical cliché that spread like wildfire):

> *"Ray Ventura's jazz [...] is French jazz. Those two words do not seem to go together today, but they will tomorrow. Ray Ventura's jazz will have something to do with that. He is influenced by the United States but without slavish imitation."* [?]

We will never really know what set the Collégiens apart from their American and British counterparts, but their jazz just *sounded* French. For Émile Vuillermoz, the particularity of French "stage jazz" was quasi-subliminal.

> *"With his 'nineteen mischievous collegians,'" he wrote, "Ray Ventura gives us quintessentially French gayety, a joie de vivre springing from our soil and home-grown humor. While respecting the great traditions of Paul Whiteman, Ted Lewis and Jack Hylton, he has invented all sorts of specifically French mischief."* [?]

Misraki's arrangements of old French songs, which were marginal but put almost everything else in the shade, drew the critics' attention. *Le Figaro* wrote:

> *"Ray Ventura's truly new recording [Vieilles chansons de France, Odéon, 1931] offers a glimmer of hope in the current gloomy state of jazz. It is gay and in tune with our sensibilities. We have borrowed enough from American jazz for it to pay us back with a 'product' that is French through-and-through."* [?]

At the time, Jack Hylton's catalog included a potpourri of old French tunes, which could suggest that it was just one passing fad among many on the record market. But in Misraki's arrangements the *Figaro* critic saw an authenticity that was missing from Hylton's:

> *"Jack Hylton's record is called Nos bons vieux airs ("Our Good Old Songs", Gramo), but I hasten to say that that is a mistake. No French musician would have confused the trivial café-concert jingles La Tonkinoise, Le long du Missouri, La Valse brune, etc., with Malbrough, Il pleut bergère, Frère Jacques and La Marjolaine, the good songs of yesteryear that come up smelling like a fresh bouquet in Ventura's record Vieilles Chansons de France (Odéon)."*

What characterizes *Frenchness*, then, is the timeless nature of "old-time songs", in other words the legacy melodies that do not bear the earmarks of any particular period. *Il pleut bergère* is a folkloric song, while *La petite Tonkinoise* was a more recent hit associated with the singers Polin, Fragson, Chevalier and Mistinguett. Through Ventura, the press celebrated an *idea* of France, and this *idea* responded far more to

its presupposed identity than to the subtlety of a difference it was incapable of distinguishing between the Collégiens and their American and British counterparts. The Collégiens became the very expression of what being *French* was all about; they embodied its supposed *values*. Their jazz "matches our spirit and taste". [?] It is jazz in the "purest French tone" that "transposes French discipline and humor". [?] When the Collégiens toured small towns and big cities all across France in 1933, local newspapers praised their "easy-going combination of British humor, American excitement and the wholesome, nuanced cheerfulness of the French spirit's charm." [?] In 1935, as France discovered Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong and Cab Calloway and hot jazz caught on, a critic even saw the Collégiens as a sort of guardrail against American triviality:

> *"With their discreet, skillfully measured dissonances ending in barely improvised melodious chords, tempered fantasy and tasteful turbulence, they seem to have created an academic jazz style. After the heat and fire of Cab Calloway and Louis Armstrong, Ray Ventura's Collégiens feel like a refreshing oasis."* [?]

In the first months of the Popular Front, the Collégiens were praised for having "restored honor to the old French gayety by tactfully adapting it to American jazz, which they Frenchified."[14] This *topos* did not waver over a decade and was still relevant just a few months before the war broke out. Following an identical template, a few months earlier Grégor and his Grégoriens had introduced Parisian "stage jazz", a paragon of French musical identity. This was French jazz at last, the press exclaimed, forgetting about Fred Melé, Léo Poll, Roger Berson and many other orchestras that embodied jazz in France, not to mention Fragson, Maurice Chevalier, Mistinguett and operettas by Willemetz, Bastia and Yvain, who successfully established American taste in French culture in the 1920s. Grégor's prologue at the Empire on 16 May 1930 ("jazz has evolved towards harmony") heralded Ventura's at the Salle Gaveau on 13 March 1931 ("jazz doesn't die, it evolves"), as did his *Fantaisie sur Ay ay ay*, a medley evoking "American, Spanish, Hungarian, Russian, German, Jewish or French colors on a Bastille Day evening", which was similar to the potpourris that became one of the Collégiens' trademarks: *Souvenirs de l'exposition colonial*, *Impressions de music-hall* (1931), *Impressions de phono et de T.S.F, Impressions d'opéra*, *La danse à travers les âges* (1934), *Tournée de Music-Hall en Province*, *Actualités sonores* (1935) and *La Marquise voyage* (1937). In 1930, Grégor and Ventura recorded their first French adaptations of sweet, sentimental American-style songs: *Pour un peu d'amour* and *C'est un chant d'amour*, respectively. Even the initiatives hailed by the press as innovations were copied in a race between the two orchestras: Grégor had barely recorded *Rondes enfantines* in December 1930 when Misraki wrote a suite of children's songs for Ventura (Odéon, April 1931). In May 1932, Ventura recorded a medley called *Les Chansons de Fragson*; Grégor followed suit in September 1933 with *Quelques succès de Jean Tranchant*. They copied each other, as everybody else did in France and across the Atlantic. Vuillermoz noted the standardization in the recording industry.

> *"Our main record companies' output is stabilizing in the following way," he wrote. "There's been no progress in jazz. The songs all sound alike, as if they've rolled off an assembly line. Not one recording in a hundred is original. The dances are interchangeable, the tangos transposable, the foxtrots stereotypical."* [?]

