

The Origins of Jazz

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It is a commonly believed myth that jazz first appeared in New Orleans between 1900 and 1918 and spread to other parts of the United States from there. There is no doubt that New Orleans was an important center of early jazz, but there is, however, very good evidence to suggest that this music could also be found in many other parts of the country at the time. Indeed, black performers were playing music very similar to the early jazz of New Orleans all over the United States well before the turn of the century. Jazz was in reality a widespread development that took place in many parts of the country over an extended period of time. New Orleans was, however, the city of origin of the white musicians who were the first jazz players to achieve widespread mainstream commercial success, and much of the credit that was mistakenly given to New Orleans for inventing jazz is due to this.

A scarcity of reliable historical sources makes this period in jazz particularly difficult to study. The media and scholarly establishment of the time gave relatively little attention to black music. They tended to concentrate on white jazz musicians rather than the blacks who were the ones that actually first developed the music. This continued even after jazz became very popular in the 1920's. Even when studies were done on black musicians, many of the researchers had racist biases or were generally ignorant of African music or the styles that were derived from it.

Many of the potential informants were either dead or far removed from the events by the time that serious research finally began to be done on the roots of jazz. Some of them were also prone to exaggeration or to giving themselves credit that they did not deserve. This was the case with Jelly Roll Morton, who falsely claimed to have invented jazz himself.

Another difficulty is that there are no recordings of the earliest jazz and very little of the music was written down. This was because most of the jazz musicians of the time tended to play mainly by ear and were musically illiterate. The result of this is that it is very difficult to objectively study early jazz. One is forced to rely pri-

marily on secondary sources, which are not always reliable.

These difficulties are particularly apparent when discussing early jazz in cities other than New Orleans, since most of the little field research that was done took place in New Orleans and there is far more information available about early jazz in this city than elsewhere. We also have only a limited knowledge of the early travels of jazz musicians between cities, making it difficult to discern the degree to which the musical styles of different cities influenced each other.¹

All of this must be kept in mind when considering any discussion involving the roots of jazz. There are very limited resources which can be used to support arguments of any kind, making that evidence which can be found all the more decisive. It is relatively difficult to find direct proof that early jazz could be found in places other than New Orleans, but it is also proportionally difficult to find direct proof that New Orleans was exclusively the birthplace of jazz.

Before beginning this discussion, it is important to clarify exactly what kinds of music will be considered to be under the umbrella of early jazz. This in itself can be a contentious issue. Jazz is generally seen as a mix of European musical ideas with African-American styles that evolved from the music brought to America by African slaves. Early jazz was in general a syncopated, horn-based music based on improvisation and having a 'hot' sound. The use of ostinato patterns, call and response, a 'rough' tone and the presence of 'blue' notes are all commonly cited characteristics of the music. Early jazz was generally used to accompany dancing.²

The ancestors of jazz which are most often mentioned include ragtime, blues, spirituals, funeral songs, ring shouts and work songs. The

¹ Lawrence Gushee, "New Orleans-Area Musicians on the West Coast," *Black Music Research Journal* Vol. 9 No. 1 (Spring 1989): 2.

² *Ibid.*, 5.

influence of European dance music and military bands are also considered important by many. As was said by the saxophonist Sidney Bechet, jazz “wasn’t spirituals or blues or ragtime, but everything all at once, each one putting something over on the other.”³

Blues and ragtime are generally seen as the styles which are the most directly related to jazz, to the extent that they are sometimes themselves considered to be varieties of jazz. For the purposes of this paper, the early instrumental horn-based blues will be considered to be a form of jazz and the primarily sung country blues will not. Part of the reason for making this distinction is that very few of the country blues players played styles of jazz that were not based on the blues, whereas many of the horn-based blues musicians were known to play a more diverse range of jazz.

Straight ragtime will not be considered to be jazz, although there is no doubt that a great deal of jazz does contain very obvious elements of ragtime. The primary difference between ragtime and jazz is that ragtime was written out note for note and early jazz was usually an improvised or arranged music.⁴ This is a fundamental difference. Jazz starts with the melody and its supporting harmony, and the creative process is what is done with this. The creative process in ragtime is found in the writing of the whole piece in all of its parts.⁵

Ragtime is also different from jazz in that it borrows more ideas from the European tradition than from the African American tradition, relative to most jazz. As time went on, the African influence on ragtime became stronger. The blue tonality became more apparent and the rhythms became more complex.⁶ Pianists such as Jelly Roll Morton and Tony Jackson added a walking bass to the left hand and between-the-beat accents to the right hand.⁷ Ragtime was also eventually adopted into a band context. These devel-

opments caused the distinctions between late ragtime and early jazz to become very blurred.⁸

