

2 New Orleans Jazz

THE CELEBRATIONS OF A CITY IN DECLINE

With the lifting of trade restrictions on the Mississippi River following the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, the New Orleans economy entered a period of unprecedented prosperity that would last over half a century. The population of the city had already doubled by the time, less than a decade later, that the first steamboat—aptly named the *New Orleans*—was put into service on the Mississippi, facilitating upstream navigation and further enhancing New Orleans's position as a major hub of commerce. The effect of this shift can be measured by the staggering growth in downriver cargo received at the port: between 1801 and 1807, an average of \$5 million worth of goods came downstream each year, but in 1851 alone almost \$200 million worth of freight was measured. Shipments of cotton constituted almost half of these receipts, but many other goods—grain, sugar, molasses, tobacco, manufactured items, and much more—as well as people passed through this New Orleans hub, creating a prosperous, cosmopolitan environment that few cities in the New World could match.¹

This localized economic boom, built on the contingencies of geography, began to subside in the years following the Civil War. The city's position on the wrong side of the Mason-Dixon line was only one small part of the problem. Even more pressing was an inexorable shift in the nation's infrastructure. During the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the railroad gradually replaced the steamboat as the major transportation industry in America. Trading hubs grew up elsewhere, and New Orleans's position at the gateway of the major inland water system waned in importance. Economic woes were further aggravated by chronic political corruption. The result: by 1874, the state of Louisiana was insolvent, unable to pay either principal or the accumulated interest on its \$53 million debt.² Investment capital, to the extent that it stayed within the region, gravitated to natural resources and oil fields, with attendant wealth moving outside New Orleans to other parts of Louisiana and beyond the state line to Texas. The boisterous histories of New Orleans jazz often obscure this underlying truth: by the time of the birth of jazz, New Orleans was already a city in decline.

The city's population had increased more than fourfold during the half-century from 1825 to 1875, but in 1878, 2 percent of the city's inhabitants perished in a devastating yellow fever epidemic. The risk of pestilence was always present in nineteenth-century New Orleans, especially during the long, hot summer months. The city sits below sea level, and its damp, warm climate combined with dismal local sanitation—the city had no sewage system until 1892, long after most North American cities had adopted modern methods of fluid waste disposal—made the Crescent City an ideal breeding ground for mosquitoes, roaches, and other assorted vermin. New Orleans bassist Pops Foster recalled conditions being so poor that he was required to wear mosquito nets during some performances.³ After the 1878 epidemic, population growth resumed at a sluggish 1 percent annual rate, but the number of foreign-born members of the population actually declined, as new immigrants sought more flourishing

economies and healthier surroundings.

The average life span for a black native of New Orleans in 1880 was only thirty-six years; even white inhabitants lived, on average, a mere forty-six years. Black infant mortality was a staggering 45 percent. During that decade, mortality rates for New Orleans as a whole were 56 percent higher than for an average American city. Seen in the context of the time and place, the New Orleans natives' extreme fascination with celebrations, parades, and parties—an obsession that reaches its highest pitch in the New Orleans parade for the dead, that extraordinary combination of funeral and festival—is reminiscent of the revelers in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death," whose merrymaking allowed them to distance themselves from the sufferings and pestilence of the here and now. From one point of view, this exuberance is the utmost decadence; from another, it is a necessary self-defense mechanism of a society living on the brink.

The dictates of commerce made it inevitable that a major city would be established near the base of the Mississippi River. But, in the words of historian Ned Sublette, it was "a terrible place to build a town."⁴ New Orleans has the lowest elevation of any major U.S. city, and with 41 percent of the continental United States's runoff flowing down and through the Mississippi, the Crescent City is to America what plumbing pipes are to your home. Tropical storms are frequent visitors, brushing by or making a direct hit once every three or four years on average, and any resident who lives to middle age will likely confront the ravages of the region's hurricanes, marauders that periodically force evacuations and leave behind untold damage. And in a land that is gradually sinking lower and lower below sea level—some foresee a day in which New Orleans will be completely surrounded by the Gulf of Mexico—the risk of flooding is ever present. In short, the city's history of homegrown catastrophes, whether acts of God or merely those of the lower deities known as elected officials, testifies both to the challenges facing the inhabitants as well as to their hardiness and perseverance.

Yet historians of New Orleans jazz have preferred to focus on the city's moral dangers, linking the rise of hot music to sin and licentiousness. One can construct a colorful story here. After all, the city was named after a debauched noble (Philippe Charles d'Orléans, Duke of Orléans), populated with prisoners and prostitutes (Louisiana became a French penal colony in 1719), financed by a charismatic adventurer and swindler (John Law, famous instigator of the Mississippi Bubble), and came of age as the Big Easy, a place where the rest of world flocks for a fast and loose time. Given this quasi-mythic history, who can be surprised that music writers have been tempted to describe the birth of jazz as a product of vice, paying more attention to bordellos, gambling, and liquor than to the contingencies of culture and economics?

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The standard accounts focus on Storyville, a red-light district in New Orleans that existed for a scant twenty years—created by the city aldermen on October 1, 1897, and closed by the U.S. Navy on November 12, 1917—as the birthplace of jazz music. Close investigation of the facts casts more than a few doubts on this colorful lineage. Donald Marquis, a leading expert on New Orleans jazz who painstakingly researched the life of Buddy Bolden—commonly credited with being the first jazz musician—was forced to conclude that Bolden "did not play in the brothels. None of the musicians who were interviewed remembered playing with a band

in a whorehouse, nor did they know of anyone who had.”⁶ Even the name Storyville, now enshrined in the jazz lexicon, was largely unknown to jazz musicians at the time. As jazz bassist Pops Foster recalled:

Long after I left New Orleans guys would come around asking me about Storyville down there. I thought it was some kind of little town we played around there that I couldn't remember. When I found they were talking about the Red Light District, I sure was surprised. We always called it the District.⁷

Other sources suggest that piano music was often featured in the bawdy houses— although in many instances player pianos were used—and that only a few locations employed larger ensembles. Certainly prostitution was big business in Storyville: at its peak some 2,000 women and more than 200 brothels were involved in the trade. Yet jazz bands were more commonly found in the cabarets and dance halls in the district, rather than in the bordellos themselves. Hence, even if one agrees with historian Bill Russell's assessment that Storyville was “kind to hot music,” the conclusion that jazz music was born in the brothels or had some special relationship with prostitution sacrifices scrupulous accuracy for a tawdry tabloid sensationalism.⁸

Chastized as the devil's music, jazz may have even deeper ties with the house of God. “You heard the pastors in the Baptist churches,” explained Paul Barbarin, one of the finest of the early New Orleans jazz drummers, “they were singing rhythm. More so than a jazz band.” “Those Baptist rhythms were similar to the jazz rhythms,” concurred Crescent City banjoist Johnny St. Cyr, “and the singing was very much on the blues side.” Kid Ory, the most famous of the New Orleans trombonists, claimed Bolden drew inspiration from the church, not the nightlife of Storyville: “Bolden got most of his tunes from the Holy Roller Church, the Baptist church on Jackson Avenue and Franklin. I know that he used to go to that church, but not for religion. He went there to get ideas on music.”⁹

But sporting houses and Baptist churches, for all their significance, were only a small part of the broad musical panorama of turn-of-the-century New Orleans. String trios of mandolin, guitar, and bass, sometimes joined by banjo and violin, performed at Saturday night fish fries. On Sundays, city residents migrated to Milneburg and the shores of Lake Pontchartrain, where as many as thirty-five or forty bands of varying instrumentation would entertain. On Mondays and Wednesdays, lawn parties—which, like the fish fries, were typically private fund-raising ventures comparable to the Harlem rent parties of a later day—were thrown all over New Orleans. Milk dairy stables provided another common setting for dances, organized by the owner or hired for the night by locals who cleaned the stables and hosted parties from dusk until the predawn hours. Collections of youngsters playing mostly homemade instruments—the so-called spasm bands with their hodgepodge of music-making cigar boxes, pipes, gourds, and other ready-at-hand objects—could be found on the streets, cadging nickels and dimes from the passersby. Lincoln Park and Johnson Park were other favorite locations for crowds to gather and listen to New Orleans bands, and a wide range of other spots—including restaurants, saloons, and assembly halls—commonly featured music, as did virtually every major event, not just rallies and athletic competitions, or the celebrations of Mardi Gras and Easter, but

even the solemn occasions of funeral and burial.