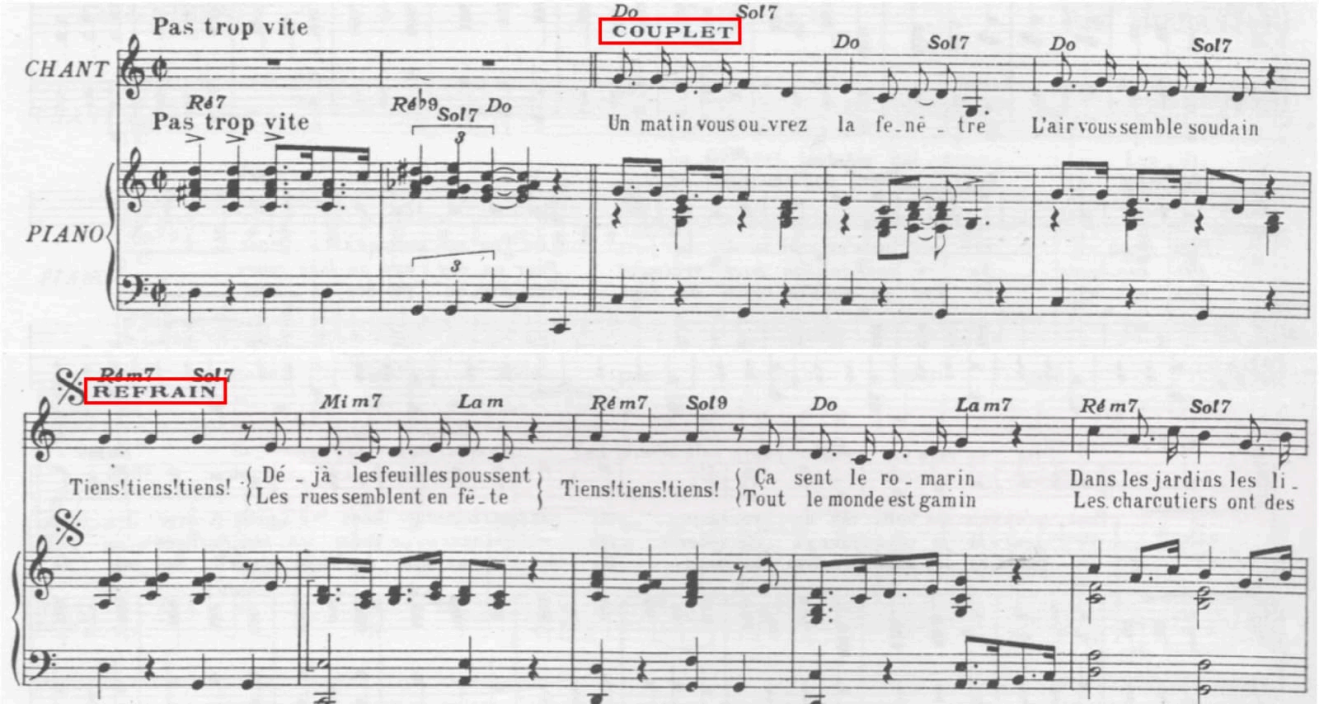
All in all, the intense circulation of these different kinds of music, which, around a core of “catchy tunes”, are at the intersection of the stage, music hall and American dance music, was not specifically attributable to the United States’ influence on Europe, or what might be called “Americanization”. Rather, it was the result of the standardization of successful popular tunes in at least three cultural areas – the United States, Great Britain and France – that were already relatively homogeneous by the late 1920s, although the starting points were usually American. Why did songs that were highly standardized on both sides of the Atlantic (and the English Channel) continue to be used as markers of national identity? Of course, there was the incompetence and mindless parochialism of the press. There was the indifference of people like Robert Desnos, who attacked musical criticism he called “aesthete” [?] and swore only by how a “popular band [...] affects the crowd”. Lastly, there was the idea of Americanization as a way to revive moribund French chanson. In a 1935 article, André-G. Bloch wrote:

> *"When you want a pine forest to have nothing but straight trees, you plant the saplings close to each other; that way, some of the trees are smothered and only the best ones, those that point straight up to the sky, grow tall. [...]. It’s the same in every area of human activity. After the war, France was invaded by jazz. It was a revelation and a revolution. Noisy, wild jazz, sweet jazz with nostalgic Negro voices and the sound of the saxophone, with its hallucinating rhythm, never let go of us. In the wake of this invasion, French chanson seemed dead and buried. Then we were delighted by the charming music of American movies. And now, in the struggle for existence, and thanks to this struggle, French chanson has blossomed magnificently, like the beautiful northern pines. There’s no doubt that French chanson today is better than it was before the war.”* [?]

Between the patriotic verve of Grégor, who touted his Grégoriens as “France’s first jazz band”, and the press unanimously labelling the Collégiens as the quintessence of French identity, a collective hit factory emerged. The emerging discourse could be summed up as follows: France fell head-over-heels for frolicsome, rough-and-tumble American jazz; French good taste tamed it, cleaned it up, elevated it. A question remains that no contemporary addressed: what elements in the Collégiens’ music lended themselves to a perception of Americanness or Frenchness?

The form: in tune with the American songbook

First, the songs’ form warrants a few comments. Looking at Ventura’s greatest hits, there are two main trends, one French, the other American. The former, rooted in the tradition of French songwriters, is the couplet-refrain form with couplet variants, illustrated by *Tout va très bien Madame la Marquise*, *Les Chemises de l’archiduchesse* and *Ça vaut mieux que d’attraper la scarlatine*. Many other songs, on the other hand, feature a form explicitly marked by American influence. This is the verse (single)/chorus (multiple, with several stanzas) model of the American song, in which a verse is neither exactly a couplet, nor the chorus a refrain. This can be seen by comparing the recording of *Tiens! Tiens! Tiens!*, a 1939 hit from the movie *Tourbillon de Paris*, with the copyrighted score. The score indicates “couplet” and “refrain” but has neither in the form they normally take in French chanson, where one or the other is repeated, one each time with different lyrics, the other with usually identical (or slightly different) ones.



