trans atlantic cultures
Cultural Histories of the Atlantic World 18th–21st Centuries

ISSN 2739-6614
transatlantic-cultures.org



Ray Ventura and His Collegians: from imitation to a Franco-American hybrid

Manon Fabre

In the early 1930s, Ray Ventura and His Collegians recorded in Paris covers of hit songs from Hollywood movies and of original compositions that straddled jazz and the French chanson. They elucidate the phenomenon of Americanization.

PUBLISHED	December 5, 2023
ORIGINAL LANGUAGE	French
AVAILABLE IN	English, French
COLLECTIONS	Americanization through the Arts
TOPICS	Music
SPACES AND PLACES	North Atlantic · Europe · North America
PERIODS	The Consolidation of Mass Cultures
KEYWORDS	jazz, 1930s, popular music
PERMANENT LINK	https://transatlantic-cultures.org/en/records/les-collegiens-de-ray-ventura-de-l-imitation-a-l-hybridation/

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Manon Fabre

Etudiante · Département Arts · Ecole Normale Supérieure Paris · France

Manon Fabre is a recent graduate of the Music History and Aesthetics classes at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris, and a student attached to the Arts department at the Ecole Normale Supérieure. She divides her research activities between the French jazz scene of the interwar period and the Russian composer Alexander Scriabin, to whom she dedicated a master's thesis at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales.

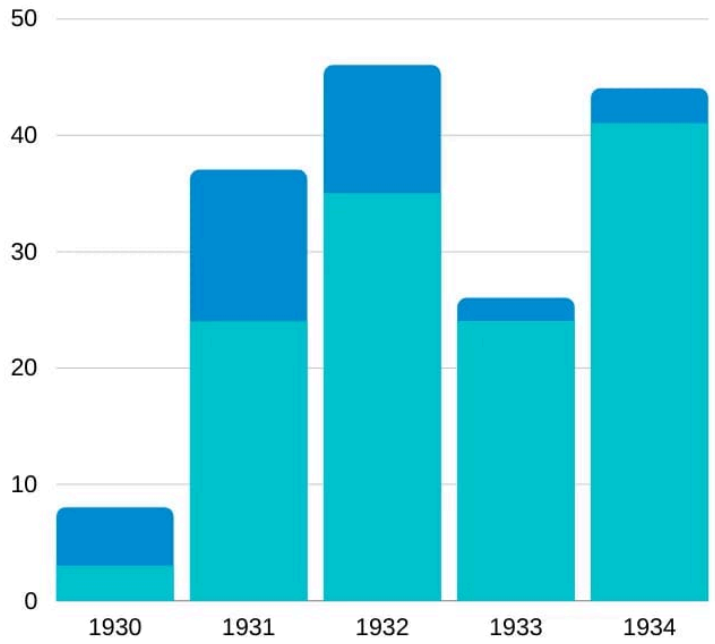
From the time American troops landed on French soil in 1917, jazz became a familiar sound in music halls, dance halls, cabarets and casinos, where bands from across the Atlantic played the syncopated music. A handful of French musicians lent an attentive ear and appropriated the new art form by forming and joining jazz bands and frequenting the venues where it was played. By the 1930s, jazz had become an integral part of France's entertainment scene. Influenced by the symphonic sounds of Paul Whiteman (the United States) and Jack Hylton (England), who toured Europe in the mid-1920s, "French jazz" was born and gradually transformed the popular music landscape. Fred Mélé's shows at the Casino de Paris in 1923 paved the way for Ray Ventura (1908-1979) and his Collegians and the band led by Krikor Kelekian (1898-1973), whose stage name was Gregor. These groups became famous in the 1930s not only because of their artistry, but also because of the way they integrated jazz with variety music. To stand out from their American and English counterparts, Ventura and Gregor put together a French-style repertoire featuring American tunes and original compositions sung in French, interspersed with musical sketches in which the instrumentalists gave free rein to their virtuosity and humor.