The second-line participants who followed the family and friends (the first line), attracted by the music of the the New Orleans funeral procession, have become famous the world over—and so beloved in the Crescent City that no burial is required these days to justify their inclusion in a public event. As such traditions suggest, if you didn't go to the music in New Orleans, it often came to you. Local residents during the early days of jazz frequently encountered performances on the move, in parades and marches and from strolling vendors—a number of sources testify to the importance of wandering rags-bottles-and-bones men who, in the words of Jelly Roll Morton, “would play more low-down dirty blues” on the wooden mouthpieces of their cheap horns “than the rest of the country ever thought of.”¹⁰ The Mississippi steamboats also served as important traveling showcases for early African American music, and jazz's journey by river to other locales is often cited and romanticized by historians of jazz. Less celebrated, but also important, were the Sunday train excursions, promoted by the Southern Pacific and other railroads, which featured some of the finest local musicians. Given these precedents, who can doubt that, even from its birth, jazz was destined to spread its joyous sounds far and wide?

One could perhaps imagine jazz developing in New Orleans even without the bawdy houses of Storyville, but the birth of this music would have been unthinkable without the extraordinary local passion for brass bands, an enthusiasm that lay at the core of that city's relationship to the musical arts. Of course, the brass band phenomenon was by no means limited to New Orleans: in the years following the Civil War, similar ensembles were organized in many cities and villages across the United States, with some towns hiring a professional bandmaster to organize and rehearse the group, while in many other instances—especially with black bands—the units were sponsored by fraternal organizations, social clubs, or the musicians themselves. But the role of these groups was especially important in New Orleans, where brass bands played not only for Sunday afternoon concerts in the village square, as happened in many communities, but for almost every type of social event.

The Excelsior Brass Band and the Onward Brass Band, both formed in the 1880s, were the best known of these ensembles, but there were many others, probably dozens, of varying degrees of fame and ability. Drummer Baby Dodds recalled the instrumentation for the marching brass bands:

There was a traditional line-up for the New Orleans parades. The trombones were always first. Behind the trombones would be the heavy instruments, like bass, tubas and baritones. Then behind them were the altos, two or three alto horns, and behind them were the clarinets. It was very good if there were two. Usually it was only one, an E flat. Then behind the clarinets would come the trumpets, always two or three, and they came next. Bringing up the rear would come the drums, only two, a bass drum and a snare drum. That was for balance. For funeral marches the snare drum is muffled by pulling the snares off. When the snares are off it's the same as a tom-tom. But you don't muffle drums with parades, or going back from the cemetery. At most there were eleven or twelve men in the whole brass band.¹¹

Sometimes the same instrumentation would be employed for dances, but in many instances a smaller subset of these musicians, often joined by string players, would be used. The repertoire of these bands was remarkably varied. In addition to concert and march music, the ensembles also knew a range of quadrilles, polkas, schottisches, mazurkas, two-steps, and other popular dance styles. As the ragtime craze swept the country around the turn of the century, syncopated pieces became more and more frequently played by these bands, a shift that was accompanied by increased interest in “ragging” more traditional compositions. This blurring of musical genres was, as we shall see, central to the creation of jazz music.

The blossoming of vernacular music took place in tandem with a tremendous outpouring of European concert music, opera, and drama. The opening of the first major theater in New Orleans in 1792 initiated a vibrant tradition of formal musical and theatrical performance. Another major venue, the Théâtre d’Orléans, opened in 1813 and was rebuilt, following a fire, in 1819; the American Theatre followed in 1824; the 4,100-seat St. Charles Theatre, where Jenny Lind sang, opened in 1825, and it too was rebuilt following a fire, in 1843; the Varieties Theatre, established in 1848, was rebuilt on a different site in 1871 and, ten years later, became the Grand Opera House; the Academy of Music opened in 1853; the French Opera House, perhaps the greatest of these, opened on the corner of Bourbon and Toulouse Streets in 1859, and stood out as one of the most elegant performing halls in the United States until it too went up in flames in 1919. In short, music of all types permeated New Orleans social life; whether high or low, imported or indigenous, it found a receptive audience in this cosmopolitan city. Indeed, has any metropolis in history exhibited a greater love affair with the musical arts?

The influence of this highbrow, European musical tradition was especially strong within the local black Creole culture. The role of these New Orleans Creoles in the development of jazz remains one of the least understood and most commonly mis-represented issues in the history of this music. Part of the confusion comes from the term *Creole* itself. In many contexts, the word has been used to denote individuals of French or Spanish descent who were born in the Americas. As such, it was a mark of pride that distinguished descendants of the first settlers of New Orleans from later groups of immigrants. However, many of these early inhabitants had slave mistresses, and the offspring of these relationships and their later progeny constituted a second group of Creoles—the so-called Creoles of color or black Creoles.

Many black Creoles were freed long before the abolition of slavery in the South. The famous Code Noir or Black Code of 1724, which regulated interactions between slaves and masters, allowed for the liberation of slaves with the consent of their owner. Paternal feelings, among other motives, led many slave owners to follow this course with these children of miscegenation. Even after the Civil War, these Creoles of color did not associate with black society; instead they imitated the ways of the continental European settlers, often spoke a French patois, and, in general, clung tenaciously to the privileges of their intermediate social position. Toward the close of the nineteenth century, this separate existence no longer remained possible for many black Creoles. Perhaps the most decisive turning point was the passage of Louisiana Legislative Code No. 111 in 1894, which designated anyone of African ancestry as a Negro. Slowly, but inexorably, these Creoles of color were pushed into closer and closer

contact with the black underclass they had strenuously avoided for so long.

This forced association took place not only in the broader social arena, but also in the musical subculture of New Orleans. The Creole musicians were, for the most part, better trained than the black players from uptown; they were steeped in the classics and skilled at reading music. But suddenly these polished Creole ensembles were forced to compete for work against the less schooled, more boisterous black bands that were pursuing a “hotter” style, one that would serve as the foundation for New Orleans jazz. In time, the hotter sound would emerge as the dominant strain— although assimilating many aspects of the Creole tradition in the process. At the close of the nineteenth century, John Robichaux’s Creole band, with its studied arrangements and skilled musicianship, represented the best of the older style. The newer, more intense approach was exemplified in the music of cornetist Charles “Buddy” Bolden.

BUDDY BOLDEN, THE ELUSIVE FATHER OF JAZZ

Buddy Bolden, often cited as the first jazz musician, may well be the most mysterious figure in the annals of New Orleans music. No recordings survive of this seminal figure—despite the rumored existence of a cylinder recording from the turn of the century—and no mention of his music appeared in print until 1933, two years after his death, and some three decades after Bolden contributed to the revolutionary birth of a new style of American music. Hence any assessment of his importance must be drawn from scattered and often contradictory accounts, almost all of them documented, sometimes with mixed motives, long after the fact. For years, only the barest sketch of a biography was available—an account that placed Bolden as a barber and editor of a local scandal sheet, both facts ultimately proven to be untrue. However, detailed research conducted by Donald Marquis, which culminated in his 1978 book *In Search of Buddy Bolden, First Man of Jazz*, put to rest the many misconceptions and brings us probably as close as we will ever get to Bolden and his music.¹²

In 1877, the year Bolden was born, President Rutherford Hayes removed the last federal soldiers from Louisiana, signaling an end to the Reconstruction era in New Orleans and its surroundings. The apparent return to normalcy was deceptive: Bolden, the son of a domestic servant, was raised in a society that would never match the prosperity and general well-being of prewar New Orleans. In 1881, four years after Bolden’s birth, his sister Lottie, five years of age, died of encephalitis; two years later, Bolden’s father died, at age thirty-two, of pneumonia. These personal tragedies reflected a broader, more disturbing social reality. As the mortality statistics cited earlier make clear, the abbreviated life spans of the Bolden clan were, for the most part, typical of black society in late nineteenth-century New Orleans.

