

Spirit of Jazz Age Paris and the Harlem Hellfighters, Heroes of WWI

Europe hosts some fabulous jazz festivals but have you ever wondered how jazz actually came to Europe?

It arrived in France on New Year's Day 1918 at the height of World War 1, marched in by an all-black regiment of 44 soldiers and hand-picked musicians lead by well-known New York band leader, James Reese Europe.



Summer 2014 marks the Centenary of the start of World War I. When the 369th Harlem Infantry (originally the 15th Regiment) was dispatched to France they were bitterly disappointed to find themselves assigned only to construction and clean up duty.

The French combat forces, however, badly needed replenishment and the segregated troop became the first American unit to fight alongside the French. In their 191 days in battle, they never lost a foot of ground nor had any man taken prisoner. For their fierceness while fighting, the Germans nicknamed them the 'Harlem Hellfighters'. They became one of the most successful and decorated units of the American Expeditionary Forces. For their exceptional bravery, 171 of their members were awarded the Legion of Honor and many Distinguished Crosses. They were the first Americans to achieve France's highest honor, the Croix de Guerre.

In addition to their prowess on the Front, the 369th took France by storm with their musical genius. Under the leadership of Lt. James Reese Europe, the regimental band helped keep morale high by marching their unheard of exciting rhythms through villages and towns. Genuine friendships developed between the French and black American soldiers, which seemed nothing short of miraculous in the light of their experiences within the U.S. Army.



Paris went wild for their music after their first concert given at the Theatre des Champs–Elysees, and by 1919, African–American jazz bands were the toast of the town. After returning to New York, several of the members returned to Paris, reformed their band and launched the jazz craze which kicked off France’s enduring love of jazz.

The Walking The Spirit of Jazz Age Paris & The Harlem Hellfighters, Heroes of WWI tour is a fantastic opportunity to learn about and to pay tribute to the remarkable achievements and legacy of the soldiers as well as to the rich African American history in Paris.

The 8–day /7 night excursion begins in Paris with a welcome dinner at a restaurant significant to African–American history and a Spirit of Black Paris bus/walking tour.

The tour whisks visitors through what was jazzy Black Montmartre of the Roaring 20s, relives the glory of Josephine Baker and the soldiers parading on the Champs–Elysées, plus many other little–known sites throughout the city where writers, artists, intellectuals, musicians and entertainers flourished.

Then, following the path of the soldier–jazz band, the excursion heads about two hours northeast to the battlefields of Belleau Wood, Chateau Thierry and the Meuse–Argonne.

Led by a member of the Guild of Battlefield Guides, participants explore the remnants of shell holes and trenches, visit captured towns, and pay their respects at monuments and the US Oise–Aisne Cemetery. They will hear many stories of individual acts of heroism such as how a former porter for the New York subway virtually single–handedly defeated a 24–man German patrol, at one point only armed with a bollo knife.



The battlefields are situated near the popular tourist area of Champagne and an exciting visit and tasting is planned to a famous champagne cellar, as well as a tour of Reims Cathedral, the UNESCO World Heritage site where France's kings were crowned since the 11th century.

Back in Paris, travelers can look forward to fully enjoying the musical legacy left by the Lt. James Reese Europe and his regiment in jazz clubs or scheduled festivals.

The Walking The Spirit Jazz Age Paris & The Harlem Hellfighters, Heroes of WWI is scheduled for July, August and October 2014 and will continue through 2018.

For further details on the tours, visit

www.specialgrouptours.com/tours/france/walking-the-spirit-of-jazz-age-paris-the-harlem-hellfighters/

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