Excerpts from the copyrighted score of *Tiens! Tiens! Tiens!* with the terms “couplet” and “refrain”

Here, the “couplet” only has one stanza. Its melody never returns, while the “refrain” presents two lines of text under the staff corresponding to the two stanzas sung to the same melody. Contrary to what the score indicates, then, *Tiens! Tiens! Tiens!* does not have a couplet-refrain form, but a verse-chorus form. In the great American songbook, the verse is a kind of recitative before the melody, heard only once. The chorus, on the other hand, is a refrain devoid of any ritornello function (as is usually the case with French song refrains), since it recurs each time with textually different stanzas, making it almost a song in itself, as detachable from the verse as an opera aria is from its recitative. Cole Porter’s *Anything goes* provides an archetypal example: a one-stanza verse as an introduction (whose melody never reappears), then a chorus (here in AABA form) melodically repeated three times to a different text, with the exception of the “anything goes” repeated at the end of the A phrases.

ANYTHING GOES (Cole Porter)

Verse

Times have changed
And we've often rewound the clock
Since the Puritans got a shock
When they landed on Plymouth Rock.
If today
Any shock they should try to stem
'Stead of landing on Plymouth Rock,
Plymouth Rock would land on them.

Chorus

Strophe 1

[A^1] In olden days, a glimpse of stocking
Was looked on as something shocking.
But now, God knows,
Anything goes.
[A^2] Good authors too who once knew better words
Now only use four-letter words
Writing prose.
Anything goes.
[B] If driving fast cars you like,
If low bars you like,
If old hymns you like,
If bare limbs you like,
If Mae West you like,
Or me undressed you like,
Why, nobody will oppose.
[A^3] When ev'ry night the set that's smart is in-
Truding at nudist parties in
Studios.
Anything goes.

Strophe 2

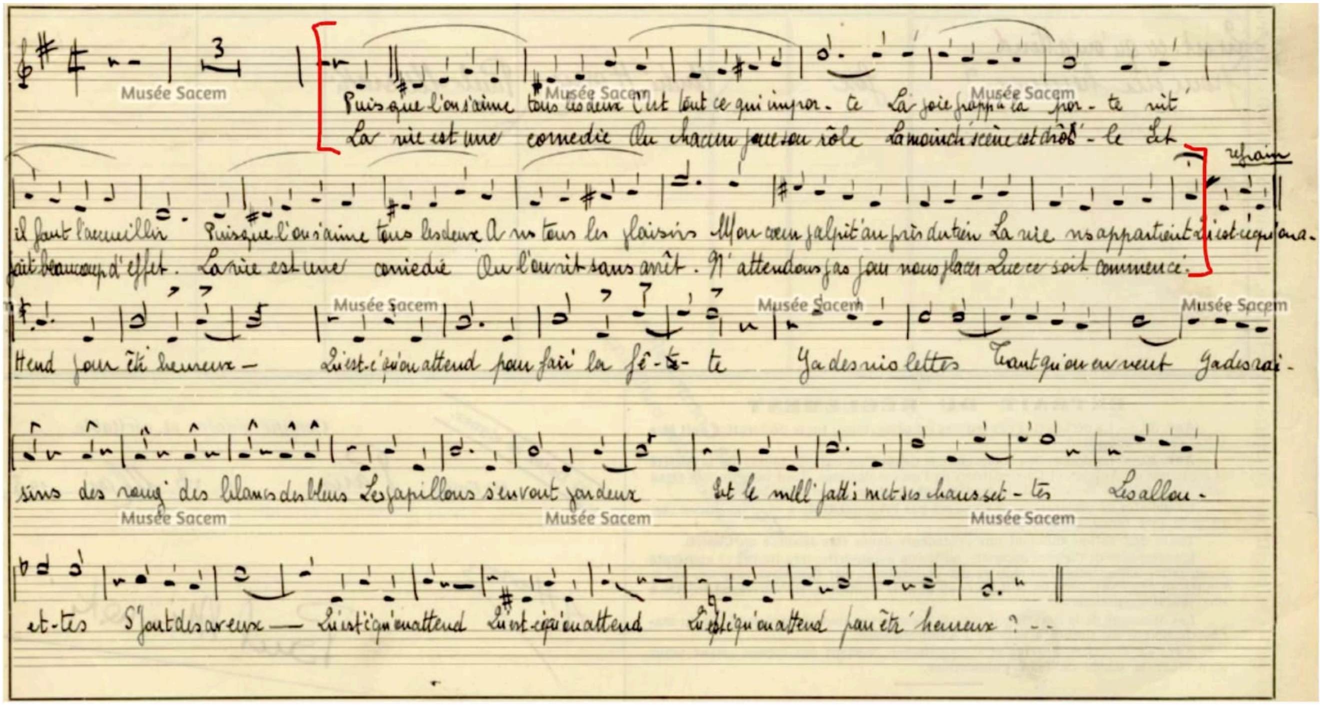
[A^1] When Missus Ned McLean (God bless her)
Can get Russian reds to "yes" her,
Then I suppose
Anything goes.
[A^2] When Rockefeller still can hoard en-
Ough money to let Max Gordon
Produce his shows,
Anything goes.
[B] The world has gone mad today
And good's bad today,
And black's white today,
And day's night today,
And that gent today
You gave a cent today
Once had several chateaux.
[A^3] When folks who still can ride in jitneys
Find out Vanderbilts and Whitneys
Lack baby clo'es,
Anything goes.