Groups like these merged jazz and *chanson* in a hybrid genre that musicologists and performing arts historians each consider outside their respective fields of study. The Collegians' first recordings, in 1928, featured syncopated instrumental improvisations on two American hits,hit that composer Paul Misraki (1908-1998) proudly said became part of "French folklore". [1] The success of Ventura's orchestra in the world of *chanson* came at the end of a hybridization process characteristic of French jazz bands, which were key links in the importation and popularization of jazz in France, and in turn participated in the shift of French *chanson* towards swing by paving the way for Charles Trénet, Johnny Hess, Henri Salvador, Mireille and Jean Sablon. The Collegians' career in the early 1930s raises a variety of issues specific to the phenomenon of Americanization, understood as appropriation, which unfolded in several stages.

The first stage was imitation. The Collegians' earliest records featured hits from American films, sometimes just a few months after they had come out in the United States. The October 1928 Columbia recording session was exemplary in this sense: *I'm Afraid of You* had already been recorded by Paul Whiteman and His Orchestra, Ben Selvin's Harmonians, Jack Smith & the Whispering Orchestra and George Fisher's Kit Kat Band the same year. To restore the American identity of these songs, which were already famous in France, singer Lou Abelardo, who had a flawless … British accent, was chosen for *Sweet Ella May* and, on side B, the vocal trio led by Coco Aslan sang the chorus of *I'm Afraid of You* in the tradition of Paul Whiteman's Rhythm Boys. In 1929 alone, 12 out of the 14 titles the Collegians recorded at Odéon were from Broadway musicals or Hollywood movies, key sources for all the of the era's jazz bands.

But songs were not all that the Collegians borrowed from the United States. Their on-stage performance style was influenced by Hylton, who had introduced American showmanship to Europe. American bands set the standard for entertainment: multitalented musicians who could sing, dance, improvise and play in musical skits became the norm. The Collegians took the advice of Léo Vauchant (1904-1991), a trombone player and arranger in various 1920s orchestras, including Hylton's. He can be heard with the Collegians on their first Odéon recordings, which included *You're the Cream in My Coffee* and *Let's Do It*. [2] Likewise, Serge Glykson, a saxophone player in Lud Gluskin's orchestra from 1928, sat in with the Collegians on *Louise*, [3] *I Want to Be Bad*, [4] and *I'm Doing What I'm Doing for Love*. [5] Philippe Brun, a trumpeter who played first with Gregor, then Hylton, also began recording with the Collegians in 1929. Thus, practices were circulated by musicians moving from one band to another.

The Collegians, renamed the Collégiens in 1931, began by translating American songs into French but gradually built up their own catalogue of original compositions. This new recording policy becomes very clear when their output with Odéon and then Decca, the record company they signed with in 1931, is analyzed. In 1930, three of the eight sides the band recorded were in French. The proportion rose to 24 of 37 the following year, 35 of 46 in 1932, 24 of 26 in 1933, their least productive year, and 41 of 44 in 1934.



The French proportion of the Collegians' repertory, 1930-1934. Number of tracks recorded: in French (light blue), in English (dark blue)

Source: Société française Odéon, Répertoire général : 1929-1930 (Paris : L'industrie musicale, 1930) ; Decca record company, Decca and Brunswick Records: Issued up to and Including October 1939 (London : Decca Records, 1941)

Misraki, the Collegians' regular pianist and arranger, was the driving force behind this shift. His repertory included traditional French *chansons*, hits from the previous generation (*Je sais que vous êtes jolie*, *Reviens* [6] and others), French translations of American songs (*Vivons nos rêves*, [7] Saint-Granier's version of *Love is a Dreamer* from the film *Lucky in Love*) and also and above all successes popularized by the new talking movies, especially the songs of MauriceIdéal*, [8] *Déjeuner d'amoureux*, *Le Taratata* [9] and others). In short, the Collegians transposed the initial process of transatlantic imitation to within France: what they imitated this time, but less directly, was the pattern they saw in the United States, drawing their repertory from across a whole spectrum of sources, from popular music-hall tunes to musicals, movies, orchestras and jazz clubs. In doing so, they became independent from American music while at the same time adopting its codes.

