Giddins, Visions of Jazz

9 ❖ Jelly Roll Morton (Red Hot Dandy)

We can only surmise why Jelly Roll Morton, whose date of birth was lately certified through baptismal records as October 20, 1890, insisted he was born five years earlier. Beyond the usual reasons (a few extra years may have got him into the bordellos, honky-tonks, and pool halls to which he escaped from his stuffy, disapproving family), an 1885 birth date made his famous claim of having single-handedly invented jazz in 1902 seem a tad more plausible. Even the imperial Jelly might have hesitated at issuing so grand a claim on behalf of his twelve-year-old self. At seventeen, though, he was a man of the world: Who could say what peaks the strutting teenage minstrel, pianist, hustler, pimp, and incipient composer wouldn't have dared? Of course, even given the 1890 date, he was a mature thirty-three when he initially found access to a recording studio and three years older than that when he carried out the Red Hot Peppers sessions that underpin his reputation.

The consensus on the Peppers within the international jazz community has hardly wavered in the sixty years since the New Orleans revivalists, abetted by Alan Lomax and the Library of Congress, spurred their resurrection. By the middle '60s, after Martin Williams helped reinterpret them for modernist holdouts, their acceptance was virtually uncontested. Few musical opinions are now as broad based as the one that places those records—made only a few months before Duke Ellington issued the first broadsides ("East St. Louis Toodle-oo" and "Black and Tan Fantasy") that would date them irretrievably—at the pinnacle of the once luminescent and soon faded glory of New Orleans jazz. The conviction abides despite three inconvenient hurdles: the pinnacle was achieved not in New Orleans, but in Chicago; the music has been out of print for long stretches, encouraging the acceptance of received wisdom; and controversy about the man himself continues to seethe. The purple prose to which many of Morton's admirers have been given has not helped his case with those who, willing to concede Morton's talent, blanch (still!) at his egoism.

Comparison with Orson Welles is instructive: Morton came to Chicago ready to venture everything, to bend the rules and recreate the idiom. And that's what he did. His version of New Orleans jazz is far richer, craftier, and more cultivated than anything he encountered in the bayous, which may help to explain why rapid stagnation banked the fires

of traditional jazz, as less adventurous musicians were content to copy Morton, King Oliver, and Louis Armstrong and a once admirable music was reduced to the precincts of tourism, complete with moniker (Dixieland), costume (straw boater and garter belt), and snacks (peanuts and beer). By the time Morton completed his epochal 1926–28 records, polyphony was on hold—Armstrong had put the soloist in the limelight and squared the beat, and Ellington had introduced melodies and voicings that supplanted the idylls of the South with the cosmopolitanism of the North. Confronted with such subversion, Mr. Jelly scrambled, embracing several musical fashions but unable to find the right cut of cloth for his genius before he faded away.

When Welles couldn't get his films financed, he turned to autobiography and self-immolation. Morton, his reputation in tatters, famed, like Welles, as much for his bragadoccio (the 1902 tale was one of many) as for his skill, was likewise the subject of interminable biographical probing. Welles's last barely released works were self-referential documentaries (*Filming Othello* is a little seen marvel, the documentary as personal essay). The last great works of Morton's career were interviews, recorded at the piano in the Library of Congress's Coolidge Auditorium. The punch line is this: like those of Welles, most of Morton's aesthetic theories and claims—notwithstanding his birth date and the birth date of jazz—were posthumously validated. He had, in fact, been everywhere he claimed, and at the right time: New Orleans; San Francisco; Chicago; and Richmond, Indiana, home of Gennett Records, where, with the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, he precipitated one of the first racially mixed recordings. The infamous business card that claimed for him the invention of jazz was, like most of his bragging, more of an exaggeration than a downright lie. He did prove to be, after all, the catalyst who transfigured ragtime and minstrelsy into a new music that adroitly weighed the respective claims of the composer and the improviser—in a word, jazz.