Strophe 3

[A^1] If Sam Goldwyn can with great conviction
Instruct Anna Sten in diction,
Then Anna shows
Anything goes.
[A^2] When you hear that Lady Mendl standing up
Now turns a handspring landing up-
On her toes,
Anything goes.
[B] Just think of those shocks you've got
And those knocks you've got
And those blues you've got
From that news you've got
And those pains you've got
(If any brains you've got)
From those little radios.
[A^3] So Missus R., with all her trimmin's,
Can broadcast a bed from Simmons
'Cause Franklin knows
Anything goes.

The verse/chorus structure in Cole Porter's *Anything Goes* (1934)

From this point of view, *Tiens! Tiens! Tiens!* is typically American. On a microstructural scale, the song's chorus form is a 32-bar AABA witha two-bar tail, a pattern established since at least 1930 by the prototype of Gershwin's *I Got Rhythm*. Many of Ventura's hits follow this pattern, including *Le Nez de Cléopâtre*, *Vivent les bananes, C'est gentil quand on y passe* (AABA) and *Chez moi* (ABA'C). The chorus is so important that many songs tend to downplay other elements (introduction, interludes, codas, couplets), some even reducing it to a single chorus, like the famous *Qu'est-ce qu'on attend pour être heureux*, a 32-bar song lengthened to 36, which shows that, unlike a typical French song, an "Americanized" one can now make do with a chorus. And yet, the score registered with Sacem on 28 May 1938 shows the song with a two-stanza verse.

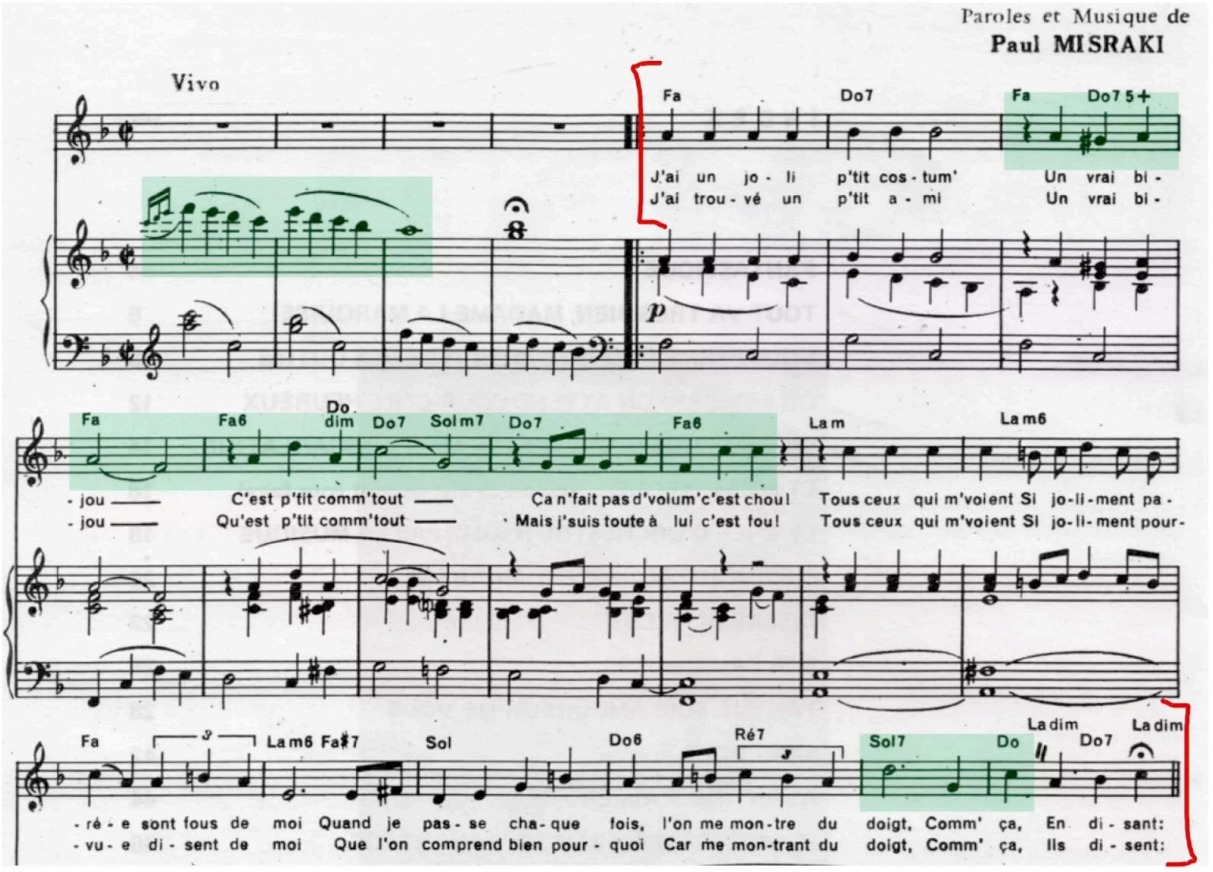


The score of *Qu'est-ce qu'on attend pour être heureux?* filed with Sacem

Source: Musée Sacem

AUDIO RECORDING

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Excerpt from the published score of *Fantastique*, Paris, Chappell, 1935 (in green, the melodic fragments of the so-called "couplet" that remain in the form of an instrumental interlude in the recorded versions)

The identical plan of the versions from 1931 (with actress Andrée Spinelly) and 1932 (with American vocalist Russel Goudey) shows that, unlike the couplet-refrain structure suggested by the score, almost the whole song is a chorus.