Bolden would have been exposed to music not only at various social events, but also at church and in school—in fact, two of John Robichaux’s musicians taught at the Fisk School for Boys, which Bolden likely attended. At some point in the mid-1890s, Bolden began playing the cornet, initially taking lessons from a neighbor, and was soon supplementing his income as a plasterer with earnings from performing. At this remove, it is hard to evaluate how much

formal training Bolden enjoyed. “[I] don’t think he really knew how to blow his horn right,” Louis Armstrong has suggested, and members of the Robichaux band dismissed Bolden’s group as a bunch of “routineers,” by which they meant fakers.¹³ Yet Bolden listed himself as a “music teacher” in the local directory. Certainly one would give much to know what pearls of wisdom he passed on to his private students. In any event, the lessons he gave in public, through the example of his own playing, came to exert an even greater influence over the nascent jazz style of his hometown.

Unlike many New Orleans horn players, Bolden’s initiation into the public music life of the city came not through the brass bands that figured prominently in the local social life, but instead as a member of the string ensembles that entertained at dances and parties. The personnel and instrumentation of Bolden’s band underwent constant shifts, but its general evolution tended to emphasize the wind instruments at the expense of the strings—the only surviving photo of the group reveals an ensemble consisting of cornet, valve trombone, two clarinets, guitar, and bass; drums, although absent in the photograph, also played an important role in the band according to all accounts. The evolution in instrumentation was accompanied by a shift in musical perspectives. By the closing years of the century, Bolden’s band was gaining increasing notoriety for its daring move into the syncopated and blues-inflected sounds that would prefigure jazz.

Bolden’s single biggest contribution to jazz may have been his focus on the blues. “On those old, slow, lowdown blues, he had a moan in his cornet that went right through you,” trombonist Bill Matthews recalled, “just like you were in church or something.” Trumpeter Peter Bocage concurred: “He played a lot of blues, slow drags, not too many fast numbers. ... [B]lues was their standby, slow blues.”¹⁴ It is worth recalling that the blues form was little known at the time. W. C. Handy may be lauded by his admirers as the “Father of the Blues,” but he never encountered this style of music until around 1903, when Bolden was already twenty-five years old. Yet Jelly Roll Morton describes a blues he heard played by New Orleans resident, Mamie Desdome, at the turn of the century. Bolden was likely incorporating the blues sensibility and structure into his music around this same time.

Certainly Bolden, even if he did not invent jazz, had mastered the recipe for it, which combined the rhythms of ragtime, the bent notes and chord patterns of the blues, and an instrumentation drawn from New Orleans brass bands and string ensembles. As we have seen, the syncopated rhythms of ragtime spread into the mainstream of American culture before the blues became well known, and Bolden can hardly take credit for this aspect of African American music, although it certainly served as another key ingredient in his work. Yet his insistence on marrying these syncopations to the blues, in an era when the latter idiom existed only on the fringes of the music world, was a brash move, and no doubt a key reason why he captured the attention of his contemporaries and the later chroniclers of New Orleans jazz.

Bolden’s ragged and raucous music stood in stark contrast to the more traditional quadrilles, waltzes, and marches of the New Orleans Creoles. Although the Creole players tried initially to dismiss the new style, its vigor appealed to the local black audience, especially to the younger, more independent generation of African Americans born and raised after the Civil War. This was more than a matter of musical techniques. Bolden’s daring lyrics

to his signature song, which included biting reference to a local judge and other contemporary figures, can be viewed as symbolic of the more outspoken attitudes of the younger black men of his day. Even so, Bolden pushed the limits as few of his contemporaries dared, no doubt enhancing the allure of his quasi-forbidden music in the process. Referring to the cornetist's trademark piece, known under varying names—"Funky Butt," "Buddy Bolden's Stomp," "Buddy Bolden's Blues," or "I Thought I Heard Buddy Bolden Say"—Sidney Bechet recalls: "The police put you in jail if they heard you singing that song. I was just starting out on clarinet, six or seven years old, Bolden had a tailgate contest with the Imperial Band. Bolden started his theme song, people started singing, policemen began whipping heads."¹⁵

Bolden's career would span only a few years. By 1906, his playing was already on the decline, aggravated by the cornetist's heavy drinking and increasing mental instability. In March of that year, he was arrested after assaulting his mother-in-law with a water pitcher—an event that led to the only newspaper articles mentioning this jazz icon during his lifetime. A second arrest, in September, and a third one the following March resulted in Bolden's being declared legally insane and committed to an asylum in Jackson. For the next twenty-four years, Bolden remained at this institution, his condition deteriorating into pronounced schizophrenia. On November 4, 1931, Bolden died at the age of fifty-four—according to the death certificate, from cerebral arterial sclerosis—only a few years before growing interest in the early history of jazz would lead researchers back to this seminal figure.

Although Bolden has been typically heralded as the progenitor of jazz, such simplistic lineages ignore the broader musical ferment taking place in turn-of-the-century New Orleans. Many musicians—mostly black, but also Creole and white—were experimenting with the syncopations of ragtime and the blues tonality and applying these rhythmic and melodic devices to a wide range of compositions. At first, improvisational techniques were probably used merely to ornament composed melodies, but at some point these elaborations must have evolved into more free-form solos. What began as experimentation eventually led to formalized practice. Reconstructing these events with any precision is all but impossible—a terminology for describing this music would not exist for quite some time, and the first recordings of this new style would not be made for at least twenty years. Whether Bolden was the decisive figure or merely one among many to spur this transformation remains a matter for speculation. In any event, all our research indicates that sometime around the end of the nineteenth century, a growing body of musicians in New Orleans were playing a type of music that, with benefit of hindsight, can only be described as jazz.

A number of uptown cornetists built on the foundations that Bolden and others had created, including Bunk Johnson, Joe "King" Oliver, Mutt Carey, and later, Louis Armstrong, the greatest of the New Orleans trumpeters. But jazz quickly leaped over the racial barriers that divided New Orleans in the early 1900s. Musicians who were early practitioners of this new idiom also included Creoles Sidney Bechet, Jelly Roll Morton, Kid Ory, and Freddie Keppard, as well as white players Papa Jack Laine, Emmett Hardy, Sharkey Bonano, and Nick LaRocca. By the 1920s, when the first recordings of a wide range of New Orleans jazz ensembles were made, the ethnic mix of the local bands was almost as diverse as the city's population. These recordings featured, in addition to the major black and Creole players, such

ensembles as Johnny Bayersdorffer's Jazzola Novelty Orchestra, a solid New Orleans jazz band composed of musicians of central and southern European ancestry; Russ Papalia's orchestra, another jazz unit, this one primarily comprising Italian Americans; and the New Orleans Owls, which included in its ranks, among others, clarinetist Pinky Vidacovich, pianist Sigfre Christensen, trombonist Frank Netto, banjoist Rene Gelpi, and tuba player Dan LeBlanc—a lineup whose lineage spanned much of Europe. Certainly jazz remained primarily an African American contribution to the city's—and, eventually, the nation's—culture; but like all such contributions, once given, it no longer remained the exclusive property of the giver. Instead, destined to become part of the broader cultural gene pool, it was taken up with enthusiasm by musicians of all colors, all nationalities.

Many of the earliest generation of players never recorded; others—such as Keppard—recorded when past their prime, thus limiting our ability to make a full and accurate assessment of their talent and influence. Still others, such as Jelly Roll Morton and Bunk Johnson, made outstanding recordings, but did so, for the most part, some years after the New Orleans style of performance was perfected, thus raising questions about how accurately these recordings represent turn-of-the-century practices. Our ability to decipher this history is further complicated by the personal mythmaking of important firsthand informants such as Johnson, Morton, and LaRocca—all players whose autobiographical narratives were tainted by a desire to enshrine themselves as major protagonists in the creation of this new music.

As previously mentioned, some twenty years transpired between Bolden's glory days and the release of the first jazz recordings. Nor do these first commercial discs simplify the historian's task. If anything, the opposite is true: the history of recorded jazz was initiated with an event that remains to this day clouded in controversy. And, as with so many of the loaded issues in the story of the music, the question of race lies at the core of the dispute. In an ironic and incongruous twist of fate, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band (ODJB), an ensemble consisting of white musicians, was the first to make commercial recordings of this distinctly African American music. Raised in New Orleans, these five instrumentalists—leader and cornetist Nick LaRocca, clarinetist Larry Shields, trombonist Eddie Edwards, drummer Tony Sbarbaro, and pianist Henry Ragas—joined forces and performed in Chicago in 1916, then opened in New York in January 1917. During an engagement at Reisenweber's Restaurant, the group attracted large audiences with its novel and spirited music, and spurred the interest of East Coast recording companies. Columbia was the first to record the band, but hesitated to release the sides because of the unconventional and ostensibly vulgar nature of the music. Soon after, the Victor label overcame such scruples, and a second session produced a major commercial success in "Livery Stable Blues."