One of the most frequently used arguments in favor of the development of jazz in New Orleans is based on the history of the Creoles there. The Creoles of the mid-eighteenth century were given social prestige and privilege that people of African descent did not receive elsewhere in the United States. This was taken from them by the Louisiana Legislative Code in 1894, which classified them legally with blacks.⁹

This legislation made Creoles susceptible to segregation laws and caused them to play increasingly with the black bands that were well-versed in African American folk music. Many of the Creoles were well educated in European music, which led to a direct mixing of European and African-derived styles that was not found elsewhere at the time. This has been used by many scholars as support for the claim that the conditions in New Orleans were particularly hospitable for the birth of a syncretic music like jazz.

It is true that the rest of the United States did not have the same kind of direct interaction between people trained in European and African American styles of music. It should, however, be realized that the direct influence of European music on early jazz is significantly less than is commonly thought, taking away much of the relevance of this argument.

There is no doubt that some aspects of jazz, such as its harmony and instrumentation, have more in common with European music than with traditional African music. There is, however, no reason to think that blacks could not have simply picked up these musical characteristics by ear and incorporated them into their own music during the centuries that they lived under white rule in America. For example, it is well known that American blacks of the nineteenth century often heard European military march music and were influenced by it. This implies that the European-style training of the Creole musicians of New Orleans was not necessary for the integration of European musical characteristics into jazz.

Even the indirect influence of European music on jazz is often overestimated. Alain Locke wrote that early jazz had “a distinctive racial intensity of mood and a peculiar style of techni-

³ Sidney Bechet, “Sidney Bechet’s Musical Philosophy,” in *Keeping Time*, ed. Robert Walser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 4.

⁴ Marshall W. Stearns, *The Story of Jazz*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956) 140-141.

⁵ Guy Waterman, “Ragtime,” in *Jazz*, ed. Nat Hentoff and Albert J. McCarthy (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974) 45.

⁶ Marshall W. Stearns, *The Story of Jazz*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956) 143.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁹ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 34.

cal performance, that can be imitated, it is true, but of which the original pattern was Negro. . . . It was the early jazz that was the most typically racial—and musically the most powerful.”¹⁰ The main impetus for the development of jazz came from African ritual events that converged with spirituals, folk rags and the blues.¹¹ The early blues musician W. C. Handy stated that spirituals, ragtime and jazz formed one continuous sequence of black music and were just different facets of the same fundamental music.¹²

There is evidence that early jazz can be traced directly to African ceremonial music used in ring shouts.¹³ Much of the earliest known jazz was played during or just following black funerals. The music that was played at these events included tropes from the ring and featured the heterogeneous sound ideal. The traditional practice of rotating groups of singers manifested itself in the form of two rhythmic groups: the front line of cornet, clarinet and trombone and a rhythm section of drums and tuba.¹⁴ The development of the simultaneous improvisation of all three front line instruments was a distinctly African American means of realizing the original African paradigm that had little to do with European influences.¹⁵ Scat singing is also believed to have its origins in ring ceremonies.¹⁶ Many of the bands that performed in these ceremonies were employed by black secret societies,¹⁷ demonstrating the close link to traditional African ideas. The ring shout also had an important erotic content that was missing from white American dance music. This transferred itself to the hot rhythms and dancing styles of early jazz and shows a much closer link to African dances than to European dances.¹⁸

The music of military marching bands or parade bands is generally considered to be one of the most important European influences on jazz.

Although there is no doubt that many black musicians heard or were part of European-style marching bands, there is also strong evidence of purely African antecedents to this type of music. For example, an English book published in 1824 shows a marching band in an African ritual ceremony that included trumpets.¹⁹

Some jazz historians also claim that the instrumentation of early jazz bands was based on an effort to imitate European-style marching bands. This assumption is flawed in several ways. To begin with, many African cultures have traditional instruments that include horns. African American musicians may well have chosen the instruments that they did because they had similarities to traditional African instruments and they were capable of achieving the ‘rough’ tone that many African cultures value and for which whites originally criticized black jazz.

