



Impact Statement

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Beneath the Flag, the Music Rose, 2026

Digital Art

JHL Studio, Bellevue, WA

Unsung Hero: James Reese Europe

Music is a peaceful rebellion against war, fighting not with weapons or fire, but with spirit and hope. James Reese Europe exemplified how music acts as a binding force to inspire and unite people in the darkness and mercilessness of wartime. As a jazz enthusiast, I truly admire James Europe's role in establishing a lasting foundation for fairness, pride, and dignity for future Black musicians. When creating my artwork, I was listening to James Europe's "Castle House Rag", played by the Tempo Club in 1914. The syncopated rhythm and the use of traditional instruments added a unique color to this piece, differing from the repetitiveness and standardization of classical music. James Reese Europe is one of the most influential figures in African American music and proto-jazz. Words flowed as the music kept ringing in my mind. I truly felt the impact of music on uplifting and connecting individuals – it was a bonding force that transcended words and time. Still, I could never imagine how it feels to be involved in war, and how difficult it was for James Europe to keep communicating messages of hope and joy in a time overshadowed by darkness and violence.

James Europe joined the U.S. Army during WWI and later became a lieutenant. He led the "Harlem Hellfighters" and fought bravely in France. He was also the first African American officer to lead troops into battles. After the war, he and his group played concerts all over France. They later returned to the United States and held concerts to share their music with all people. Europe's passion for music and his spirit that was preserved despite difficulties, such as racial discrimination, inspired me to create this artwork. I depicted James Europe as a band leader conducting his band during wartime. The baton held in his hand was more than a metronome that kept the music in rhythm; most importantly, it was a source of light and responsibility that illuminated the soldiers' hearts in the darkness of war. The soldiers fight not only with physical weapons, but also with the morale that was communicated through music. In the background of this painting, I included a few combat aircraft to signal the ongoing war during Europe's time. Calm and determined, Europe led his soldiers with courage. The soldiers depicted in this painting each held an instrument. These instruments held in their hands mean far more than the weapons that simply attack and kill to defeat: they were the carriers of hope that allowed people to see the horizon beyond violence and survival. Lastly, I also included a musician playing the banjo in Carnegie Hall as part of the painting. As part of the Clef Club organized by Europe in 1910, the banjo player was able to perform music by black composers with other black musicians in the most important music hall in the US. It was a tremendous accomplishment that marked the beginning of the age of jazz.

in the United States. The limited space on the canvas could not fully express my admiration and reverence towards this hero. Whether in a concert hall or on the battlefield, whether being a talented composer or a brave soldier, Europe proved that music has the unifying power that can transcend race and the brutality of war. To me, he was like a candle whose flame kindled light in others. With all candles ignited, his spirit lived on the inspiration he passed to others.

As a singer and a clarinet player, I feel that music is truly an indispensable part of my life now. However, I did not feel the same way before. Before I started playing with bands and orchestras, I felt practicing my instruments was only for the purpose of improving my technical skills. At that time, I completely ignored the beauty of music, even though I was constantly exposed to musical environments. When I joined the band for the first time, I felt something completely different. The harmony and the intricacy created by the dialogues of different instruments completely captured my heart. I believe James Europe and the musicians in his group also feel the same way when performing their music. Playing music to me feels like a way to build emotional connections among me, other players, and the audience members. After learning about James Europe, I can proudly say that I play music to share my passion and love with others. Just like the Harlem Hellfighters and James Europe, I would like to spread the message of joy and love through both music and art. I plan to share this art piece with my instrumental ensemble friends and my band director to pass on Europe's spirit.