• Introduction sur la 1ère phrase du chorus	16 mes.	Fa M
• Chorus/Refrain (instrumental)	34 mes.	Fa M
transition modulante (célesta)	2 mes.	
• « Verse »/Interlude (instrumental)	16 mes.	Ré M
• Chorus/Refrain (chanté)	34 mes.	Ré M
transition modulante (cuivres)	2 mes.	
• Chorus/Refrain (instrumental – 3 violons + clar.)	34 mes.	Réb M
• Chorus/Refrain (instrumental – cuivres + saxs)	32 mes.	Fa M
coda (cuivres)	2 mes.	

Plan of the two versions of *Fantastique* (1931 and 1932)

A final example is *Chez moi*. This song, with lyrics by Jean Féline, has three verses and three refrains (textually different), as the copyrighted score clearly attests. In fact, this is how the star vocalist Lucienne Boyer sang it on the first recorded version on 30 September 1935.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bw-ouAsWvVI

Chez moi, Lucienne Boyer

Source: YouTube

When the Collégiens recorded the song a month later (October 31), the couplet became a verse. Only one stanza, the first, was kept, and its purpose is purely introductory. What was supposed to come back and advance the narrative is now no more than an anecdotal prelude that keeps the listener waiting until the chorus. It has also lost all of the "off-tempo" character often found in the verses of French songs of the same period, verses that were the terrain of expression par excellence for female realist singers (since they were free to shape their hallmark declamatory style). Misraki sang the verse *a tempo*. From Boyer to Misraki, the French chanson *Chez moi* became an American song.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQ6SETpETrw

Chez moi, Ray Ventura et ses collégiens

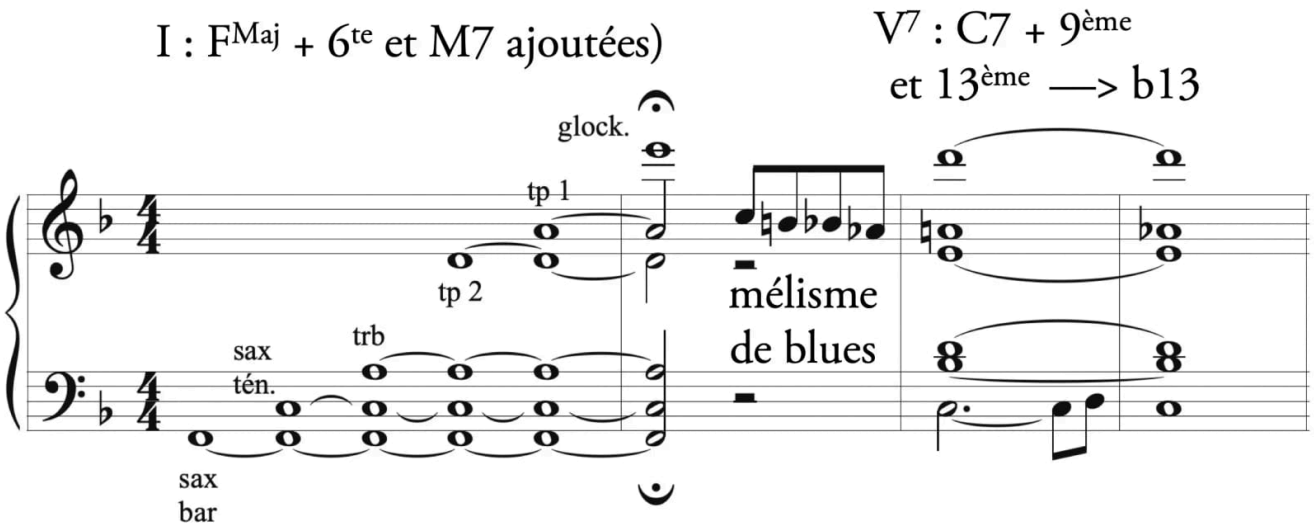
Source: YouTube

"Monogenetic melodies and obsessive chords": the American *melos*

Jazz pianist Stéphane Mougin, an on-and-off member of the Collégiens between 1929 and 1932 who also occasionally worked with the Grégoriens, could be a tough critic.

> *"Apart from its rhythms, monogenetic melodies and obsessive chords, it [jazz] has no higher appeal, either intellectual or artistic," he wrote in Jazz-Tango in 1930. "It does not rise above what the people can easily understand and accept. It was born to be the music of the people, of the crowd, and having conquered this audience, cannot conquer anything else."* [7]

The claim that these "monogenetic melodies" lack "higher appeal" does not prevent the substance of his criticism from having a grain of truth. The American song has its own specific *melos*, which shaped the taste of the times all the more since it circulated in a fairly standardized way through American, British and French song: a similar melodic structure, uniform distribution of melody based on a few formats, equally standardized melody-harmony ratios and a penchant for certain patterns, such as stressing the ninths added to the dominant chord and resolving on the sixth added to the pivot chord. This *melos* enriches or hybridizes in forms informed by jazz and idiomatic patterns from the blues.



Introduction of *C'est un chant d'amour* by the Collégiens (1930)

Ventura's version makes such a showy display of language absent (or only timidly present) from French chanson until then that if the two introductions were listened to blindfolded it would probably be more surely attributed to America than Vallee's. As in the case of Boris Vian, Americanization here appears to be a process of concentrating traits identified as American. From the start, the Collégiens' assimilation of Americanness was groundbreaking and mimetic in equal measures: The orchestra was quick to adopt the reflexes of American popular music. With respect to creating melody, Misraki's assimilation process was no less original. Rather than importing what already existed (the method of the first Collégiens), he fashioned his own melodies, steeped in memories and almost undetectable borrowings from American songs, but in a new and different way. *Chez moi* is typical of this process. An original song that bears Misraki's unmistakable trademark, it nevertheless recalls the Gus Arnheim orchestra's *There's Something About a Rose (That Reminds Me of You)*, composed by Sammy Fain, which the young Collégiens probably heard in a little 1928 Vitaphone film in a Paris movie house in 1929 or 1930.