The instrumentation chosen was probably also related to the simple fact that many of the instruments used in marching bands were easily and cheaply available at the turn of the century. This was partly due to the Spanish-American War, which ended in 1898. As the troops were broken up, the American army sold off many used band instruments, giving blacks with very limited financial resources an opportunity to buy affordable instruments that they did not usually have.²⁰ In a sense, the instruments were makeshift or found, fitting the common African practice of adopting whatever materials are easily available at the time to make music.²¹

All of this demonstrates that not only were European musical characteristics less influential on early jazz than is commonly believed to be the case, but many of these characteristics had analogous African roots as well. The influence of white musicians and European musical ideas became more significant in the later development of jazz, but there is little that can be found in early jazz that black musicians could not either come up with on their own or simply learnt by ear from European-style music. This means that the influence of the Creole musicians was by no means necessary for the development of jazz, thus eliminating one of the strongest arguments

¹⁰ Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music*. (New York: Arno Press, 1969) 72-73.

¹¹ Samuel A. Floyd Jr., *The Power of Black Music*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 84.

¹² Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music*. (New York: Arno Press, 1969) 70.

¹³ Samuel A. Floyd Jr., *The Power of Black Music*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 83.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 82-83.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 81-82.

²⁰ James Lincoln Collier, *The Making of Jazz*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978) 63-64.

²¹ Samuel A. Floyd Jr., *The Power of Black Music*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 84.

in favor of New Orleans being the birthplace of jazz.

Another argument in support of the development of jazz in New Orleans is the claim that the word 'jazz' itself was first used there. The primary support for this belief is an old article written by Walter Kingley saying that the reporter Lafcadio Hearn "reported that the word 'jaz,' meaning to speed things up, to make excitement, was common among the blacks of the South and had been adopted by the Creoles as a term to be applied to music of a rudimentary syncopated type."²²

It should be realized that there is a great deal of debate on exactly what the word first meant and exactly when it was first used, and that, despite exhaustive searches of Hearn's extensive writings, nobody has been able to find any proof that he ever said this.²³ This means that any claims at all about the origins of the word should be considered critically, including the assertion that it was first used in New Orleans.

Some jazz historians believe that New Orleans musicians had never even heard of the word 'jazz' until they traveled north.²⁴ The idea that the word was known elsewhere before its first reported use in New Orleans is supported by several informant interviews. The black bandleader George Morrison from Missouri reported that, "My father was a musician. In fact, as far back as you can trace the Morrison family, the men were all fiddlers. . . . they couldn't read a note—never knew what a note looked like—played everything by ear. . . . I first heard the word jazz way back around 1911."²⁵ This was actually two years before the first reported use of the word in New Orleans.

Another one of the arguments that is often mentioned in conjunction with the claim that New Orleans was the birthplace of jazz is the existence of Storyville, a famous New Orleans red-light district. The argument is that the Storyville brothels employed jazz musicians who were not professional trained, thus providing them with an opportunity to develop their music that

was not as easily available elsewhere.²⁶ In actual fact, research by Donald Marquis has shown that "none of the [New Orleans] musicians who were interviewed remembered playing with a band in a whorehouse, nor did they know of anyone who had."²⁷ Further research shows that it was primarily solo piano players who were hired by brothels, and only a very few locations employed larger ensembles.²⁸

It can be shown that black musicians were playing and combining many different styles of music with links to jazz well before the turn of the century, when jazz was purportedly developed in New Orleans. This is supported by Lucy McKim Garrison's letter to *Dwight's Magazine* in 1862 which contains a cross-reference between spirituals, ring shouts, camp songs and jubilee Hymns.²⁹ The transference of musical styles between African ring ceremonies and funeral parade bands that was mentioned earlier was also occurring all over the United States in the nineteenth century. There is particularly strong evidence of this in Baltimore and Alabama.³⁰

Early blues and jazz musicians such as W. C. Handy and Willie (the Lion) Smith stated in interviews that the music they played was similar to music that they heard as children.³¹ Elements of jazz can also be heard in the music of Louis Gottshalk, which indicates that he was probably influenced by similar music some forty years before Handy and Smith were born. This traces the development of early jazz to folk forms of the 1830's.³² In addition, an 1867 collection of black songs contains ecclesiastical examples of blue notes, shifted accents, ragged time, rhythmic counterpoint and many of the other charac-

²² Lawrence Gushee, "The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Jazz," *Black Music Research Journal* Vol. 14 No. 1 (Spring 1994): 9.

²³ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁵ Frank Tirro, *Jazz A History*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977) 68.

²⁶ James Lincoln Collier, *Jazz: The American Theme Song*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 19, 92.

²⁷ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 31.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁹ Ernest Borneman, "The Roots of Jazz," in *Jazz*, ed. Nat Hentoff and Albert J. McCarthy (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974) 20.

³⁰ Samuel A. Floyd Jr., *The Power of Black Music*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 83.

³¹ Hildred Roach, *Black American Music*. (Boston: Crescendo Publishing Co., 1973) 65.

