

Jason Moran: The Harlem Hellfighters

Start time: 8pm

Running time: 90 minutes – no interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

Kevin Le Gendre explores the legacy of pioneering musician and soldier James Reese Europe with Jason Moran.

It is forgotten that, in times past, even the most talented of musicians were not insulated from the grand coups de theatre of world history. James Reese Europe is one of the most meaningful cases in point. During the First World War, a time when racial segregation stymied all areas of American life including the armed services, the composer-conductor and many of the musicians he led in peacetime forsook civilian for military life, joining the 369th Infantry, which had the monikers the 'Black Rattlers' and 'Harlem Hellfighters.' This 'colored' regiment was deployed in France in a conflict that, lest we forget, was defined by the horrific realities of trench warfare and casualties on a colossal scale. However, as a counterpoint to the unholy carnage, Europe's band brought to continental audiences in 1918 an array of startling sounds borne of newly developed African-American idioms such as ragtime and syncopated symphonic music, prototypes of what would eventually become known as jazz.

Tonight pianist and composer Jason Moran celebrates and extends his legacy in *The Absence of Ruin*, a piece that presents new arrangements of some of Europe's timeless works. Moran, whose discography counts interpretations of a wide range of black music, from hip-hop pioneer Afrika Bambaata to stride piano masters James P. Johnson and Fats Waller, has an important point to make about the monumental courage of Europe, a visionary who had appeared at the Carnegie Hall in 1912, a grand achievement for an African-American artist at that point in time.

'I've been trying to think about why he would really jump that far, to sign up.' Moran says 'He's successful, he's doing his work. [Europe's trusted collaborator] Noble Sissle writes about the moment he came back to his office and said I'm gonna tell you what we're gonna do... we're gonna sign up! Imagine Wynton Marsalis comes into a room and tells Jazz At Lincoln Center... alright, we're gonna put down our instruments and go fight. Are you kidding me? With Europe, this is maybe one generation after Emancipation Proclamation, so folks are just getting their freedom. And here we are with enough radical thinkers challenging the system, composers are charging into the concert hall with real intention, and James Reese Europe and his men...do the unimaginable as far as I'm concerned. They sign up!'

As the founder of The Clef Club, a historic organisation that brought together New York-based black artists with a view to improving their working conditions and instilling a greater sense of self-worth, Europe was all too aware of the challenges he and his peers faced. The need to project the best possible image of the Negro in the eyes of a deeply judgemental if not endemically prejudiced mainstream society is a major element of Europe's story, or rather the era in which he came to prominence.

'There's this book called *Harlem To The Rhine* where this colonel talks about going on trips with James Reese Europe, what they played and who they played for,' Moran explains. 'Throughout the book he keeps saying the main focus was for us to present ourselves as respectable human beings. You show up in these small French towns, don't go wildin' out. They had these kinds of things to uphold.'

Being able to 'dignify the race' by way of music that was singular and cognizant of the black experience in America, rather than in deference to European norms, was uppermost in Europe's mind. Moran, whose superlative trio The Bandwagon is augmented by guest horn players from Tomorrow's Warriors, seeks to invoke the composer's spirit of innovation in pieces such as the texturally adventurous 'The Moaning Trombone', all the while bringing his own creative verve to the table. As was the case with Moran's acclaimed 2008 Thelonious Monk project, tonight's performance has a strong visual dimension, with images provided by John Akomfrah, a trailblazer in British multi-media art since the heady days of the Black Audio Film Collective, and Bradford Young, the American cinematographer whose many credits include *Selma*.

Music aside, Moran, whose commitment to the rich traditions of American culture such as the blues and gospel has never been at odds with his modernism, is well aware of the bigger political backdrop of Europe and the Hellfighters. What they represented for the black community is not to be underestimated in the slightest.

'When they left there was nobody there, but when they returned everybody was there for a historic parade up Fifth Avenue. What that meant for Harlem and New York city, was a rare moment of acknowledging. So, it can't be that I just play the music and people clap. That's not what we're aiming for.' Neither was James Reese Europe.

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Performers

Jason Moran piano

The Bandwagon

Tarus Mateen bass

Nasheet Waits drums

Tomorrow's Warriors

Ife Ogunjobi trumpet

Joe Bristow trombone

Hanna Mubya bass trombone

Mebrakh Johnson reeds

Kaidi Akinnibi reeds

Alam Nathan reeds

Andy Grappy tuba

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