Ventura's achievement was to combine French *chanson* with jazz. The two genres were not incompatible. On the contrary, the history of jazz itself, as seen by Ventura, is what allowed him to shift from American standards to the French repertory. In a 1931 article for *L'Édition musicale vivante*, he wrote:

> *We began dancing a lot. The repertory had to be updated and expanded. Composers began writing foxtrots, often based on English tunes… sweet, silly little English ditties. From that day on, pure jazz was dead. When Louis Armstrong […] improvises for hours on Saint Louis Blues, Saint James Infirmary or Tiger Rag, that's jazz. But when he improvises on Confessin', Dinah or any other piece of Jewish-American origin, you no longer hear real jazz. Nowadays, all the so-called big bands just play their country's popular music.* [16]

Ventura pointed out the inconsistency of the defenders of "pure" jazz who criticized him for diluting it with *chanson*. Jazz, he noted, emerged from the cross-fertilization of multiple sources and evolved with the music of its time. He also put his finger on the kinship between jazz and *chanson* in the 1930s: the re-appropriation of themes or texts by different artists and an emphasis on arrangements and performance were features common to both genres, which could be found on the same stages, starting with those of music halls. To those who argued that *chanson* and the new American music were incompatible with each other because they were based on unsurmountable cultural differences between France and the United States or between tradition and modernity, Ventura retorted that jazz was the product of cross-fertilization and exchanges. It was not a repertory set in stone to be imitated as is, but a method, almost a way of thinking, that could be appropriated and adapted to national contexts. In any case, his approach worked: the band's new show was a hit. Its records were bestsellers and the press was enthusiastic: "It's been a long time since we've been waiting for a French jazz band to put on a French music hall show," wrote columnist René Bizet. [10]

The Collégiens pursued a successful stage and screen career setting French songs to the syncopated beats and strong horn and rhythm sections of American jazz. Misraki became their regular composer when they signedthe French label.

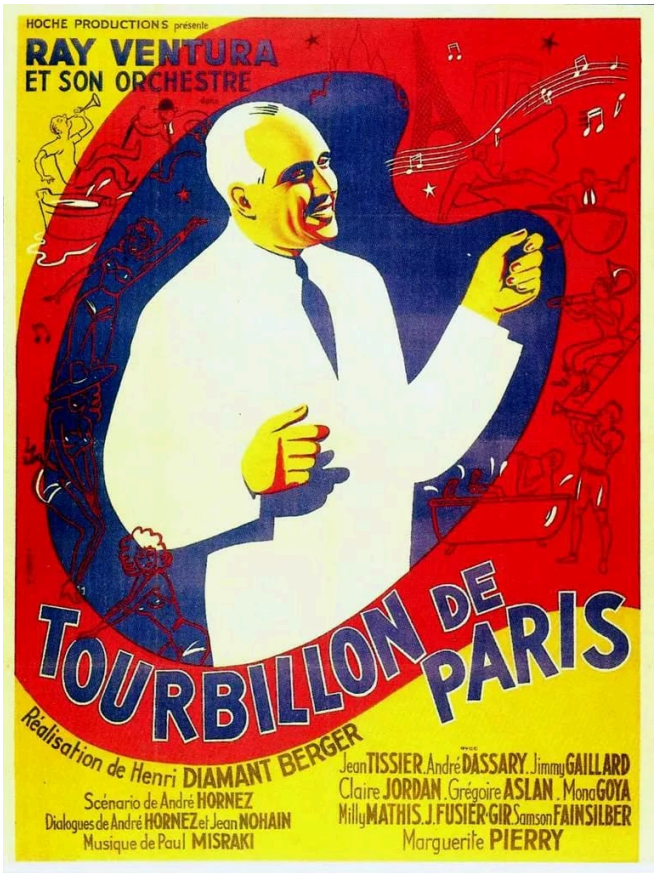


Sheet music (cover), "*Tout va très bien, Madame la Marquise*: fox-trot humoristique", lyrics by Paul Misraki, Bach & Henry Laverne, music by Paul Misraki, Éditions Ray Ventura, 1936