³² *Ibid.*, 65.

teristics which were features of early jazz.³³ All of this demonstrates that jazz was in the process of being developed long before it was allegedly born in New Orleans in the early twentieth century.

Indeed, virtually all of the musical styles that are considered to be ancestors of jazz were present in many areas of the United States, not only in New Orleans. Given that the distinctions between many of these styles and early jazz are fairly fluid and that most musicians were well versed in a variety of styles, this lends a good deal of credence to the argument that jazz could have developed simultaneously in many parts of the United States.

To begin with, ragtime, which is commonly seen as one of the closest relatives to jazz, was certainly popular all over the U.S. This includes orchestral ragtime.³⁴ This is explained by the composer Will Marion Cook:

About 1888 marked the starting and quick growth of the so-called 'ragtime.' As far back as 1875 negroes in questionable resorts along the Mississippi had commenced to evolve this musical figure, but at the World's Fair in Chicago, 'ragtime' got a running start and swept the Americas, next Europe, and today [1918] the craze has not diminished.³⁵

Blues was another very close relative of jazz that was certainly found in places other than New Orleans. As Gunther Schuller writes:

In those years of vast changes, as several musical styles coalesced into the one that finally came to be known as jazz, the only tributary source of jazz that seemed to remain constant was the blues. It is unlikely that the blues changed basically between the 1880's and the early 1920's. And one can be sure that when Bunk Johnson says that as a kid he 'used to play nothin' but the blues' in New Orleans barrelhouses, he was playing essentially the same instrumental blues. . . .

that he had heard Buddy Bolden play in the 1890's.³⁶

As a relatively stable type of music at the time, the blues must have had similar influences on musicians all over the United States.

Black brass bands were founded in many American cities and villages after the Civil War,³⁷ many of which played similar styles of music to what was being played in New Orleans. F. L. Olmsted wrote in 1853 that "in all of the Southern cities, there are music bands, composed of negroes, often of great excellence. The military parades are usually accompanied by a Negro brass band."³⁸ This shows that the black marching bands that were among the first to play jazz in New Orleans were by no means found only in that city.

The importance of rural areas in the development of jazz is often overlooked. In a discussion of country brass bands, Frederic Ramsey Jr. wrote, "The rhythm set up by these bands is not a tight, regular march step; it is more of a flowing anticipatory emphasis and counter-emphasis, ideally suited to a free style of dance."³⁹ This shows a movement towards jazz-like styles. Sterling Stuckey recognized a resemblance between jazz improvisations and early Southern black rural folk songs.⁴⁰ This was particularly evident in nineteenth century South Carolinian funeral music, which had many characteristics in common with the New Orleans tradition.⁴¹

J. A. Rogers also saw jazz as having important folk roots. As he wrote, "The earliest jazz-makers were the itinerant piano players who wandered up and down the Mississippi towns from saloon to saloon."⁴² All of this demonstrates that early jazz had widespread folk roots and was played in rural areas that had relatively

³³ Ernest Borneman, "The Roots of Jazz," in *Jazz*, ed. Nat Hentoff and Albert J. McCarthy (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974) 20.

³⁴ Lawrence Gushee, "The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Jazz," *Black Music Research Journal* Vol. 14 No. 1 (Spring 1994): 2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

³⁶ Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968) 67.

³⁷ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 32.

³⁸ Marshall W. Stearns, *The Story of Jazz*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956) 55.

³⁹ Ernest Borneman, "The Roots of Jazz," in *Jazz*, ed. Nat Hentoff and Albert J. McCarthy (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974) 30.

⁴⁰ Samuel A. Floyd Jr., *The Power of Black Music*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 81.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴² Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music*. (New York: Arno Press, 1969) 73.

little interaction with urban centers such as New Orleans.

The very strong influence of spirituals on early jazz musicians is also well documented. For example, many nineteenth century spirituals featured a ternary treble part and a duple or quadruple bass at the same time. This practice of splitting a bar metrically rather than accentually became a basic pattern of New Orleans jazz.⁴³ Spirituals such as *Good Lord'll Help Me on My Way* had ragtime accompaniments ten years before the first rag was published.⁴⁴ Paul Barbarin, an early New Orleans jazz drummer, stated that, "You heard the pastors in the Baptist churches, they were singing rhythm. More so than a jazz band."⁴⁵ The banjoist Johnny St. Cyr said that, "Those Baptist rhythms were similar to the jazz rhythms and the singing was very much on the blues side."⁴⁶

The influence of these spirituals is particularly clear in the case of Buddy Bolden, the New Orleans musician who is considered by many to be the first known jazz player. He was well known for being part of a shouting congregation as a child⁴⁷ and the trombonist Kid Ory said that, "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."⁴⁸

Spirituals were just as much a rural type of music as they were urban and they were sung all over the United States. When it is considered that spirituals not only had many traits in common with early jazz, but also served as a conscious inspiration for New Orleans jazz musicians, it is reasonable to think that musicians from other parts of the United States might well have been influenced by spirituals in similar ways.