Partisan polemics have made it all the more difficult to assess this band's importance and merits. LaRocca and his apologists have offered a stridently revisionist history that places the ODJB as key contributors to the creation of jazz.¹⁶ In contrast, critics of the band have attacked its playing as stiff and unconvincing, some going so far as to claim that it did not play jazz at all, just a raucous variant of ragtime. Others have looked for earlier examples of recorded jazz in their attempt to dislodge the ODJB from their place in the jazz pantheon, often tendentiously striving to classify the 1913–14 sides by James Europe's Society Orchestra as the true maiden

voyage of the new musical style, or else hypothesizing about lost recordings by Bolden and others.

Any fair assessment of this controversial band needs to tread cautiously through the exaggerations made on both sides. On the one hand, no evidence exists to support the claim that the ODJB initiated the jazz tradition—indeed, it is even doubtful that the band was the first white group of New Orleans musicians to play jazz (Papa Jack Laine, a turn-of-the-century bandleader, has stronger claims on that distinction). Yet smug dismissals of the ensemble are equally off the mark. LaRocca's cornet playing stands out as especially supple and often inspired, while Larry Shields's clarinet work, although seldom remembered nowadays, also exerted an influence on other musicians at the time. Sixty years later, Benny Goodman recalled that Shields had been a strong early influence (along with Jimmie Noone and Leon Roppolo) on his music, adding that he could still play Shields's chorus on "St. Louis Blues" note for note. True, the group indulged in novelty effects of questionable taste, but so would a host of later jazz musicians—from Jelly Roll Morton to the Art Ensemble of Chicago—without subverting the underlying virtues of their efforts.

Although not the best of the early jazz bands, the ODJB was certainly one of the most wide ranging. Its recordings encompassed jazz, blues, rag forms, and pop songs, as well as arrangements with an additional horn that anticipated the textured voicings of swing music. In their travels, the band members were among the first global ambassadors for hot music; they moved from New York to England, where they gave a private command performance for the royal family, and also journeyed to France, where they helped celebrate the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. The group disbanded in 1925 but rejoined forces briefly in 1936 to record again for the Victor label and go on tour, but this reunion proved short lived. LaRocca would survive another quarter of a century, and though he no longer performed on the horn, he worked tirelessly as an advocate arguing for the ensemble's historical importance. Inevitably, this zeal in promoting the ODJB as pioneers of the music—no less than the "Creators of Jazz," as their public billings proclaimed—created a fierce backlash within the jazz world, as would their success in securing a recording contract at a time when so many African American artists were ignored. Yet few bands of that period did more to expose the wider public, at home and abroad, to the virtues of this new music from New Orleans.

THE WORLD'S GREATEST HOT TUNE WRITER

Jelly Roll Morton, the greatest of the New Orleans jazz composers, also generated controversy by his claims to have invented the music. Indeed, Morton was known to exaggerate about many things, so much so that he has acquired the persona of a blustering loudmouth in most historical accounts. However, a careful study of Morton's firsthand recollections, preserved by Alan Lomax in a series of taped interviews and performances for the Library of Congress, reveals that this often maligned figure could be, when the occasion warranted, one of the most thoughtful and accurate sources of information on early jazz.

More often than not, later historical research has vindicated Morton's assertions as well as

validated his recreations of earlier musical styles. Moreover, few jazz figures of any era have matched him in providing insightful commentary into the aesthetic dimensions of the music. Although Morton did not invent jazz, he was perhaps the first to think about it in abstract terms, and articulate—in both his remarks and his demonstrations—a coherent theoretical approach to its creation. On a wide range of topics—dynamics, vibrato, melodic construction, the use of breaks, the essence of Latin music—Morton’s comments continue to provoke thought and demand our attention.

Yet Morton’s assertions, for all their musical insight, stand out as paragons of doublespeak and evasion on autobiographical matters. Like his fictional contemporary from the Jazz Age, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, Morton had a flair for rewriting his life story to match the dimensions of his ego. He sometimes gave his birthdate as 1885—like many early New Orleans players, adding to his age to strengthen his case for being present at the birth of jazz—and stated that his original name was Ferdinand LaMenthe. In fact, Jelly Roll was born in or around New Orleans in 1890, as Ferdinand Joseph LaMothe, and was raised in a strict Creole environment that strenuously resisted assimilation into New Orleans’s black population.

Morton’s family all but disowned him when he became involved in the world of jazz, with its low-life connotations and attendant vices. Not that Morton himself was open minded in embracing African American culture. On the contrary, Morton’s tendency to rewrite the past was never more apparent than when he dealt with racial issues. In a typically bizarre aside, Morton explained to Lomax that he abandoned the name LaMenthe for racial reasons—because of ethnic hostility directed at the French! As to his own African roots, Morton was in a lifelong state of denial, pointing instead to his European ancestry (“*All my folks came directly from the shores of France,*” he told Lomax¹⁷) and upper-class Creole background, and putting faith in his relatively light complexion and his mastery of white diction and mannerisms. Even by the standards of black Creole society of the turn of the century—many of whose members shared his anxieties about assimilation into black culture—Morton’s protestations were extreme. Despite his insatiable ego, Morton would have been nonplussed to see himself lauded by posterity as a major African American musician.

Yet in his actions, if not his words, Morton strived to relinquish all the highbrow trappings of his Creole youth. More than any other major New Orleans jazz artist, Morton’s apprenticeship in the music business took place largely in the bordellos of Storyville (although Morton worked mainly in the white bordellos where few other jazz players could follow). Rather than regretting the low-life associations of the District, Morton luxuriated in the company of pimps, prostitutes, murderers, gamblers, pool sharks, and dealers and hustlers of various sorts, and at times could rely on a few of these trades himself. At some point in the early 1900s—Morton claimed 1902, although this seems too early, given his birthdate—he began working as a musician in Storyville. His great-grandmother expelled him from home when she learned of his activities in the District, and before long Morton started on the peripatetic freelancing that would occupy most of his life. His early travels brought him to Memphis, New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Detroit, Tulsa, Houston, and other locales. By 1917, Morton had traveled farther west, visiting California, Canada, Alaska, and Mexico.

Wherever Morton journeyed, he was noticed. How could it have been otherwise? He was a

big spender, wore a diamond in his tooth and more on his garters, was known to boast that he kept a trunk full of money back in his hotel room (only the top tray carried the cash, but visitors catching a glimpse walked away believers), and showed off an extensive and expensive wardrobe, often by changing outfits several times a day. His skills as a pianist and composer were no doubt refined during these years, but Morton's income at this time almost certainly relied more on his activities as a procurer and pool shark. However, when he returned to Chicago around 1923, Morton was well prepared to draw on his considerable talents for self-promotion in building a musical career. Certainly the time was ripe. The Jazz Age had begun in earnest, and Morton looked to capitalize on the public's insatiable demand for this new style of music.

Morton's Chicago years, which lasted until 1926, constitute the most prolific musical period of his career. He made over one hundred recordings or piano rolls of his compositions, published a steady stream of pieces, and formed his most famous ensemble, the Red Hot Peppers. This band, which recorded in both Chicago and New York during the remaining years of the decade, achieved a level of collective artistry that few New Orleans groups ever matched, and none surpassed. Nor would Morton's preeminence as a jazz composer—"the world's greatest hot tune writer" was how his business card modestly described it—be seriously challenged until Duke Ellington pushed the limits of creativity even further in the following decade. But, above all, in its mastery of ensemble interaction—so essential to the New Orleans aesthetic—this band remains the paragon to this day.