Morton's accomplishment, scarcely less impressive than the one he vaunted, was to establish jazz as a pancultural bouillabaisse. He redefined the playing field in his use of diverse ethnic spices ("if you can't manage to put tinges of Spanish in your tunes," he advised, "you will never be able to get the right seasoning, I call it, for jazz") and his plenary borrowings from pop, folk, and the academy—not that Morton would have considered opera, a musical form to which, as a New Orleans Creole of color, he was practically born, academic. Caught between the French tutorial traditions to which his family aspired and the enchantment of blues improvisation emanating from the poor black quarter uptown, he was impeccably positioned to avoid the hazards of high art/low art snobbery. Morton soaked up Italian opera, military brass bands, French quadrilles, Latin habaneras and tangos, and all the other sounds he found on his travels through the South (Biloxi was a hotbed of blues), the West (he was a hit in Los Angeles as early as 1917), and the Midwest (although he did regret missing the piano competition at the St. Louis Exposition). By the time he returned to Chicago in 1923, he was a walking treasury of the nation's musical byways, which he integrated into a music of his own. He was the first of the "workshop" composers, prefiguring Ellington, Mingus, and Muhal Richard Abrams.

Morton wrote some of the loveliest ("The Pearls," "Frog-i-more Rag") and trickiest ("King Porter Stomp," "Pep") works for piano in the American repertory. Few pianists (Dick Hyman is one) can do justice to them, which says more about Morton's alleged primitivism than any amount of debate. Morton was a product of ragtime and not of Tin Pan Alley. His compositional procedure was by nature formal and compound—a piano opus was a succession of strains, varied and complementary, not a stand-alone song fit for variations. But he was also grounded in the blues, those elemental twelve- and sixteen-measure sonatas that in the New Orleans style of his youth were rooted in riveting bass patterns and seductive moods. He sought to modify ragtime's parlor propriety with the suggestive rhythms and the spacious harmonies of the blues; he sought to enrich blues with the gaudy melodies and thumping euphoria of ragtime. His stimulating cross-rhythms, ringing overtones, skillful syncopations, and steady bass could make of the blues a pianistic showcase ("Fat Meat and Greens") or an inspired evocation ("I Thought I Heard Buddy Bolden Say").

But he was too ambitious, too prolific, and too talented to limit himself even to the unlimited vagaries of the blues. Though by no means a virtuoso, Morton was good enough to play the knuckle-busting music he wrote, and the standards he had to meet were those of ragtime. "Grandpa's Spells," which he recorded as a solo piano piece in 1923 and later adapted for the Red Hot Peppers, is essentially a rag tricked up with a stomp episode. Its structure, following a four-bar intro and with a four-bar transition preceding the stomp, is AABBACCA (each letter represents a sixteen-bar strain). Formally, it could almost pass for a Joplin rag, though Joplin preferred four strains. But the crashing accents of the stomp (C) announce a change that is decisively underscored by the final sixteen-bar embellishment of the A strain—a jazz chorus.

"King Porter Stomp" is a famously transitional piece that Morton claimed to have written in 1902, the year he elected for genesis. He said he submitted it to Joplin and won his approval. It combines ragtime structure with a stomp episode that became anthemic in the swing era when Fletcher Henderson turned it into a big band riff chorus. Morton himself

did not adapt it for his recording ensembles, but he did arrange one of the most melodious of his stomps, "The Pearls," which began life as an ABACC piano solo, initially recorded in 1923. In that performance, the stomp aspect is muted, yet the piece demonstrates a rapprochement with Tin Pan Alley in combining two sixteen-bar strains with a closing thirty-two bar chorus. When he rerecorded it as a piano solo in 1926 (the same year he arranged it for the Red Hot Peppers), he added a pronounced fourth-beat stomp in B and freely embellished the final choruses.

By the time of the first Peppers session, in 1926, Morton was a seasoned musician who could order, edit, and transform various musical elements and influences with unequivocal conviction. His insistence on hiring three clarinets to play the trio strain of "Dead Man Blues" or obtaining a Klaxon horn for an effect on "Sidewalk Blues" typifies the certainty with which he conceived each piece. Yet the records were not initiated as an end in themselves. Melrose Publishing, which had made a pile with Morton's "Wolverine Blues" and owned the rights to many of his other songs, figured recordings by a band would boost their sheet-music sales and urged Victor to sign him. Though they never performed outside a studio, the Red Hot Peppers were billed as "The Number One Hot Band." In those insuperable sessions, Morton consolidated his instincts for formalism and spontaneity, and fused the racial divisions that marked his adolescence—educated Creoles of color in his own neighborhood and self-taught blacks uptown. He hired homeboys from both communities.