Minstrel shows served an important role in the dissemination of black musical ideas. While the music played in the original shows was certainly anything but authentic black music, many of the early jazz musicians were playing in minstrel shows by the 1890's. As the popularity of minstrelsy declined, many of the musicians employed by them turned to ragtime and then to jazz.⁴⁹ W. C. Handy was himself a member of Mahara's Minstrels in 1896,⁵⁰ where he fused elements of ragtime and blues into minstrel music.⁵¹ Handy stated that "even in the minstrel days we played music similar to jazz, but we didn't call it jazz."⁵² By the turn of the century, jazzmen such as Clarence Williams, James P. Johnson, Bunk Johnson and Jelly Roll Morton were playing in minstrel shows.⁵³

These shows traveled all around the country, giving musicians from New Orleans and elsewhere the opportunity to hear each other play and share musical ideas. Many minstrel shows were from New Orleans, or visited there, leading to the exchange of musical ideas long before the time of Buddy Bolden.⁵⁴ This kind of ongoing musical communication between black musicians from many different areas makes any claim that jazz originated independently in any one place very dubious.

A reporter named Lafcadio Hearn was in New Orleans at the time surrounding the turn of the century looking for traditional black music. He wrote that:

My inquiries about the marimba have produced no result except the discovery that our negroes play the guitar, the flute, the flageolet, the cornet-a-piston. Some play very well; all the orchestras and bands are coloured. But the civilized instrument has

⁴³ Ernest Borneman, "The Roots of Jazz," in *Jazz*, ed. Nat Hentoff and Albert J. McCarthy (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974) 19.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁵ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 31.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁷ Marshall W. Stearns, *The Story of Jazz*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956) 67.

⁴⁸ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 31.

⁴⁹ Marshall W. Stearns, *The Story of Jazz*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956) 119.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵¹ Ernest Borneman, "The Roots of Jazz," in *Jazz*, ed. Nat Hentoff and Albert J. McCarthy (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974) 31.

⁵² Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968) 65.

⁵³ Marshall W. Stearns, *The Story of Jazz*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956) 120-121.

⁵⁴ Ernest Borneman, "The Roots of Jazz," in *Jazz*, ed. Nat Hentoff and Albert J. McCarthy (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974) 30-31.

killed the native manufacture of aboriginalities.⁵⁵

It seems almost certain that Hearn would have reported any contact with an exciting African-derived music like early jazz had he heard it. Instead, he made very little mention of any African-derived music in New Orleans and no mention at all of anything similar to jazz,⁵⁶ despite the fact that he was actively looking for African styles of music. This indicates that jazz was probably less prevalent than commonly believed in New Orleans at the time when many scholars believe it was in the process of being born.

Walter Goldstein was one of the speakers at the 1917 Music Teacher's National Association annual meeting. He had specifically studied the black music of New Orleans and spoke about ragtime but said nothing about jazz.⁵⁷ It is unlikely that Goldstein would fail to comment on an exciting new music like jazz, unless this music was indeed already ordinary and could be heard by interested researchers in many places other than New Orleans. The unusual music that he commented on instead was ragtime and blues with a local accent.⁵⁸

There is also evidence that the music of New Orleans was not exceptionally influential on musicians elsewhere during the first decade and a half of the twentieth century. This invalidates the possible claim that jazz started in New Orleans and was only heard elsewhere after the musicians there had been exposed to the sounds of New Orleans. For example, W. C. Handy was a musician who traveled all over the South, yet he had not heard of Bunk Johnson or Buddy Bolden at the time when they were supposed to be playing the earliest jazz.⁵⁹ This means that they could not have been as famous outside New Orleans as is commonly believed and therefore could not have had the influence on other cities that is often credited to them.

