

Impact Statement

Alex Park, Grade 10

***Fighting with Music*, 2024.**

Acrylic, gouache on paper, 10.8 x 15.3 inches.

St. Paul's School, Concord, NH

Unsung Hero: James Reese Europe

How can music coincide with war? How does it unify the people within such harsh conditions? These are the thoughts that pondered through my head when I learned about James Europe during my Humanities Class this year. What seemed like someone I just stumbled upon turned out to be an “unsung hero” that piqued my musical interest. As a lover of music, especially jazz music, it seemed quite unique for someone to enlist in the war efforts while conducting a band. Yet at the same time, although James Europe was not the conventional “hero” one thinks of—for example, saving civilians during wartime, or advocating for civil rights during tumultuous times—Mr. Europe to me, emitted a type of bravery and courage that no one else had before. War is terrifying. It is brutal, unforgiving, merciless, and the list goes on. But no matter how many haunting synonyms I write, it will never be enough to describe what war is like. However, during such chaotic times, James Europe and the Harlem Hellfighters were able to spread culture, music, but most importantly joy through their music. Not only that, segregation and discrimination were also key factors that played a role in the army. On top of the already dreadful war, James Europe and his regiment preserved through racial discrimination. That, to me, is a hero.

My artwork of Mr. Europe depicts what I felt like he did for the jazz community, but also for his soldiers. We must not forget Mr. Europe was a lieutenant. A leader. He led his soldiers into battle, risking his life, while boosting the morals of other soldiers with his band's music. My work depicts Mr. Europe as a band leader, leading his soldiers into war. But none of the soldiers carry a weapon, rather different instruments: A drum, a trumpet, a saxophone, etc. In a way, as much as they fought the war with weapons, so did they with music, if not more. My artwork portrays Mr. Europe's bravery during war through his ability to not only fight, but morally support other troops outside the regiment whether they discriminated against him or not. It illustrates his unfaltering commitment and love for jazz and his troops, but also his determination to serve and spread happiness during impossible times. My vision behind the creative interpretation was to emphasize the notion of music. I wanted to put in the slightest light that some soldiers may have felt from James Europe's music and make the artwork as hopeful as possible while aligning with the harsh conditions of war. I also wanted to depict the soldiers' will to fight due to Mr. Europe, and how they were musicians as they were soldiers.

While working on this artwork, I listened to a lot of music to keep myself focused. Jazz at that. When I used to listen to music, I just listened. I never paid any attention to who sang it, the lyrics, or what it was about. If it sounded good, I listened to it. I still believe that doing this is not necessarily wrong, but I do believe that it is sometimes important to know what you are listening to and the cultural significance that may be relevant to it. And while drawing this art and keeping the context of the painting in mind, I thought about the songs I listened to a little more intently. I tried to think about the certain times these jazz artists lived in and tried to understand the background. Through the process of making this art, I came to appreciate music, and the value of music. Music to me was something that was extremely accessible and irrelevant to other valuable things in life, but for some people during the war, it was something invaluable and precious. This artwork allowed me to rethink the little things in life like music. In a way, I guess the music I listened to during this project also helped with my creative process. Whenever I talk about music with my friends now, I really like to tell them about the importance of the music they listen to. At first, I would have agreed with them that music is just music, but now I tell anyone that music is something more. Although learning about Mr. Europe was certainly a different and wonderful experience, I firmly believe that the lessons I learned from this process, but more importantly from Mr. Europe's courage for music was life changing enough for me to want to spread it to other people. Interestingly enough, I used to play the clarinet and saxophone, but quit due to other priorities in life. But something sparked inside of my musical mind while I made this artwork, so I decided to hop back on the saxophone. To be honest, it felt amazing. I felt more whole with the music I played, and it was definitely different to "just" listening to music. It has been around a month since I have returned to my instrument, and I can proudly say that my skills are back. More importantly, however, I now perform for my school again. But not like I did before. I do not play to just play. I play to spread my relit love for music. I hope someone can listen to my playing and feel even a fraction of what I felt making my art about James Europe and the Harlem Hellfighters.