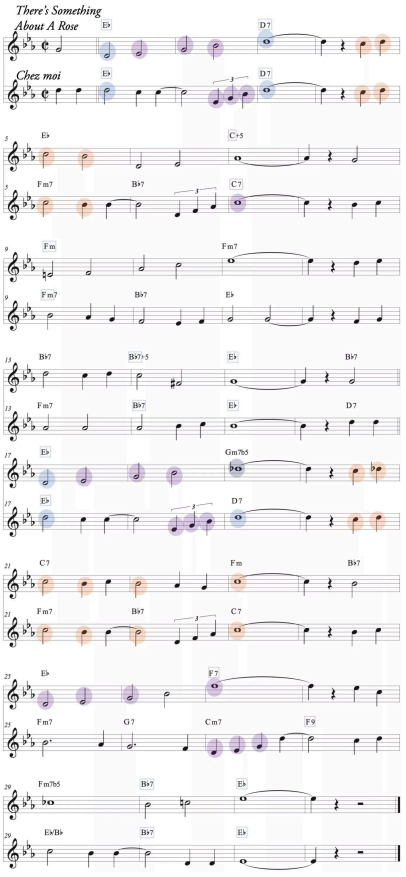
VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/embed/iamSYSpVmwE?start=224

Gus Arnheim and His Orchestra, *There's Something About a Rose (That Reminds Me of You)* (music by Sammy Fain), Vitaphone film, 1928.

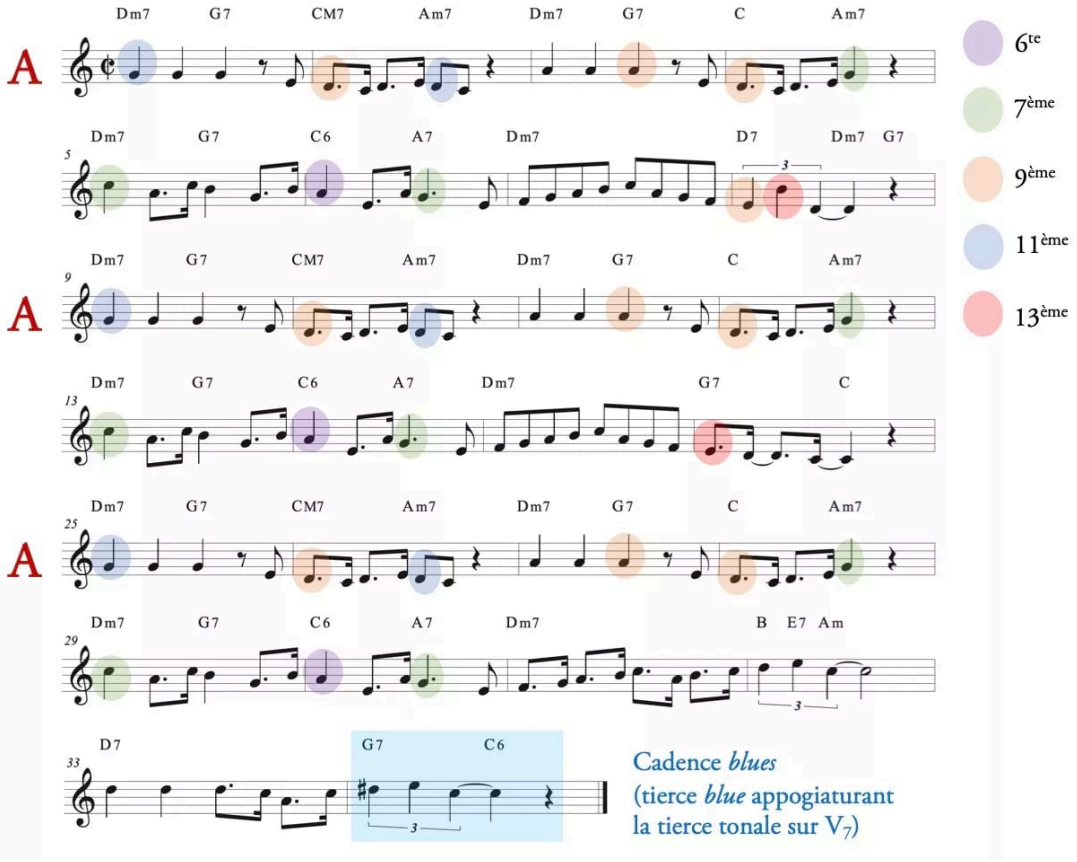
Source: YouTube

The Collégiens probably used *There's Something About a Rose* as a model for their stage performances. It is an ideal tool for understanding how the American *melos* permeated their music through diffuse recollection. To paraphrase the song's title, it can be said that there is something about the theme of *There's Something About a Rose* that recalls *Chez moi*. This something can be narrowed down when the two themes are transcribed side by side. Far from claiming here that Misraki plagiarized the song, the point is rather to support the hypothesis that "the French Gershwin", as one journalist called him, [?] bore the stamp of an American *melos* whose source can occasionally be clearly demonstrated.