Finally, there is direct evidence from informant interviews that jazz was being played in other parts of the United States well before it

gained media attention in New Orleans with the release of the first jazz recording in 1917. The trombonist Frank Withers was active in San Francisco before 1915 and Earnest Coycault/Johnson was playing in California from 1908 onwards.⁶⁰ The musician Eubie Blake heard jazz in New York before New Orleans was known for jazz, just as Duke Ellington heard it in Washington.⁶¹ Gavin Bushell recalls of his hometown of Springfield, Ohio, that "there was instrumental ragtime—and improvisation—in the dance halls," which can be interpreted as very possibly being jazz.⁶² W. C. Handy was playing a bluesy jazz in Memphis by 1912 and Jasbo Brown was playing cabaret jazz in Chicago at the same time.⁶³ Handy even had a hit song called *Memphis Blues* in 1912 which can very reasonably be considered early jazz. *Baby Seal Blues* was published in St. Louis and *Callas Blues* was published in Oklahoma City in the same year.⁶⁴ Handy himself said that jazz was played in Memphis around 1905 and that the performers were unaware that New Orleans had the same style of music until 1917.⁶⁵

New York is a city where the presence of early jazz was particularly evident. Repressive legislation in the South at the end of the nineteenth century led to a huge northward migration of blacks, who took their music with them. New York was a particularly common destination, and the emerging black middle class there led to the establishment of an independent black theatre. These shows featured syncopated songs written by black composers.⁶⁶

In addition to being the center for black vaudeville, New York was also the home of a

⁵⁵ Lawrence Gushee, "The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Jazz," *Black Music Research Journal* Vol. 14 No. 1 (Spring 1994): 10.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁹ Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968) 66.

⁶⁰ Lawrence Gushee, "New Orleans-Area Musicians on the West Coast," *Black Music Research Journal* Vol. 9 No. 1 (Spring 1989): 4.

⁶¹ Hildred Roach, *Black American Music*. (Boston: Crescendo Publishing Co., 1973) 63.

⁶² Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968) 67.

⁶³ Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music*. (New York: Arno Press, 1969) 74.

⁶⁴ Frank Tirro, *Jazz A History*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977) 52.

⁶⁵ Paul O. W. Tanner, David W. Megill and Maurice Gerow, *Jazz*. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1997) 54.

⁶⁶ Thomas L Riis, *Just Before Jazz*. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989) xxi.

great deal of syncopated dance music.⁶⁷ Will Dixon led a band there called the Nashville Students that included banjos, mandolins, guitars, saxophones, drums, a violin, a bass and brass instruments.⁶⁸ Dixon and James Reese Europe directed groups in New York that played music that was at the very least close to jazz before the first recordings were released by New Orleans bands.⁶⁹ Europe went on to direct a military band that played more European-influenced music during the First World War.

There were also several ragtime pianists in New York that played in a jazz style. These included Jess Pickett, Sam Gordon, William Turk, Eubie Blake and James P. Johnson.⁷⁰ Ring shout ceremonies were common in New York at the time and these influenced the musicians there just as they influenced the musicians in New Orleans. As New York ragtime pianist Willie 'The Lion' Smith relates, "Shouts are stride piano—when James P. [Johnson] and Fats [Waller] and I would get a romp-down shout going, that was playing rocky, just like the Baptist people sing."⁷¹ A wealth of blues songs were also in circulation in New York by 1917. Active New York blues songwriters included Perry Bradford, Joe Jordan and Clarence Williams.⁷²

Taken together, the sum of these arguments casts very serious doubts on the theory that jazz originated in New Orleans. Many of the arguments that are used to support this theory are problematic. There was much less European influence on early jazz than is traditionally thought, and what influence there was could easily have been picked up by ear. This counters the claim that the contribution of the New Orleans Creoles was requisite for the development of jazz. There are also major problems with the assertions that the word 'jazz' was first used in New Orleans and that Storyville provided a unique location for early jazz musicians to play. It has also been shown that there is reason to believe that jazz was not any more particularly prominent or influential in New Orleans at the turn of the century than it was elsewhere.

In addition, many of the styles of music which influenced jazz in New Orleans were found all over the United States in the nineteenth century, and there is evidence that elements of these styles were being combined to produce music that was at the very least similar to jazz. There is also evidence that jazz had strong rural folk roots in the spirituals and funeral music played by black brass bands found in many parts of the country. Minstrel shows helped to establish musical communication between black communities all over the United States, making it difficult to claim that jazz evolved in isolation in New Orleans. Finally, there is a good deal of direct historical testimony by musicians that early jazz was being played in locations as diverse as New York, Memphis, Chicago, California, Springfield, St. Louis and Washington as well as in New Orleans.

This summary makes it clear that the development of jazz was certainly a good deal more complex than an event that took place in a single city in a matter of a few years. This raises the question of why New Orleans has so often been given the credit for being the single birthplace of jazz.

