

James Reese Europe

1881-1919



WHY HE MADE HISTORY James Reese Europe was an acclaimed musician who was involved in the evolution of jazz. He was also the first African American to lead troops into battle.



As you read the biography below, think about how James Reese Europe changed music and the military for years to come.

James Reese Europe was born in Mobile, Alabama, on February 22, 1881. As a young boy, Europe studied both violin and piano. In 1904 Europe moved to New York City to pursue a career as a professional musician.

In 1910 James Reese Europe organized the Clef Club, a professional African American musicians' association and union. The Clef Club was one of the earliest African American unions, and contained a 125-member orchestra. In 1912 Europe conducted the Clef Club Orchestra at Carnegie Hall, where they played **bandores** and **mandolins**. This was the first African American band and the first jazz band to play at the hall.

Europe's role as a major figure in music history stems from his work as a composer and conductor. Europe is often credited for helping jazz music gradually evolve away from the ragtime style. Europe also restyled what was considered modern dance of this era. He collaborated with Vernon and Irene Castle, co-creators of the fox-trot dance.

In 1916 Reese enlisted in the Army and helped organize a band for the 15th Infantry Regiment of the New York National Guard, an African American regiment. Europe accomplished something that



NARA

VOCABULARY

bandore a musical instrument that resembles a guitar

mandolin a small instrument with four sets of paired strings

African Americans were allowed to accomplish at this time; he attended officers training and was commissioned a lieutenant.

During World War I, Europe proved himself not only as a successful bandleader with the Army, but also as a courageous soldier. His regiment, renamed the 369th Infantry, was nicknamed The Harlem Hellfighters after the soldiers proved their courage during combat. Europe was the first African American to lead troops in battle during a war.

In 1918 Europe and his musicians were ordered to entertain soldiers and the wounded in camps and hospitals across France. After the surrender of Germany, the band became popular and performed throughout Europe. After the war Europe became an even more popular musician in America with his special blend of ragtime and jazz.

Ironically, Europe survived World War I only to die tragically at the hands of one of his own musicians in 1919 at the age of 39. His innovative musical style and distinctive compositions still inspire musicians today.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. What was James Reese Europe's contribution to music?

2. **Explain** Aside from music, how else did James Reese Europe distinguish himself in his lifetime?

ACTIVITY

Use an encyclopedia or online resource to conduct research about jazz music. Use a blank sheet of paper or an index card to write five facts that you learned.