Compared transcriptions of *Chez moi* (Paul Misraki) and *There's Something About A Rose* (Sammy Fain)

However, the American influence is not always as obvious as in *Chez moi*. It is often even so ambiguous that the hypothesis can be put forward that it can be heard "in two ways". For that let us return to the example of *Tiens! Tiens! Tiens!* Musical analysis shows that the diatonic conjunct melody, which looks very much like a French nursery rhyme on paper, actually bears the hallmarks of an unmistakable American-style melody-harmony ratio (or, to use Mougin's words, between "monogenetic melodies" and "obsessive chords"). Most of the stresses are on minor sevenths or elevenths, sixths added to the pivot chord and ninths or thirteenths on the dominant chord – all notes that "signify" the American *melos*, to which the final, blues-inflected cadential turn (with its characteristic third) must be added.



Analysis of the melody-harmony ratio of the three As in *Tiens!.. Tiens!.. Tiens!...*

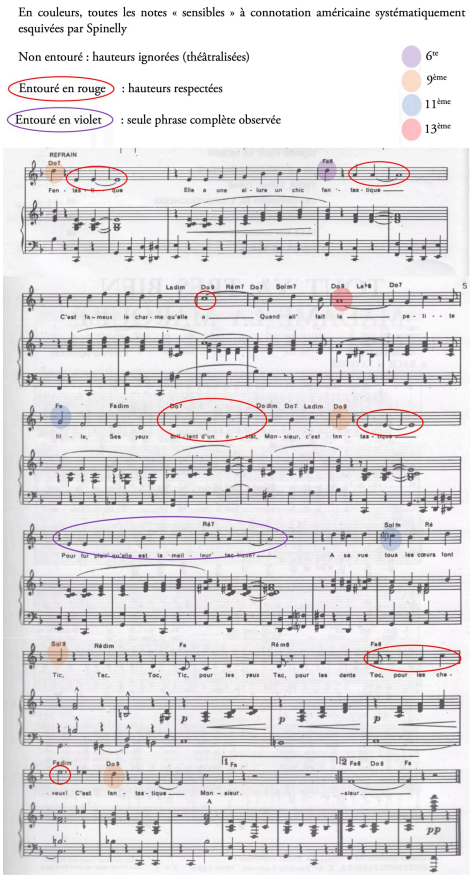
The elementary diatonicism of the melody in the first strain, completely free of melodic Americanism, is Americanized by harmonization. This means that if we focus solely on the melody, we are more likely to hear a French melody, whereas if we pay attention to the melody-harmony ratio, we are more likely to discover an *Americanizing* melody (and the hypothesis that the Collégiens' songs play intensely on this ambiguity). The bridge melody, moreover, is unthinkable in a French song of the 1920s and 1930s that would not have been deeply *Americanized*.



Analysis of the bridge (B) in *Tiens!.. Tiens!.. Tiens!...*

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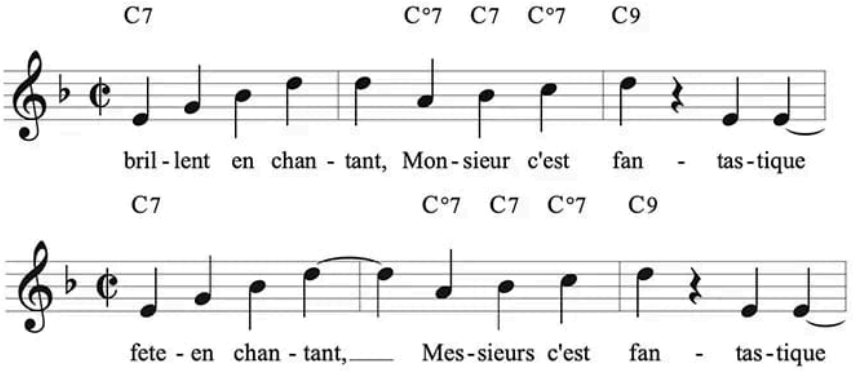
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Analysis of Spinelly's performance of *Fantastique* (1931)

AUDIO RECORDING

View online: https://tracs-prod.s3.rbx.io.cloud.ovh.net/assets/records/ray-ventura-le-jazz-et-la-chanson-francaise-une-americanisation-a-double-entente/resources/fantastique-goudey.mp3



Example of a “re-Americanized” phrase from *Fantastique*, between the version of Andrée Spinelly (1931) and Russel Goudey (1932), which preserves the Charleston accent (fourth quarter note accentuated)

This brings us straight to the heart of the matter: the question of what one critic pompously lumped together as “the fever-inducing rhythms of jazz” [?]. And here again, the analysis allows the sensibilities that coexist in the Collégiens’ music and the continuous ambiguity between “French” and “American” musical time to be examined in greater detail.

The ambiguity of “fever-inducing” rhythms: a beat that can be heard two ways

The question of rhythm increases the ambiguity of the perception that can be had of the Collégiens’ music. Most of the copyrighted scores are composed in cut time, which means they were written as if they had been thought of in two-beat bars. But four beats are needed for the afterbeat feel of swing (regardless of whether they are played in four-beat or two-beat bars, i.e. with the bass playing only every other beat). On the first listen, the permanent cut time is almost always contradicted by the rhythm section, in particular by the thumping guitar, which the discernable jazz lover recognizes as an incontestable four-beat bar calling for an afterbeat – one of the most specifically American expressions of American time during this period. This contradiction is not simply an effect of musical spelling or the choice of writing convention when publishing scores (although it undoubtedly is this too). There is real tension between two rhythmic sensibilities, two worlds of the perception of rhythm, two musical times, between an American clock and a French clock. *Tiens! Tiens! Tiens!* provides a perfect example. The main motif of three eighth notes (the “tiens, tiens, tiens”) is itself ambiguous. Given the powerful pump of the guitar, any jazz lover will hear this motif as the typical pronunciation of the black eighth note beat that identifies the swing of Louis Armstrong and Bix Beiderbecke:



AUDIO RECORDING

View online: https://tracs-prod.s3.rbx.io.cloud.ovh.net/assets/records/ray-ventura-le-jazz-et-la-chanson-francaise-une-americanisation-a-double-entente/resources/04_mp3_louis.mp3



(1927).