One possible answer to this is that the enthronement of New Orleans as the birthplace of jazz can be partially attributed to an effort to downplay the Caribbean influence on early jazz so that it could be portrayed as a purely American music.⁷³ It can be argued that the influence of Caribbean ideas on jazz was in some ways fairly strong. Many slaves were brought to the United States by way of Haiti or Cuba, particularly after the importation of new slaves was made illegal. Many Haitians also chose to emigrate to the U.S. after the Haitian revolution.⁷⁴

Haitian meringues often sound similar to ragtime, there are many similarities between the ring ceremonies found in the Southern United States and those in Haiti and there were many commonalities between Haitian dances and the dances of New Orleans.⁷⁵ The Afro-French music of Martinique and the preacher and shouting congregations of Trinidad were also influential.⁷⁶

⁶⁷ Frank Tirro, *Jazz A History*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977) 57.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 60.

⁷³ Norman C. Weinstein, *A Night in Tunisia*. (London: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1992) 40-41.

⁷⁴ Marshall W. Stearns, *The Story of Jazz*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956) 25.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

Explicit references to the Caribbean influence can be found in some jazz music itself, such as in Louis Armstrong's 1926 recording of *King of the Zulus*, where Clarence Babcock interrupts a trombone solo to act the part of a Jamaican.⁷⁷

The influence of the Spanish Caribbean and of Mexico was also evident in early jazz. The trombonist George Filhe stated that some older jazz musicians "used lots of Mexican stuff"⁷⁸ and Jelly Roll Morton said, "If you can't manage to put tinges of Spanish in your tunes, you will never be able to get the right seasoning, I call it, for jazz."⁷⁹

By crediting New Orleans with the invention of jazz, it became possible to claim that many of these Caribbean influences on jazz were actually due to the French and Spanish character of New Orleans itself, thus preserving the illusion that jazz is an entirely American music. There is likely some truth to this theory, although one must be careful not to overstress the amount of direct influence that Caribbean music had on jazz and how much this concerned those who wanted to foster the belief that jazz is a purely American music.

There is another important answer to the question of why New Orleans has so often been given the credit for being the birthplace of jazz. Simply put, New Orleans was the home of the jazz musicians who were first commercially successful among whites. It was the first city where significant numbers of whites learned to play jazz and went on to perform and record it themselves.

This led the media to concentrate their attention on New Orleans, with the result that far more information is available about jazz in that city than elsewhere. The misconception that jazz arose exclusively in New Orleans was likely propagated by scholars who were influenced by racist ideas relating to black musicians or who mistakenly interpreted the imbalance of information available on different cities to mean that

more jazz was played in New Orleans than elsewhere.

The fact that New Orleans jazz was not 'discovered' by 1900 or 1910 supports this theory. It is common knowledge that there were many practicing jazz musicians in New Orleans by this time, and there was certainly no shortage of visitors to hear the music that was being played.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, twenty years passed between Buddy Bolden's prime and the first jazz recording.⁸¹

Why were New Orleans jazz and jazz in general not given any real mainstream media attention before the white Original Dixieland Jazz Band recorded the first jazz album in 1917? The answer to this is much the same as the answer to the question of why it was the ODJB that was the first jazz band to record when there were many black bands available with significantly more talent. Simply put, the ODJB was white and therefore had much more appeal to record producers and to the media. Had a white band been playing jazz earlier in New Orleans or in another city, it is likely that it would have been recorded then. Since the ODJB was one of the first white bands to have any proficiency in playing jazz, it was they who were the first to be recorded and it was their hometown of New Orleans that was crowned the birthplace of jazz.

The extent of the racist conceptions about black music is demonstrated by the fact that the leader of the ODJB claimed to have invented jazz and was originally believed by many, despite the overwhelming evidence that black musicians had been playing jazz long before he learnt to play.⁸² Jazz was recorded exclusively by whites for five years after this and was considered by many whites to be "a specialized form of white dance music."⁸³

The common belief among whites at the time was that blacks were incapable of coming up with any quality music of their own and that any music that they produced was either primitive or a poor imitation of white music. The gen-

⁷⁷ Norman C. Weinstein, *A Night in Tunisia*. (London: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1992) 95.

⁷⁸ Lawrence Gushee, "The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Jazz," *Black Music Research Journal* Vol. 14 No. 1 (Spring 1994): 16.

⁷⁹ Jelly Roll Morton, "The Inventor of Jazz" in *Keeping Time*, ed. Robert Walser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 18.

⁸⁰ Lawrence Gushee, "The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Jazz," *Black Music Research Journal* Vol. 14 No. 1 (Spring 1994): 1.

⁸¹ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 37.