Morton (again like Ellington) was able to get the most out of his musicians, so much so that his groups could rise above the limitations of individual players. Here Morton's high opinion of his own talents was clearly a decisive factor: by sheer force of will, he prodded his sidemen into sharing his exalted vision of New Orleans jazz. Sometimes Morton used even more dramatic means to keep his musicians on track. A telling anecdote from the 1920s describes a recording session at which trombonist Zue Robertson refused to play the melody of one of Morton's pieces the way the composer wanted. Morton took a large pistol from his pocket and placed it on top of the piano. On the next take, Robertson played the melody note for note.¹⁸

Morton's 1926 recording of his "Sidewalk Blues" testifies to the results achieved by this single-mindedness. The piece begins with a roll call, a ten-bar introduction in which each major instrument is summoned to order: piano, trombone, cornet, and clarinet. This leads directly into a twelve-bar cornet melody statement over blues harmonies supported by a stop-time vamp. Stop-time techniques such as this—here the band propels the soloist with sharp accents on beats two and four—were a trademark of Morton's music, invariably used for a brief spell to add variety to the accompaniment. A second twelve-bar melody follows, this time employing the interlocking trombone-cornet-clarinet counterpoint style, which is the calling card of classic New Orleans jazz. The piece then returns to the opening twelve-bar melody, but with the clarinet taking the lead this time. A four-bar interlude segues into a new thirty-two-bar melody played by cornet, trombone, and clarinet (interrupted briefly at bar sixteen by a car horn, a typical Morton novelty twist) that abandons the blues form and sensibility in favor of a plaintive parlor song style. This thirty-two-bar melody is repeated, but

now played in an arrangement for three clarinets. In the context of the New Orleans style, this was a startling device. Morton brought two extra clarinetists to the session, letting them sit idly by most of the day, merely requiring their presence at certain key junctures of the performances such as this interlude. This change of instrumentation in mid-song, so rare in other jazz recordings of the period, is representative of Morton's penchant to pull out some surprising sound at unexpected places in his music. This understated clarinet section changes direction dramatically in the final eight bars, with the return of the energetic New Orleans-style counterpoint. A five-bar tag closes this whirlwind three-and-a-half-minute performance. In a compact form, Morton has covered a world of sounds.

When lecturing on Morton's music, I have always been struck by how long it takes to describe in words what is happening in any one of his pieces. For a three-minute recording, it requires ten times as much time to provide even a cursory explanation of the various shifts in instrumentation, harmonic structure, and rhythmic support that characterize these performances. This structural complexity is not arbitrary, but essential to Morton's maximalist aesthetic. In his September 1926 version of "Black Bottom Stomp," another telling example of this approach, the band disappears midway through the piece, leaving the leader to keep the music flowing with a blistering, two-fisted stomp, which Jelly ardently attacks as though it were the star soloist's cadenza in a classical concerto. But, in a flash, the Red Hot Peppers are back, this time supporting cornetist George Mitchell in a heated stop-time chorus. This leads directly into a Johnny St. Cyr conversation, in syncopated time, with the ensemble. Soon the New Orleans counterpoint of trombone, clarinet, and cornet returns with redoubled energy, the trademark sound—as inevitable as the "happily ever after" at the close of a fairy tale—that indicates a Red Hot Peppers performance has reached its intended conclusion. Here again, three minutes of vinyl are forced to accommodate symphonic aspirations.

Morton was not without his limitations. His harmonies, as in "Finger Buster" or "Froggie Moore," occasionally present clumsy combinations of chromatic and diatonic tendencies, suggesting that the composer was reaching beyond his grasp of theory; his piano playing, for all his assertions to the contrary, was typically less than virtuosic; his claim to have invented jazz hardly merits serious debate. Nonetheless, in terms of overall artistry, Morton's achievements were considerable. These 1926 Victor recordings find Morton at the peak of his creative powers. In performances such as "Sidewalk Blues," "Black Bottom Stomp," "Dead Man Blues," "Grandpa's Spells," "Smokehouse Blues," and "The Chant," he tilled a fertile middle ground between the rigid compositional structures of ragtime and the spontaneous vivacity of jazz improvisation. This style would soon become anachronistic—in fact, it may already have been so by the time these recordings were made—as jazz came to forget its origins in the multithematic ragtime form. In this context, Morton's work represents both the highest pitch and final flowering of this approach.

Although his artistic vision dominates these sides, Morton benefited from the presence of a seasoned group of New Orleans players. Trombonist Kid Ory, a Creole born in LaPlace, Louisiana, at some point between 1886 and 1890, had been a successful bandleader in New Orleans before taking his music on the road. In Los Angeles, in 1922, his band released the first New Orleans jazz recording featuring black musicians, and in 1925 he moved to Chicago

where he participated in several of the most important studio dates in jazz history, working not only with Morton on the seminal Red Hot Peppers dates, but also recording with Louis Armstrong and King Oliver, among others. His frequent colleague Johnny St. Cyr, born in New Orleans in 1890, was one of the first jazz string players. St. Cyr was trained as a plasterer, but a musical career beckoned after he taught himself to play a homemade guitar. As a performer with Fate Marable's riverboat band, St. Cyr traveled extensively, finally settling in Chicago in the early 1920s, where he also recorded with Armstrong and Oliver. In these years, St. Cyr often played a hybrid instrument, a six-string guitar-banjo, which combined the guitar's neck and fingerboard with the banjo's body. Other members of the 1926 Red Hot Peppers included cornetist George Mitchell, clarinetist Omer Simeon, bassist John Lindsay, and drummer Andrew Hilaire.

Jelly Roll continued to record frequently during the remainder of the 1920s. The members of his band changed regularly, but, regardless of the sidemen or the evolving musical tastes of the American public, Morton's ensembles were at their best when working within the aesthetic constraints of the classic New Orleans idiom. Noteworthy Morton recordings from the 1920s include an invigorating 1927 trio session with clarinetist Johnny Dodds and drummer Baby Dodds, a tantalizing 1924 duet date with King Oliver, and Morton's 1923 work with the New Orleans Rhythm Kings—a historic event that not only produced fine music but served as a milestone in countering the segregation of black and white jazz players in the recording studio—as well as ongoing performances as a solo pianist. As with so many of the artists from this period, Morton's recording career came to a sudden halt with the Great Depression, but even under happier economic circumstances his music would almost certainly have fallen out of favor. Jazz had become a soloist's music, and the structured, collectivist aesthetic of Morton's finest work was not in keeping with the prevailing tone of the Swing Era.

Morton had his own, somewhat paranoid interpretations of his fall from the limelight after his Victor contract ran out in 1930. At times, he blamed a conspiracy of music industry insiders (led by ASCAP and MCA) for his problems; on other occasions, he asserted that a voodoo curse was the main culprit. In any event, Morton made only one recording during an eight-year stretch during the 1930s. If he maintained any degree of notoriety, it was as the composer of the "King Porter Stomp," a piece popularized through the efforts of big band leaders Fletcher Henderson and Benny Goodman, who adapted it to meet the new tastes of the time. In the mid-1930s, Morton settled in Washington, DC, where he ran an unsuccessful nightclub on U Street—the club changed names every few months in a fruitless attempt to attract a clientele—and continued to hatch schemes for reviving his music career.

In 1938, he succeeded in doing just that, spurring his comeback through an audacious move marked by all the trademark Morton excesses. "It is evidently known, beyond contradiction, that New Orleans is the cradle of jazz, and I myself happened to be the creator," opens a celebrated letter Morton sent to *Downbeat* magazine.¹⁹ The conclusion of this long-winded epistle put everything into perspective, or at least into a Jelly Roll perspective:

My contributions were many: First clown director, with witty sayings and flashily dressed, now called master of ceremonies; first glee club in orchestra; the first washboard was recorded by me; bass fiddle, drums—which was supposed to be

impossible to record. I produced the fly swatter (they now call them brushes). Of course many imitators arose after my being fired or quitting. ... Lord protect us from more Hitlers and Mussolinis.

The letter is signed, “Jelly Roll Morton, Originator of Jazz and Stomps, Victor Artist, World’s Greatest Hot Tune Writer.”