Source: Médiathèque Musicale de Paris, PF177-T

Originally intended for the stage, the song's success surpassed all expectations: over 600,000 disks were sold, convincing the orchestra to record more novelty numbers. By 1940, the group had released 21 "comic foxtrots", including *Les Trois Mandarins*, [11] *Quand un Vicomte rencontre un autre Vicomte* [12] and *Les Chemises de l'Archiduchesse*. [13]

In the late 1930s, the Collégiens began performing in film musicals rather than just recording hits from American and French ones. The band's American models had shown the way: *King of Jazz*, starring Paul Whiteman's Orchestra, premiered in France at the Olympia in December 1930 as *La Féerie du jazz*, while in England, Hylton played himself in *She Shall Have Music* (1935). The Collégiens recorded Misraki's songs written for movies in the early 1930s before appearing in *Feux de joie* (1938) and *Tourbillon de Paris* (1939).



Ray Ventura on the poster for the film *Le Tourbillon de Paris*, 1939

Source: Hoche Productions - Unifrance

On this occasion the band recorded some of its greatest hits, such asBritish film *Rhythm Serenade*. While this phenomenon was not new — the French song *Mon Homme* was covered multiple times in the United States from the early 1920s — for Ventura and his orchestra it was a matter of coming full circle in the trajectory of Americanization that began a decade earlier.

The appropriation was complete and surpassed: in just ten years, the Collégiens took the spotlight by inventing a new hybrid musical form that combined jazzy rhythms and orchestrations with the witty lyrics and funny situations of comic French *chanson*. Although this model declined after the war, Ventura's orchestra served as a springboard for the careers of many artists (Raymond Legrand, Jacques Hélian, Henri Salvador, Loulou Gasté and others) who benefitted from the spirited exchanges of musical styles and genres that took place between both sides of the Atlantic.



La marquise voyage, a musical paraphrase by Paul Misraki on "*Tout va très bien*"

Source: Paris : Pathé, 1937 [4604] – 78t 30 cm, Médiathèque Musicale de Paris, S 1152

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Fabre, Manon. "Les Orchestres Attractifs Des Années 1930 En France, Entre Jazz et Chanson. L'exemple de Ray Ventura et Ses Collégiens, à La Frontière Des Genres." Mémoire d'histoire de la musique, CNSMDP. Paris, 2021.

Tétart, Philippe, and Alain Tercinet. *Ray Ventura et ses Collégiens. Ou les enfants de la Marquise - Philippe Tétart,Alain Tercinet*. Les greniers de la mémoire. BD Music Editions, 2009.

Hélian, Jacques. *Les grands orchestres de music-hall en France: souvenirs & témoignages*. Paris, France: Filipacchi, 1984.

NOTES

1. "Le Jeu de l'ouïe -- Paul Misraki," March 11, 1991, INA archives.
2. Odéon 165.529, 78, 1929.
3. Odéon 165.625, 78, 1929.
4. Odéon 165.624, 78, 1929.
5. Odéon 165.775, 78, 1929.
6. Odéon 238.440, 78 rpm, 1931.
7. Odéon 238.176, 78 rpm, 1930.
8. Odéon 238.343, 78 rpm, 1931.
9. Odéon 238.897, 78 rpm, 1931.

10 René Bizet, "Spectacles. Music-Hall. Empire," *L'Intransigeant*, July, 1931, 7.

11 Pathé PA 752, 78 rpm, 1935

12 Pathé PA 729, 78 rpm, 1935

13 Pathé PA 1181, 78 rpm, 1937

14 Columbia D 19146, 78, 1928.

15 Pathé PA 624, 78 rpm, 1953.

16 Ray Ventura, "Non... Le Jazz ne meurt pas ! Il évolue....," *L'Édition Musicale Vivante*, September, 1931, 9.

17 Pathé PA 624, 78 rpm, 1935.

18 Pathé PA 1651, 78 rpm, 1938