⁸² Charley Gerard, *Jazz in Black and White*. (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1998) 20.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 17.

eral hostility that many whites had towards blacks can be seen in an article published in an 1888 edition of *Metronome* magazine complaining that, "the colored race monopolize the procession music to a great extent."⁸⁴ Even those individuals who did credit blacks as having invented jazz were careful to portray them as Americans rather than as blacks. An example of this can be found in the work of the historian Henry Kmen, who studied the early musical life of New Orleans.⁸⁵

There are several reasons why New Orleans was the first city where whites successfully learned to play jazz. To begin with, New Orleans was under French and Spanish rule until the nineteenth century. While Protestant colonial powers tended to repress their slaves' musical and religious traditions, Catholic countries were more likely to give them significantly more freedom in this area. This way of thinking continued in New Orleans even after it came under American rule. At the same time that slaves were forbidden from playing African music in other parts of the United States, New Orleans established an area called Congo Square in 1817 with the explicit purpose of giving slaves a place to dance and play their music.⁸⁶

This music was listened to by many white citizens of New Orleans, exposing them to African styles of music that were mostly inaccessible to whites elsewhere.⁸⁷ A description of a Congo Square performance in 1886 includes music that appears to be West African, but with the addition of European instruments and the inclusion of a European folk melody.⁸⁸ Whites who listened to this music were being well-prepared for the jazz that was soon to come.

The existence of the Creole class also served as a bridge between white and black musicians in New Orleans. They caused the jazz of New Orleans to have a European flavor that was more pronounced than the jazz found elsewhere, leading to a music that was probably more palatable to whites. This also had the effect of making

⁸⁴ Lawrence Gushee, "The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Jazz," *Black Music Research Journal* Vol. 14 No. 1 (Spring 1994): 7.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

⁸⁶ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 7.

⁸⁷ Marshall W. Stearns, *The Story of Jazz*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956) 50-51.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 52-54.

New Orleans jazz more likely to inspire white musicians and made it easier for them to learn to play jazz.

New Orleans was also an important center for minstrel shows. This put whites from New Orleans in a particularly good position to hear the jazz elements that were beginning to seep into minstrel music around the turn of the century.

According to a ledger of permits issued in New Orleans in 1864, a good number of dance balls were 'colored,' including some with colored owners.⁸⁹ This and the fact that blacks and whites lived in relatively close contact in New Orleans⁹⁰ gave whites the opportunity to see blacks playing their own music, whereas in other parts of the country blacks tended to play primarily European styles of music for white audiences. The general musical openness of New Orleans can be seen in these comments of Jelly Roll Morton:

New Orleans was the stomping grounds for all the greatest pianists in the country. We had Spanish, we had colored, we had white, we had Frenchmen, we had Americans, we had them from all parts of the world because there were more jobs for pianists than any other ten places in the world. The sporting-houses needed professors, and we had so many different styles that whenever you came to New Orleans, it wouldn't make any difference that you just came from Paris or any part of England, Europe, or any place—whatever your tunes were over there, we played them in New Orleans.⁹¹

New Orleans was also a particularly musical city as well as being a center of dance music for both whites and blacks.⁹² The sheer quantity of music that was played there facilitated the transfer of musical ideas between different groups.

⁸⁹ Lawrence Gushee, "The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Jazz," *Black Music Research Journal* Vol. 14 No. 1 (Spring 1994): 5-6.

⁹⁰ James Lincoln Collier, *Jazz: The American Theme Song*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 4.

⁹¹ Jelly Roll Morton, "The Inventor of Jazz" in *Keeping Time*, ed. Robert Walser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 17.

⁹² Paul O. W. Tanner, David W. Megill and Maurice Gerow, *Jazz*. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1997) 54.

The combination of all of these factors made it that much easier for whites to hear and learn jazz in New Orleans than was the case elsewhere. It was not until white musicians such as the Original Dixieland Jazz Band began to play jazz that the music began to have any mainstream commercial success. It was this white commercial success which caused many people to mistakenly credit the city of New Orleans with the invention of jazz and overlook the reality that black musicians had already been playing jazz all over the country for years. In reality, jazz was not an isolated event that took place in New Orleans at a particular time. Rather, it was a widespread cultural development that took place over an extended period of time all over the United States.

Whites continued to commercially dominate jazz for decades, despite the existence of many black bands with at least as much talent. Band-leaders such as Fletcher Henderson were pushed to the wayside by orchestras led by whites like Benny Goodman. In order to be successful, black musicians like Louis Armstrong often had to play up to racial stereotypes. It wasn't until the emergence of bebop, which was in many ways both part of the evolution of jazz and a revolution within it, that black musicians were finally able to begin to reclaim jazz as their own. Misconceptions about jazz that were originally steeped in racism persist even today, as is demonstrated by the belief that jazz originated in New Orleans.

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