Morton scored first time out. "Black Bottom Stomp" is an exuberant example of his ability to fully exploit seven musicians while dodging disarray. The opening strain, blaring with daring mirth, suggests military pomp filtered by irony and typifies his gift for highly rhythmic melodies. It consists of four four-bar figures that imitate the call-and-response of a preacher and his congregation, the rhythm varying between a Charleston stop-time (for the preacher) and a stable four/four. The second strain, which animates the improvisations, combines an eight-bar blues and a twelve-bar blues and is dramatically heightened by the inclusion of two-bar breaks ("it's always necessary to arrange some kind of spot to make a break," he counseled). In the closing episode, he employs one of his favorite devices for increasing tension: the ensemble states the theme, then repeats it exactly, except for the addition of trombone smears and a break.

That device is achieved with greater subtlety in "Dead Man Blues," as a clarinet trio plays a charming theme alone and then again with the mild shading of a trombone. In the best of the Peppers, Morton makes

you aware of the unique properties of each instrument: the tailgate glissandi of the trombone, the sparkling snap of the trumpet, the prettiness of the clarinet, the brazen rhythms of the banjo. "Dead Man Blues" is Morton's interpretation of the traditional New Orleans funeral, which he traced to scriptural injunction: Rejoice at the death and cry at the birth. In case the listener fails to appreciate his intentions, which in 1926 would have been more than likely in most parts of the country, he opens the performance with vaudeville dialogue to set the scene. A somber march, condensed from the hymn "Flee as a Bird to the Mountain," leads to the helium-light first strain—as graceful an example of New Orleans polyphony as exists on record. You can almost see the Grand Marshal prancing nimbly with his gaily colored parasol at the head of a funeral procession. The second strain is written for solo trumpet, and the third for clarinets, which leads to a reprise of the ensemble episode.

Other high-water marks are "Sidewalk Blues," which employs stop-time (the articulation of some beats and not others), ensemble turnbacks (junctures between choruses or segments of choruses), another twice-told trio (this time enhanced by Morton's piano), and an automobile horn; "The Chant," a New Orleans Rhythm Kings tune dressed up in Charleston rhythms, wacking cymbals, a brass riff with clarinet counterpoint, and ensemble breaks; and "The Pearls" and "Grandpa's Spells," vivid orchestrations of pieces written for piano. Morton brought controlled euphoria to composed jazz, as Oliver and Armstrong had to improvised jazz. In "Smoke House Blues," he fills what should have been a piano break with the lament, "Oh, Mr. Jelly!" as though notes could never fully express his feelings.

Yet for all its bite and pleasure, Morton's music was out of sync with '20s New York. He was not averse to infecting records with hokum and sentimentality, but he wasn't much good at condescension. Ultimately, he took up the gauntlet dropped at his feet by Henderson and Ellington and Webb and enlarged his unit, succeeding where Oliver had failed in adapting the New Orleans style to a big band. The results are uneven, yet fascinating. "Sweet Anita Mine" is a soufflé for twelve musicians, marred by a tacky clarinet solo, with a transitional passage for reeds that shows he had been listening to Frank Trumbauer. On "New Orleans Bump," he effectively acknowledged the jungly timbres that were packing them in at the Cotton Club. "Burnin' the Iceberg" is more indigenous, a roaring blues that, after two stop-time choruses, changes into a sixteen-measure theme heightened by repetition and textural alterations. The bubbly octet "Little Lawrence" boasts a catchy harmonic pattern that moves from major to minor and jaunty solos by an impressive crew,

including Ellington's first trumpet star, Bubber Miley. And there is more: "Mr. Jelly Lord," with Johnny and Baby Dodds; "Mournful Serenade," a quartet based on Oliver's "Chimes Blues"; "Ponchartrain," something of a sequel to "Dead Man Blues"; and "Blue Blood Blues," an important outing for clarinetist Albert Nicholas. Yet by 1930, Morton was considered out of date, and Victor threw in the towel.

One aspect of Morton's talent, his singing, was all but ignored in the days of the Peppers, as though he considered it unworthy, a holdover from vaudeville. He was an outstanding jazz singer, by turns dramatic and touching and flamboyant. But except for an explosive minstrel-like foray on "Doctor Jazz" (the "Roll Over Beethoven" of its day), Morton hardly sang at all until the last, desperate phase of his life. This is part of the enduring Morton mystery. After Victor declined to renew his contract, he vanished from records and public view for eight long years. Did he have no inkling and was there no one to tell him that singing might have transformed his cycle of hard luck, that singing was a more respectable response to changing tastes than joyless farce?