Similar letters were sent to other parties, and before long Morton had established his position as, if not the inventor of jazz, at least its most noteworthy cause célèbre. Further attention came on the heels of the Library of Congress recordings conducted by Alan Lomax. If the *Downbeat* letter presented Morton as blusterer, the Lomax interviews offered a more compelling account of his achievements. In his playing, singing, theorizing, and reminiscing on these sessions, Morton left behind one of the most spellbinding documents in the history of jazz music. An era comes to life, revived under the sure touch of his fingers as they glance over the keyboard and sketched with oratorical aplomb by Morton’s hypnotic voice. Whether as huckster or historian, Morton was a persuasive talker, and record companies were again listening, after the long dry spell of the early and mid-1930s. He made the best of these new opportunities. In particular, a series of intimate recordings, released under the name “New Orleans Memories,” showcased not only his strengths as a composer (most notably on “The Crave”) and pianist, but also his less-known skills as a vocalist. His singing here, as well as on the Lomax sessions, is deeply moving and suggests that, under different circumstances, Morton might have made his name in the music world without touching the keyboard.

Morton enjoyed his new status as an elder statesman of jazz for only a few short years. Late in 1940, following the death of his godmother, Morton drove across the country in inclement weather, with his Lincoln and Cadillac chained together. He was concerned that some diamonds that were in his godmother’s possession might be stolen (as events turned out, his fears were confirmed). He stayed on in California, working sporadically as a musician, but soon fell ill. On July 10, 1941, he died in the Los Angeles County General Hospital.

The jazz world still has not come to grips with this complicated figure from its earliest days. Morton has served as the inspiration for a novel and has been depicted in a Hollywood movie, excoriated in a Broadway musical, commemorated in modern dance choreography, and psychoanalyzed in liner notes, essays, and articles. Most of these efforts, however, latch on to one side of this variegated personality, usually emphasizing the braggadocio, the gems and flashy wardrobe, or the underworld trappings, painting Morton as some sort of Crescent City Mack the Knife. Too often the music, which is the *real* diamond in this psychological abyss, gets lost in the process. Even the Broadway musical based on Morton’s life and times, *Jelly’s Last Jam*, conveniently relied on other composers for much of its score—almost as if the Morton persona were sufficient, while the artistry could be safely ignored.

But, in the final analysis, Morton’s position in jazz history depends on none of these superfluities, neither the boasting nor the bordello sidelines. Morton’s most important legacy lies in his body of compositions, recordings, piano rolls, reminiscences, and lucid commentary on the jazz idiom. It is through these that he earned his place as the most consummate craftsman of the traditional New Orleans style.

THE NEW ORLEANS DIASPORA

One of the supreme ironies of the history of New Orleans jazz is that so much of it took place in Chicago. By the early 1920s, the center of the jazz world had clearly shifted northward. New Orleans musicians continued to dominate the idiom, but they were now operating far afield from their native soil. Well before the middle of the decade, a large cadre of major New Orleans jazz musicians were making their reputations in other locales—Jelly Roll Morton left New Orleans around 1908; Freddie Keppard departed in 1914 (if not earlier); Sidney Bechet in 1916, Jimmie Noone in 1917, King Oliver in 1918, Kid Ory in 1919, Johnny Dodds around that same time, Baby Dodds in 1921, and Louis Armstrong in 1922. These moves may have begun as brief stints on the road, but in the end proved all but permanent. The vast majority of the New Orleans diaspora never returned to their home state except for brief visits.

This exodus was anything but a purely musical phenomenon. Between the years 1916 and 1919, a half-million African Americans left the South for more tolerant communities in the North, with almost one million more following in their wake in the 1920s. This vast population shift, which has since come to be known as the Great Migration, encompassed the whole range of black society, from doctors and lawyers to musicians and ministers, from teachers and merchants to artisans and manual laborers. Musicians moved north for the same reasons that motivated other groups: the search for a better life, for greater opportunities to work, to support a family, to enjoy a modicum of personal freedom—options that were much harder for an African American to pursue in the segregated South. As a result, in a host of major cities—Chicago, New York, Cleveland, Detroit, Philadelphia—the black population more than tripled between 1910 and 1930.

Certainly there were outstanding musicians who stayed behind in New Orleans, and some even had a chance to record in their native city. Hear, for example, the distinguished sides made by Sam Morgan's band in New Orleans during 1927 with their uncanny anticipation of the later four-beats-to-the-bar Kansas City swing style. Yet, for the most part, ambitious players intent on advancing their careers in jazz during the 1920s had little choice but to look beyond their home turf. In retrospect, we can see that only those who departed made major reputations, both for themselves and for the musical riches of their hometown. In this regard, New Orleans was no different than Memphis, Clarksdale, and the other centers of distinctive local and regional performance styles in the South. Nashville has emerged as the only exception, the one city that could build national reputations for its homegrown talent, and serve as a destination rather than a starting point for celebrated music careers. New Orleans, for all its fame as a city built on nightlife and entertainment, never achieved that level of self-sufficiency. Bechet, Oliver, Morton, Armstrong, and others were able to put New Orleans jazz on the musical map of American culture, but only by leaving the Big Easy behind.

White New Orleans jazz musicians also made the move to Chicago during this period, but in their case the motivation was not to escape racial intolerance, but to tap the larger economic base of the northern city. As in the case of the ODJB, these white ensembles also found it easier to interest record companies in their music, and for a while enjoyed a virtual monopoly on the jazz record market—at least until the tremendous popularity of the first race records

revealed the commercial potential of African American performers. Within a few months of the initial recordings of black Chicago musicians, racially mixed bands also entered the studio—although the issue of segregation in jazz was anything but resolved by this move, and would continue to be a focal point for conflicts, personal as well as societal, for many years.

The collaboration between Jelly Roll Morton and the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, a Chicago-based unit of white Louisiana instrumentalists, was the occasion for this signal event, the first interracial session in the history of Chicago jazz. The Rhythm Kings had already undertaken recording sessions in August 1922 and March 1923 when, in July 1923, they engaged Morton to serve as pianist and composer for a follow-up date. “We did our best to copy the colored music we’d heard at home,” group organizer Paul Mares later recalled. “We did the best we could, but naturally we couldn’t play real colored style.”²⁰ In Mares’s case, his pungent middle-range cornet solos reflect the influence of his contemporary Joe “King” Oliver, whose band made its first sides in Chicago a few months after the initial Rhythm Kings recordings. Although less rhythmically exciting than King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band, the New Orleans Rhythm Kings featured strong ensemble work, a sure sense of swing, especially at medium tempos, and the impressive clarinet stylings of Leon Roppolo. Roppolo’s work, as demonstrated in his solos on “Wolverine Blues” and “Panama,” avoids the arpeggio-based approach that imparted a mechanical quality to so many other first-generation New Orleans clarinetists. Instead, he offers a more linear, melodic style that would come to exert a marked influence on numerous later Chicago school reed players.

Yet those seeking the hottest jazz in Chicago, circa 1923, inevitably found their way to Lincoln Gardens, the largest dance hall on the South Side, where King Oliver led a band built primarily on the skills of transplanted New Orleans players. Was Oliver the greatest of the early New Orleans cornetists? On this matter, historical accounts are inconclusive. If anything, the deeper one probes, the more one encounters contradictions and unanswered questions. “Most everybody has heard of Joe Oliver and Louis Armstrong,” Preston Jackson has asserted, “but few ever heard of Mutt Carey in his prime. Mutt Carey, in his day, was equal to Joe Oliver.” Carey himself had a different story to tell, remarking that “Freddie Keppard had New Orleans all sewed up. He was the King—yes, he wore the crown.” Edmund Hall, another of the first-generation players, cast his vote for Buddy Petit: “Buddy is a man they’ve never written much about. He kind of what you call set a pace around New Orleans. ... If Buddy had left New Orleans to go to Chicago when a lot of the other men left, I’m positive he would have had a reputation equal to what the others got.”²¹ Or what about Emmett Hardy, the white New Orleans cornetist who never recorded and died of tuberculosis in 1925 at the age of twenty-two? “Emmett was the greatest musician I ever heard,” later wrote Bix Beiderbecke, who had encountered the New Orleans player when Hardy traveled to Iowa to perform in the early 1920s.²²

Whatever the virtues of these and other neglected figures, Oliver stands out as the New Orleans cornetist who left behind the most impressive body of recordings—recordings that, in many ways, help us understand what the other early figures of New Orleans jazz might have sounded like in their prime. Oliver’s band may have lacked the ingenious arrangements of the Red Hot Peppers, or the understated elegance of the New Orleans Rhythm Kings. But its hot,

dirty, swinging sound comes closest to the essence of the jazz experience. Its appeal draws from its rawness, its earthiness, its insistence. If Jelly Roll's music has aged like a fine wine, Oliver's still cuts to the quick like a jug of bootleg moonshine.

