

The Jazz Age in the West End of London, 1918-39

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This paper is derived from the ongoing history of the West End of London that I am writing (the first volume, covering the period from 1800 to 1914, was published by Oxford University Press in 2020). The project as whole is intended to place the pleasure district on the scholarly map both as an aspect of urban history but also as a contribution to cultural history more generally. The paper will therefore commence with a brief discussion of what I am calling the 'pleasure district paradigm'. In particular, I wish to consider the following question: what kinds of cultural work do pleasure districts perform? The paper will then explore this further with reference to the West End in the 1920s and 1930s, focusing on forms of nightlife. Whilst the West End had emerged in something like its modern form in the years leading up to the Great War, it was in the inter-war period that it became truly iconic. It was a space that embodied the shock of the new, characterised by novel cultural forms including jazz, cabaret, dance and night clubs. The effect of being in London's pleasure district was fragmentary and driven by the appeal of diversion. The West End was more than simply a constellation of sounds and spaces. It offered a form of identity: modern, bohemian, cosmopolitan, sophisticated. The paper will consider how jazz and nightclubs provided distractive forms of experience at least for those who did not have to worry about getting up for work the next morning. It contributes to a growing literature on the significance of nighttime in popular culture and its evolving gender dimension (women and men had different relationships to the nighttime economy). Nightlife offered a distinctive space, which allowed participants to reflect on what it meant to be modern.

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