Not until the final act, when, unlike Welles, Morton was barely acknowledged in his own business, did he casually record unforgettable vocal performances of "Winin' Boy," "Sweet Substitute," "I Thought I Heard Buddy Bolden Say," "Mamie's Blues," "Mr. Jelly Lord," and others as good, either for General, a tiny label later acquired by Commodore, or the Library of Congress, which released its tapes years after his 1941 death. (He also recorded a few vocals during his brief comeback at Victor in 1939, but they tend to be less effective.) Morton's disappearance in the '30s has never been satisfactorily explained.

What demons pushed him off the map? Surely, it wasn't just the specter of bobby-sox aesthetics. Yet that's what many cranks argued: "cheap commercial music" was the culprit, according to Rudi Blesh, who insisted that "printed scores are not a part of jazz." Never mind Morton's own scores, which were notated down to the bass lines. The '30s were years in which Armstrong, Ellington, Fats Waller, Cab Calloway, and Ethel Waters enjoyed unprecedented success. A man with the performing abilities of Morton as bandleader, pianist, and singer should have been able to negotiate his way through that crest in black entertainment. The success of "King Porter Stomp" alone ought to have revived his fortunes to the point where he could at least finance a band and get decent work. By all accounts, the problem seems to have been one of character—his and that of onlookers who enjoyed seeing him brought low. The stubborn, loudmouthed dandy with diamond tooth and stickpin was due for a comeuppance. Jelly was temperamentally unsuited to the era, and no one helped him turn the corner.

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Morton's stock has of necessity risen and fallen according to the availability of his music. The reputation of no figure of comparable importance has been quite so vulnerable to the impulses of one record company. The Morton revival didn't begin to transcend the true believers until 1959, when RCA issued a compilation (billed on the jacket as "Dixieland Jazz") of sixteen Morton masterpieces, *The King of New Orleans Jazz*. They made one mistake by inadvertently including the "wrong" take of "Dead Man Blues," but even that was fortuitous. The alternate, though marred by a flawed trumpet solo, achieves a buoyancy in the ensemble passages beyond that in the master take. In the '60s, the fine RCA-Vintage series released most of the remaining Victors in entertaining and non pedantic sets that juxtaposed the ludicrous and the sublime.

By the mid-'70s, however, the Red Hot Peppers were available only as multi volume chronological imports from RCA's French operation. His music was then in the forefront of jazz repertory, thanks to Dick Hyman, Bob Greene, and Martin Williams's office at the Smithsonian, but Morton himself was largely invisible, except for the 1923 piano solos collected on Milestone. The Commodores and Vocalions were in and out of print in a flash, and the Library of Congress series remained a rare collector's item. One of the most enterprising and genuinely witty minds in American music was once again out of the loop. His name is rarely mentioned by critics who came of age in the '70s and '80s.

At the close of 1990, to honor a centennial that was otherwise shamefully ignored, Bluebird (RCA) issued *His Complete Victor Recordings*, a handsomely packaged set of five compact discs that includes the seventy-four titles he recorded between 1926 and 1930 and during his brief return in 1939, as well as thirty-eight alternate takes. This should have done the trick, but the potential significance of the release was undermined by technological caprice. The label and producer relied on a digital process developed by Sonic Solutions called NO NOISE, which produced quiet surfaces at the expense of musical vitality. Like so many other CDs issued in that period (RCA and Columbia were the worst offenders), the high and low frequencies were deleted along with the static, and the music was cramped in airless midrange. The presentation was particularly disappointing because the producer, Orrin Keepnews, was a prominent figure in the Morton revival of the '50s and '60s.

The Bluebird discs reduce Morton's music to the echoes of a metallic ghost. The sad irony is that the original Victor sound was exceptionally good for its time, unlike, say, the 1923 King Oliver Gennetts, which demand of the listener great patience, if not a trained ear. This particular desecration was simply one of the most heartbreaking among many in

the rush to speed digitally processed product to the stores. Numerous musicians, from Louis Armstrong to Miles Davis, were treated as ingloriously. But they had long since achieved unwavering recognition. Morton, having fallen between the cracks, was now lost in the grooves. The ambience of his music was gone along with the pulsing rhythmic bottom of bass or tuba. The swelling and decaying shhhhhhh! of the cymbal sounded like a pot falling on Formica, and the piano might as well have been covered by a blanket.