Oliver, for his part, was neither the most melodically inventive nor the most technically skilled of the New Orleans cornetists. Yet he remains, in many ways, the measuring rod by which we can gauge the work of other New Orleans brass players. His throaty, vocal sound inspired many imitators and represented, both conceptually and historically, a meeting ground of earlier and later jazz styles. Hence, Oliver's playing carried within it a clear link to a long list of underrecorded (or unrecorded) early New Orleans cornetists such as Manuel Perez, Freddie Keppard, Buddy Petit, and Buddy Bolden; it also looked ahead to the work of later players influenced by Oliver, not only the most famous musical son of New Orleans, Louis Armstrong, but also a host of brass players schooled in the Chicago tradition as well as the cadre of growling and moaning soloists in various Ellington bands, all of whom are clear descendants of King Joe. In his summation of the past, Oliver could integrate into his playing both the spontaneous (Bolden) and studied (Perez) traditions of early New Orleans brass playing, and in his anticipation of the future we can draw connecting lines all the way to Wynton Marsalis and beyond. By almost any measure—historical, musical, biographical—Joe “King” Oliver stands out as a seminal figure in the history of the music.

We know little about this performer's earliest years, and contradictory sources make even his date of birth a matter for speculation. It may have been as early as 1881 (according to his World War I draft registration card) or as late as 1885 (based on U.S. Census data). In any event, Oliver came of age in New Orleans during a period in which marching bands played a prominent role in the city's social activities. By his midteens, Oliver was playing with these ensembles, and an early apprenticeship with Perez in the Onward Brass Band was perhaps a crucial step in his musical development. Oliver's work retained the influence of these ensembles to the end, as shown by the marchlike elements in performances such as “High Society” and “Snake Rag.” In 1918, Oliver left New Orleans, and over the next several years he performed not only in Chicago but as far away as California. In 1921, Oliver returned to Chicago, where his Creole Jazz Band drew an enthusiastic following, among both musicians and the general public, during an extended stint at Lincoln Gardens, a dance hall on East Thirty-first Street.

For the Lincoln Gardens engagement, Oliver used the same front-line players who had traveled with him to California: Honore Dutrey on trombone and Johnny Dodds on clarinet. But in a surprising move, Oliver now decided to add a second cornet player to the band. This duplication of roles was an oddity at the time— indeed, as it would be in a combo today—but it was an especially peculiar change for Oliver. In California, by contrast, he had relied on violin and saxophone in his attempts to give a richer texture to the group's sound. One might think Oliver would follow a similar path in Chicago or, at a minimum, hesitate to hire another cornetist, if only because of the risk that his own role as star cornetist in the band would be lessened.

In fact, something of this sort soon happened. As fate would have it, Oliver's choice for this new spot in the band, Louis Armstrong, an ascending star then still largely unknown

outside New Orleans, would come to outshine not only Oliver, but the whole first generation of jazz musicians. Some have stressed Oliver's appreciation of Armstrong's talent as the motivating factor in this move; others have pointed to Oliver's desire to enhance the musicianship of the Creole Jazz Band. Perhaps Oliver's sense of his own declining skills as a cornetist—gum problems would eventually force him to abandon the horn—spurred him in this direction. Whatever the reason, Oliver acted quickly: within a few weeks of securing the Lincoln Gardens gig, in July 1922, he sent a telegram to Louis Armstrong requesting his immediate presence in Chicago.

KING OLIVER AND LOUIS ARMSTRONG

Even within his own lifetime, the mythic elements in Armstrong's biography began crowding out the facts. This conflation of truth and error begins literally with the details of his birth—usually given, by Armstrong and many later commentators, as the Fourth of July in the year 1900. One could hardly imagine a more fitting birthday for a legendary American figure, combining as it does both a symbolic commemoration of national independence and the dawn of the American century. Reality is less elegant. As Tad Jones and Gary Giddins have convincingly proven, the conventional account is exactly thirteen months out of synch. The baptismal certificate that Jones uncovered at Sacred Heart of Jesus Church in New Orleans states (in Latin) that Armstrong was born on August 4, 1901, the illegitimate son of William Armstrong and Mary Albert, and was baptized three weeks later.²³

Armstrong's own accounts of his parents' role in his upbringing are not consistent, and statements by others are often equally incoherent. For example, Armstrong's parents, according to some versions, were born into slavery; yet records clearly show that the birthdates for both came after the Emancipation Proclamation. All accounts agree, however, in indicating that both William and Mayann, as Armstrong invariably referred to his mother, were often absentee parents. William was soon living with another woman, and eventually devoted his energies to raising a family with his new lover. Mayann, who appears to have been only fifteen years old at the time of Armstrong's birth, left Louis with his grandmother Josephine and moved to Perdido Street, at a time when that area was the center of prostitution in black Storyville—the implication being that Mayann earned her livelihood by that means.²⁴ Armstrong did not return to his mother's care until he was five; from that time on, he later recalled, a number of different "stepfathers" shared their living quarters. At the age of seven, Armstrong began working, selling coal to prostitutes in the red-light district.

The next turning point in Armstrong's biography has also taken on the overtones of popular legend in narrative accounts of his life and times. Shortly after midnight on January 1, 1913, Armstrong was arrested for disturbing the peace. His crime: shooting six blanks into the air from his stepfather's .38 revolver. Armstrong was placed in the Colored Waif's Home for Boys, where he remained for eighteen months. This punishment may have been a blessing in disguise: the youngster clearly flourished amidst the military discipline of the Waif's Home. Armstrong had already played cornet before this period—again contrary to the usual

accounts²⁵—as well as performed in a vocal quartet; nonetheless, the Waif’s Home presented a secure, structured environment, where music making in the military tradition was stressed, and where recognition for achievement was provided. In this setting, Armstrong steadily moved up the ranks, first playing tambourine, then alto horn, next bugle, and finally cornet.

At the time of his release, into his father’s custody in June 1914, Armstrong was reluctant to leave the Waif’s Home. Perhaps with good reason: he was soon employed in backbreaking labor, driving a coal wagon, an occupation he pursued until the close of World War I. But as older, more experienced brass players left New Orleans, opportunities for Armstrong to earn money as a musician were on the rise. Over the next several years, his playing graced a number of celebrated bands, including Kid Ory’s group (where he replaced Oliver, after the latter’s departure to Chicago), clarinetist Sam Dutrey’s Silver Leaf Band, Fate Marable’s riverboat ensemble, and Papa Celestin’s Tuxedo Brass Band. By the time Oliver sent for the young cornetist, Armstrong may have been unknown to jazz fans in Chicago; however, musicians in New Orleans were already taking note of this up-and-coming player.

The recordings made by Armstrong’s new ensemble, King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band, present a number of challenges to the modern-day listener. The most obvious one stems from the poor sound quality of circa 1923 acoustic recordings. This technology, while acceptable in capturing the sound of a single instrument or a human voice, was decidedly weak in presenting the delicate balance between different instruments in a jazz band. And few ensembles were less well suited to this technology than the Creole Jazz Band, with its passionate interplay between contrasting horn lines. But sonic authenticity is perhaps less of a stumbling block to modern ears than is the very unmodern aesthetic vision underpinning early New Orleans jazz music. Unlike later jazz, with its democratic reliance on individual solos, the New Orleans pioneers created a music in which the group was primary, in which each instrument was expected to play a specific role, not assert its independence. The most characteristic moment in these recordings of early jazz takes place when the lead instruments, usually cornet, clarinet, and trombone, engage in spontaneous counterpoint. The trombone takes over the low register, providing a deep, deliberate bass melody; the clarinet plays more complex figures, often consisting of arpeggios or other rapidly fingered patterns, in a higher register; the cornet moves mostly within the middle register, playing less elaborate melodies than the clarinet, but pushing the ensemble forward with propulsive, swinging lead lines. No early jazz band was better at this ensemble style of playing than Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band.

