

Paul Whiteman, 'the Jazz King' Of the Jazz Age, Is Dead at 77

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DOYLESTOWN, Pa., Dec. 29 —Paul Whiteman, the band-leader who was "the King of Jazz" in the nineteen-twenties, died in Doylestown Hospital today of a heart attack. He was 77 years old and lived in nearby New Hope.

Made Jazz Respectable

By ALDEN WHITMAN

Rotund, jovial and sleek, with thinning black hair and a pencil-thin black mustache, Paul Whiteman reigned supreme as the monarch of sweet, danceable, jazzlike music in the nineteen-twenties and early thirties.

As a bandleader, he made ragtime respectable by orchestrating its rhythmic patterns. At the same time, he introduced symphonic music with jazz overtones through George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," which he commissioned, and through Ferde Grofé's "Grand Canyon Suite," which he played. And, in a series of memorable performances, he brought his toe-tapping dance music into the concert hall and to the attention of serious critics.

In the era of the Stutz Bearcat, the raccoon coat and the hip flask, Mr. Whiteman



Paul Whiteman

was the hero of flaming youth. In nightclubs, hotels and ballrooms, they danced all night to such favorites as "Yes, We Have No Bananas," "Whispering," "The Japanese Sandman," "Dance of the Hours" and "Three O'Clock in the Morning." Thousands more danced to these tunes at home by cranking the phonograph and playing one of Mr. Whiteman's

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disks or by tuning their storage battery-operated radios to his broadcasts.

Those who went to listen to Mr. Whiteman's band in the twenties heard a number of jazzmen and vocalists who were later celebrated in their own right. The instrumentalists included Bix Beiderbecke, Frankie Trumbauer, Eddie Lang, Joe Venuti, Red Norvo and Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey. Among singers, Mr. Whiteman introduced The Rhythm Boys—Bing Crosby, Al Rinker and Harry Barris. Mildred Bailey sang with his band, as did Jane Froman and Morton Downey.

Among the tributes to Mr. Whiteman was one from Bing Crosby, a vocalist with the Whiteman band in the twenties. "Paul Whiteman advanced the quality of American music in the early days when jazz was just catching on," Mr. Crosby said.

As a conductor, Mr. Whiteman was somewhat less than dynamic. Looking like a Dutch miller, he flicked a small baton, twitched an elbow or crooked an eyebrow. Virtually his only consistent movement was to wag his head to the band's rhythms. His talent lay in an instinctive ability to add a catchy ingredient to a tune.

A Consummate Showman

In rehearsal, with his shirt unbuttoned, his golf cap askew, and a Chesterfield between his lips, he gave a score its finishing touches—a banjo swipe here, a comedy trumpet there. Mr. Grofé Mr. Whiteman's brilliant pianist, was his arranger. Even so, Mr. Whiteman could tell rather little about a composition from reading it, and he made his additions after hearing his men play a piece for the first time.

For all his seeming indolence on the bandstand, Mr. Whiteman was a consummate showman. Not only did he play his brand of jazz in the world's most fashionable concert halls, but he also, for a time, conducted his group of 46 musicians from atop a white horse in New York's old Hippodrome.

At the apogee of his popularity, the bandleader's life was a succession of other people's parties. A notable one in the mid-twenties was Clarence Mackay's. The Postal Telegraph Company magnate turned his Long Island estate into a likeness of the Versailles gardens and hired Mr. Whiteman to play. His tip was \$10,000. Many other society figures paid the piper with similar abandon.

Over the years, Mr. Whiteman took in vast sums—\$680,000 in 1925, for instance. His recording of "Three O'Clock in the Morning" sold 3.4 million copies, and yielded him a fortune, which was augmented by other recordings and by the movies in which he appeared—"King of Jazz," "Thanks a Million," "Strike Up the Band," "Atlantic City" and "Rhapsody in Blue." With his money Mr. Whiteman was singularly openhanded. He was generous to his musicians, who called him "Pops," and to almost anyone with a hard-luck story. What was left over, he put into high-powered motor cars, of which he owned hundreds, and into a 400-acre farm in New Jersey.