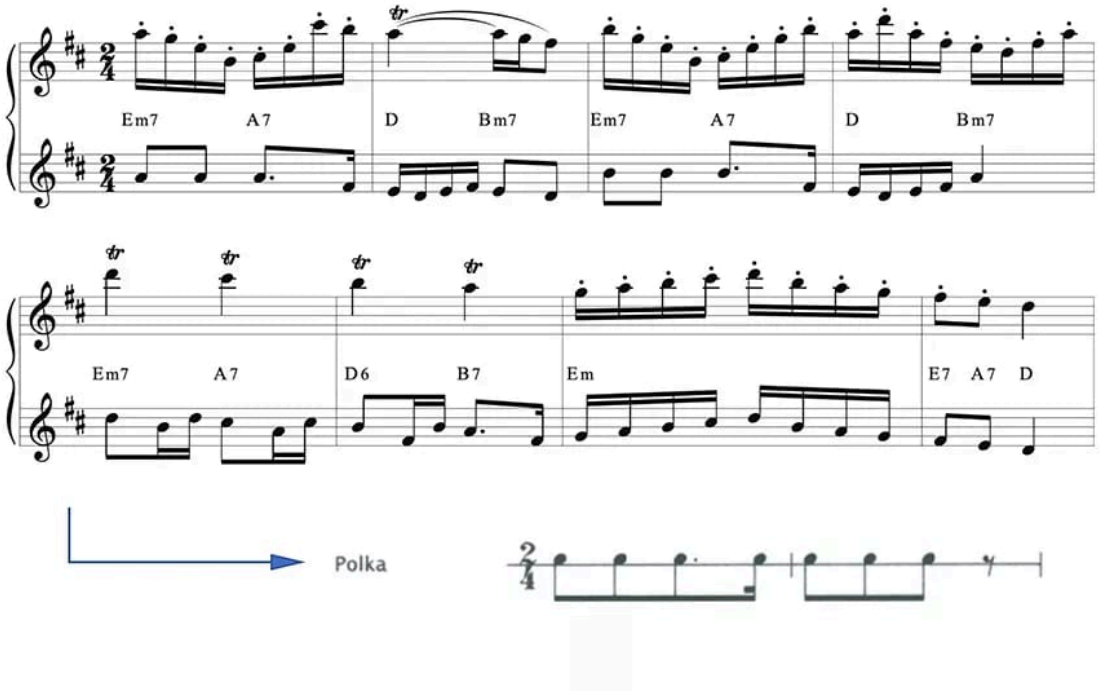
The structure of the same motif on each “tiens, tiens, tiens” is very ambiguous.

AUDIO RECORDING

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While it awakens the rhythmic flavor of hot jazz in the ears of connoisseurs, it cannot at all be excluded that a French listener in 1939 heard a “short-short-long” motif, in other words, a classic anapest, which changes everything because the principle of the anapest is that the two short syllables are on the strong beat (or first part of the metric foot) and the long syllable is on the weak beat (or second part of the foot). This is not the case with the same motif pronounced as three eighth notes (like American swing), where

there is no stress on the weak beat (the one and three being strong beats), and therefore no sense of anapest. There is no right or wrong answer to the question “how should the ‘tiens, tiens, tiens’ motif be heard?”



Transcription of the strings part arranged on the second strain of the vocal exposition for the Swiss version (1940) of *Tiens! Tiens! Tiens!*, revealing its rhythmic polka structure.

Most of the Collégiens’ songs can be heard two ways. Despite a rhythm section systematically beating American time, the orchestral jazz sounds of most of the arrangements and the American phraseology of the band’s soloists, the structure of the melodies remains ambiguous enough to sound “French”, which imposes the sensitivity of its musical time on the American clock of a rhythmic world it simply doesn’t hear.In *Les Mondes du jazz*, André Hodeir coined a very useful term: *organic blindness*. In one scene from the book, he and Pierre Boulez are listening to a Charlie Parker record. Hodeir asks, “Is it safe to say that they are hearing the same music?” No, he replies, because Boulez hears it with his own “system of coordinates” and he is necessarily unable to appreciate its “organic coherence ” (the relationship between timbre, phrasing, accentuation and all the parameters that make a phrase not just a series of notes on chord progressions). He is struck by “organic blindness”, which is more or less what Ventura described in 1941 when he explained why the Collégiens deliberately toned-down their inclination towards “the most swinging performances”:

> *“Perhaps you would find it interesting that, after the French, the audiences that understand us best are English and Belgian. People in Latin countries like Spain and, especially, Italy give us a chillier, less welcoming reception. Is this because they’re so attached to the’ Bel Canto’ tradition that they can’t step away from it? In France, people don’t know enough about swing. They day when they understand better the feelings expressed through popular American songs, maybe we can let go and give hotter or more swinging performances.” ?*

The power of Americanization that the Collégiens' songs may have had remains eminently paradoxical for that reason: imbued with signs of musical Americanness, their structure is ambiguous enough to be loved by "organically blind" listeners who did not perceive those signs of Americanness and interpreted them within the mindset of an exclusively French *melos* and musical time – which was all the easier since they were steeped in discourses permeated by an obsession with identity.

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