Oliver’s melodic vocabulary was primitive, almost simpleminded, by modern standards. His famous solo on “Dipper Mouth Blues” builds off a few notes, a concise melodic fragment played over and over with minor variations. Here, as elsewhere, the virtue of Oliver’s playing lies not in linear improvisation but in his seamless blending with the band and, especially, in the haunting vocal quality of his cornet work. King Oliver left behind no interviews with jazz historians, and we can only speculate about the specifics of his artistic vision; however, one comment that has come down to us is especially revealing. Oliver claimed to have spent ten years refining his cornet tone. This obsession with sound gets to the heart of the New Orleans revolution in music, and to the essence of Oliver’s contribution to it. Instead of aspiring to classical purity of tone, emulating an otherworldly perfection, the early jazz players strived to

make their instruments sound like human voices, with all the variations, imperfections, and colorations that such a model entailed.

This was an approach to music that defied conventional notation and refused to be reduced to a systematic methodology. Richard Hadlock, recalling a music lesson given to him by Sidney Bechet, conveys something of this fastidious New Orleans attention to tone production:

“I’m going to give you one note today,” he once told me. “See how many ways you can play that note—growl it, smear it, flat it, sharp it, do anything you want to it. That’s how you express your feelings in this music. It’s like talking.”²⁶

This admonition—“growl it, smear it, flat it, sharp it, do anything you want to it”—could very well be a description of the rugged beauty of Oliver’s playing. His music is not about scales or passing chords; it is a celebration of color and texture.

From this perspective, King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band provided an odd context for Armstrong to hone his skills as a jazz musician. Herein lies the oddity: Armstrong would soon emerge as the first great soloist in the history of jazz, yet he refined his talents in an ensemble that featured few solos. Oliver conceived of jazz as collective music making in which the instruments were interdependent, and no one horn was allowed to dominate. Armstrong, in particular, was especially constrained: as second cornetist, he was expected to add a supporting line or harmonic fill under Oliver’s lead line—and the recordings of the band show that, when so inclined, he was capable of doing this with great skill; nonetheless, Armstrong’s more powerful tone and greater technical facility made him a poor choice for such a subservient role.

At times, as on the OKeh recording of “Mabel’s Dream” or in his quasi-solo on “Froggie Moore,” the second cornetist clearly overpowers the bandleader—in New Orleans jazz, the equivalent of the chief steward’s mutiny. On the rare occasions when he was allowed to stand out from the rest of the group, on “Chimes Blues” and “Tears,” Armstrong presents poised and fluid lines that contrast markedly with the rest of the band. Even at this early stage, Armstrong was a player of consequence, demonstrating his ability to hear and adapt to the musical flow around him, as well as a rhythmic sensibility that was paradoxically both relaxed and propulsive. On the other hand, Armstrong would never match Oliver’s mastery of the mute, or be able to evoke the wide range of growls and moans the latter could elicit from his horn. His wife (and colleague in Oliver’s band) Lil Hardin would later recall how Armstrong spent days trying to imitate his boss’s famous solo on “Dipper Mouth Blues”—a solo that, despite its melodic simplicity, he could never quite recreate. “I think it kind of discouraged him,” she noted, “because Joe was his idol and he wanted to play like Joe.”²⁷

The sensation of listening to these performances is both exhilarating and disturbing. Armstrong’s musicianship was far beyond that of his colleagues—hence the exhilaration. It contrasts in the sharpest degree with Hardin’s penchant for muddling the chord changes, trombonist Honore Dutrey’s often uninspired melody lines, and Dodds’s hesitant approach to his parts (compare the King Oliver sides to Dodds’s carefree and superior work with Jelly Roll Morton or his fine performances with the New Orleans Wanderers). Armstrong’s mastery

can only stand out impressively in such a setting. Yet, at the same time, his individualistic approach also comes across as disturbingly subversive. Is it not a deliberate undermining of a collective aesthetic? In the context of his later recordings, with their emphasis on solo playing, his charismatic and heroic stance is an asset, but in the setting of the Creole Jazz Band it disrupts the seamless blending of instrumental voices that is the crowning glory of the early New Orleans style. Here we encounter one of the grand ironies of jazz history—and a telling reminder of the rapid pace of change in the music’s development—namely that, because of Armstrong’s presence, the King Oliver recordings from the early 1920s stand out both as a paramount example of the New Orleans collective style and also anticipate its obsolescence, already hinting at the more individualistic ethos that would replace it.

The passing of the baton from Oliver to Armstrong also marks another decisive turning point in the history of American music. Oliver represents a more Africanized sensibility, in which musicians work with sound textures rather than pure and discrete notes. The idea of codified musical structures built on notes and scales is a distinctly Western idea, our legacy from Pythagoras and the Greeks, and quite alien to the traditions of Africa. For Western music to assimilate the jazz sensibility, it required an innovator like Louis Armstrong, a visionary who was more than just a sound painter, but a true master of licks and phrases and all the complicated combinations of notes that appeal to the Western musical mind. We see the same transition in the blues, when we move from the aural ambiguities of Son House to the precise constructions of Robert Johnson. This adaptation is never pure or complete. What an Armstrong or Johnson plays is never just notes. Even so, an important divide has been crossed, and the African heritage has now been schematized in a new manner, transformed through the impact of these masters in a way that allows the alien style to seep into the inner life of American (and eventually global) music.

By mid-1924, the core of Oliver’s band had left, primarily because of the sidemen’s suspicion that their leader was withholding money due them. By the time Oliver recorded again, with a new group named the Dixie Syncopators, the jazz world had changed as a result of the growing popularity of the big band format. Oliver attempted to adjust his music to this emerging sensibility with the addition of two or three saxophones and the adoption of more tightly arranged pieces. This later phase in Oliver’s career is often dismissed by critics for its abandonment of the more spontaneous New Orleans interplay between the horns. Nonetheless, Oliver might have successfully weathered the transition to the big band era with this new approach had not his playing begun to deteriorate in the face of continual embouchure problems. The extent of these and their chronology are a matter of debate, but the broad general trend is unmistakable: as time went on, Oliver played less frequently, and the quality of his work was inconsistent at best. By the mid-1930s, he could no longer play at all.

Various letters written by the cornetist toward the end of his life, and later published, have been rightly called by jazz critic Martin Williams “among the most moving documents which have been preserved from the past in jazz.”²⁸ These, combined with anecdotal accounts of Oliver’s later days, serve as a disturbing reminder of not only Oliver’s plight, but also the degraded conditions of life for southern blacks during the Great Depression. Having outlived his fame, Oliver worked long hours in menial jobs—pool-room janitor, roadside vendor, and

the like—struggling, without success, to raise enough money to purchase a railroad ticket to join his sister in New York. At his death, in April 1938, he was living in near poverty in Savannah, Georgia. His return to New York was posthumous: Oliver's sister used her rent money to bring the cornetist's body to New York, where he was buried at Woodlawn Cemetery in an unmarked grave, since no funds were left to provide a headstone. (A memorial was later put in place, courtesy of the New Jersey Jazz Society.) Louis Armstrong, Clarence Williams, and a few other musicians were in attendance.

By the late 1930s, Oliver's music may have been all but forgotten among the general public, but through his protégé, Louis Armstrong, Oliver would leave a lasting mark on both the jazz idiom and the broader streams of popular culture. By this time, Armstrong's influence was pervasive in the jazz world. But even more remarkable was Armstrong's ability, then becoming increasingly evident, to extend his fame beyond the confines of jazz, to develop an international renown and status, with his visage and demeanor instantly recognizable even to those who paid little attention to jazz music. In this regard, Armstrong ranks with only a handful of figures from the first half of the twentieth century—Charlie Chaplin, Pablo Picasso, Babe Ruth, Al Jolson, Shirley Temple, Winston Churchill—whose fame transcends the realities of time and place and blends into a mythic larger-than-life presence, one in which the border between image and actuality blurs.

Armstrong's status as cultural icon, however, is perhaps a mixed blessing for the student of jazz history. With such celebrities, the image threatens to overshadow the essence, or even to become the essence. To understand Armstrong's role as jazz innovator, and not just as a mass market entertainer, requires us to look past the superficial trappings of his fame, and instead probe deeply into the body of work he left behind. It is here that we will uncover the vital core of Armstrong's achievement as a jazz musician.