Reluctant Violinist

Paul Whiteman was born in Denver, March 28, 1890. His father, Wilberforce Whiteman, was a music supervisor in the public schools and his mother, Elfrida, was a vocalist. His father apprenticed him to the violin at the age of 7 and locked him up in the sewing room every afternoon to practice. The boy rebelled by smashing the instrument, but his father obliged him to recoup its cost by mowing lawns. Eventually, Paul bought a viola, at which he became sufficiently adept to play in the Denver Symphony. Later, he was a violinist with the San Francisco People's Symphony. He was grateful for this experience in the classics, explaining once, "You'll never learn to bounce in jazz if you don't know your Bach and Beethoven."

Mr. Whiteman heard his first jazz on San Francisco's Barbary Coast. "It hit me hard," he said, and he determined to make jazz his career.

A Navy hitch in World War I, in which he was a bandmaster at Bear Island, Calif., served to give him a start, for, after his discharge, he formed in 1919 what has been called America's first dance orchestra. Mr. Whiteman and his band were "discovered" at the Hotel Alexandria in Los Angeles by Douglas Fairbanks and Charlie Chaplin, among others of the movie colony.

A Milestone Concert

With such recognition, it was only a step to the Ambassador at Atlantic City and Broadway's renowned Palais Royale. With that engagement in 1920, Mr. Whiteman, in the opinion of many jazz historians, brought the Jazz Age to New York. His popularity was instantaneous and overwhelming. The Victor Talking Machine Company signed him for recordings; George White put him in his "Scandals"; Florenz Ziegfeld found a place for him in his "Follies"; he played the Palace; he toured Europe.

On his return to New York, Mr. Whiteman put on a milestone concert at Aeolian Hall



Paul Whiteman in 1925 meeting with, from the left, Ferde Grofé, Deems Taylor, Blossom Seeley and George Gershwin

then the city's sanctuary of classical music. The concert, on Feb. 12, 1924, drew a distinguished audience—Heifitz, Kreisler, Damrosch, Stokowski, Stravinsky, Rachmaninoff and Mary Garden. For this audience, the Whiteman band played "Limehouse Blues," "Alexander's Ragtime Band," "The Volga Boatman," four serenades especially composed by Victor Herbert and Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" with the composer at the piano.

"An uproarious success," was the verdict of Lawrence Gilman, The Tribune's music critic; and Olin Downes of The Times remarked on the "beautiful examples of scoring" that he had heard. Other critics, among them Deems Taylor of The World, were less enthusiastic. But the public seemed to agree that "concert jazz" had come into its own.

Thereafter, Mr. Whiteman toured the United States, playing in the leading concert halls and conducting symphony orchestras, and in the process the 6-foot, 300-pound conductor became a national personality. So insistent was the demand for his music that he organized 50 bands to operate under his name. He also recorded some classical music, including "Meditations From Thais," that further enlarged his public.

In the thirties, Mr. Whiteman took his band into the movies and into radio on a full-time basis. He was heard on the Columbia Broadcasting System and over stations of the National Broadcasting Company throughout that decade.

In 1943, he was named musical director of the Blue Network, which was to become the American Broadcasting Company. His radio music for almost seven years was packaged as "The Philco Radio Hall of Fame." There were new tunes, of course, but Mr. Whiteman hewed to his basic style of presentation.

Maintained Large Following

Although Mr. Whiteman had long since lost his pre-eminent position in the dance-band world, he maintained an astonishingly large following, chiefly because his music was so danceable. In the fifties, he essayed television, but it was not his medium. He retired several times, but tried comebacks as late as 1960, when he conducted an evening of Gershwin at the Lambertville (N.J.) Music Circus, and 1962, when he played a month's engagement at Las Vegas.

Mr. Whiteman's principal avocation was automobile racing. He was a director of the Daytona Speedway in Florida and of tracks at Langhorne, Pa., and Trenton. He lived in New Jersey until six years ago when he purchased a home in New Hope, which he nicknamed Coda Cottage.

Mr. Whiteman married four times. His first marriage, to Nellie Stack, took place in 1908. After a divorce he married Jimmy Smith. That union ended in 1922, the year he married Mildred Vanderhoff, whose stage name was Wanda Hoff. They were divorced in 1931. The same year he married Margaret Livingston, an actress.

The musician is survived by his widow; a son, Paul Jr.; and three daughters, Mrs. Margo W. Sprague, Mrs. Julia Kelley and Mrs. Jan Martino.

A funeral service for Mr. Whiteman will be held Tuesday at 2:30 P.M. at Frank E. Campbell's, Madison Avenue and 81st Street. Burial will be in Trenton.