Just how detrimental the sound is was made clear by the simultaneous release of the Morton Victors on a small English label called JSP, supervised by an exacting engineer, John R. T. Davies, whose exemplary work is a model for reprocessing archival jazz. A comparison of the JSP and Bluebird CDs was a terrible revelation of how critical an engineer's input can be in properly reproducing music that we who are not audiophiles tend to think of as immutable. The JSP edition, poorly distributed Stateside, became an instant collector's item, while Bluebird—despite great leaps in digital technology (even at Sonic Solutions)—declined to rectify its fiasco.

Alan Lomax's Library of Congress interviews with Morton were also in limbo. In 1990, an independent American label, Solo Art, issued the first of eight promised volumes (remastered by the meticulous Jack Towers with speed and pitch corrections by John R. T. Davies), but was enjoined from continuing by legal issues. Four years later, Rounder Records won the rights to release the Library of Congress recordings and elected to release four CDs, excerpting all the musical fragments without the commentary they are meant to illuminate. A few new selections (once considered too risque for home listening) are included, but the absence of Morton's guff and wisdom is deeply disappointing. As of 1998, this matchless historical document, financed by tax dollars, has been generally unavailable for almost four decades.

Why is it important? Under Lomax's eager prodding, Morton keeps up a march-like vamp on the piano while ruminating on his past. He is so compelling an anecdotalist, you don't mind his pontificating. After declaring that he wrote the first stomp, he says he doesn't know what *stomp* means, but that he coined the term. His famous demonstration of how "Tiger Rag" evolved from a French quadrille is an essential music lesson (as are his displays of the evolution of "Maple Leaf Rag" and the ways in which Verdi's *Miserere* was made to serve the purposes of jazz). Best of all, he sings "Mr. Jelly Lord," "The Jelly Roll Blues," and "Alabamy Bound" in his thick, whiskey-stained drawl, sustaining an incomparably langorous tempo that delineates a world that disappeared long ago but seems bracingly familiar all the same.

10 ❖ King Oliver (Working Man Blues)

To anyone for whom the music of King Oliver is a source of continuous and deepening delight, the disproportionate attention paid to his historical and mythic station rather than to his art is puzzling and frustrating. But not entirely surprising. The acoustic recording techniques in use during the year of Oliver's most consequential records, 1923, were better at capturing sounds than reproducing them. The question of his genius became a matter of faith, sworn to by sympathetic and imaginative listeners undaunted by surface noise or primitivism. The first obstacle ought to disappear. Digital remastering, cautiously executed, can work miracles, as Thomas G. Stockham, Jr., proved with Caruso recordings two decades older than Oliver's, and as Jack Towers, John R. T. Davies, Robert Parker, and others have demonstrated with classic jazz recordings (alas, only for small independent labels). In time, they will surely remaster all of Oliver's important music; Parker's first two CD compilations show how dramatic the improvement in texture and clarity can be—his transfer of "Dippermouth Blues" is so vivid you may feel, as I did, that you are hearing the real Oliver for the first time.

The primitivism issue may be harder to dispel, as it became ingrained in the very rhetoric that worked to establish Oliver's importance in jazz history. He is chiefly famous for two things: he was Louis Armstrong's mentor (since the '50s, his records have often been reissued under Armstrong's name), and he led the first black New Orleans ensemble to triumph up north in clubs and on records. One can applaud those achievements without feeling obliged to penetrate the hiss and crackle of a Neanderthal's 78s. Yet the Oliver admirer is surprised that anyone would want to talk about his music in terms of obligation. The essence of his relatively small, flawed body of work is a rollicking, plangent, sensuous collectivization of musical wills that not even Armstrong could replicate. As a cornetist, his impassioned playing reaches us across the decades, conveying a solitary dignity, a pain and urgency, even as it spurs his cohort to action.

Joseph Oliver was born on Dryades Street in New Orleans in 1885, or so it is generally believed. Most of the facts have been disputed: a plantation outside the city has been proposed as his place of birth, and his birth date has on extremely slim evidence been estimated at one to eight years earlier. While still in his midteens, he lost his left eye, presumably in a