

## NEW ORLEANS STYLE

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**I**NSTRUMENTAL jazz, as distinguished for instance from piano rag-time, is generally believed to be the product of New Orleans. But even the most intense regional culture cannot account for such a complex phenomenon. Its background is anything but simple.

The most important factor of course is the folk music of the American Negro with its African roots. This more or less homogeneous music already represents the assimilation of many diverse primitive arts.

Then there are the myriad honky-tonks of the southern cities, where that rural folk material was transformed by urban development. Along the Gulf Coast from Pensacola to Dallas and then up the Mississippi to St. Louis and East St. Louis, blues singers moving in from the plantations and journeymen piano-players found a kind of roving, city work which they held for years against the inevitable day of the radio and the juke box. Even today these piano players are the most productive single group of folk artists in America, as witness the comparatively recent growth of boogie-woogie.\*

Georgia's Ma Rainey, the "mother of the blues" appeared for at least fifty years (from the 1890's on) before Negro audiences, in tent shows, on vaudeville circuits, in churches and cabarets. Wearing a necklace of twenty-dollar gold pieces, in a low husky voice she sang about every phase of Negro life, songs called *Bad Luck Blues*, *Levee Camp Moan*, and *Lost Wandering Blues*. Her subject matter was generally nearer to Negro life than that of the famous Bessie Smith although the latter, too, was a folk singer, despite greater sophistication and closer contact with the commercial world.

Partly because of urban prejudice against folk music of the country, partly because so many Negroes were impoverished, the lowly urban style of blues became the rule rather than the exception. Early jazz, too (from 1890 on) was barred not only from white but from many Negro homes in New Orleans. Jobs for men who played this type of music were for the

\*A development in blues piano playing characterized by recurring bass figures, usually of a jerky or rolling nature. The name comes from a dance step. It was the occasional custom of blues pianists to announce their pieces. Pine Top Smith did that for a record, (U.H.C.A. - 113) just as he might in a "back room," saying, "This is Pine Top's boogie-woogie." From then on the name was used to describe the style.

most part in Storyville, the red-light district that the city fathers had segregated from the rest of the town.

This inevitable honky-tonk environment provided the musicians not only with pay but with an audience. That audience is not to be ignored because it gathered in places that were, culturally speaking, beyond the pale. Dock wallopers came to be paid off in the South Rampart Street saloons which were also hang-outs for railroad section gangs. It was an environment by no means stultifying; just listen to the utterly serious *Red Onion Blues*, named after a honky-tonk, (played by Johnny Dodds and His Orchestra, Decca-18094) or the solemnly evocative *Low Down Blues* (Kid Rena's Jazz Band, Delta-803).

What New Orleans' Storyville did for these singers and players is not unlike the development of ragtime in the sportin' district of St. Louis – up from the levee – late in the nineteenth century. The colorful exponents of the improvised style who are still alive suggest that ragtime had genuine folk roots, as jazz did. The finest ragtime improviser, Louis Chauvin, couldn't read a note of music but used to play by the hour for Scott Joplin, the neglected Negro composer who wrote the ragtime operetta *Treemonisha*. Diamond-flashing, gun-toting Tom Turpin played in such accurate tempo that he was called "the metronome," and Joplin was known around the old-time St. Louis saloons as "the diminished fifth man."

Turpin and Joplin studied theory and composition on the money saved from work as "Professors" in sportin' houses. Thus ragtime was a written music when brought from St. Louis to New Orleans in the 1890's. And it was immensely popular – especially the Scott Joplin rags. All the bands played them. John Robichaux's orchestra of Creole Negroes at Antoine's famous restaurant were considered the best ragtime musicians in New Orleans. They were somewhat on the "legitimate" side and, as they say, "good sight readers." The Buddy Bolden band was known for blues and stomps (fast dance tunes), and they played the St. Louis rags, but by ear. So although they were called a "ragtime" band that was only a convenient appellation, for ragtime was originally a pianistic style.

In the 1890's the name Buddy Bolden was synonymous with the music later called jazz. (This word itself is a corruption of "jass" which was taken from the vernacular of the bawdy-houses.) He and his band worked in dance halls where the men kept their hats on so that they would not be stolen, and in honky-tonks where the pay of two or three dollars a night was supplemented by what Frankie Dusen, the trombonist, could

badger out of the girls and their escorts. Negro or white, all jazz bands looked to Bolden for inspiration. The white bands got under way in the 1890's with one headed by Jack (Papa) Laine. The "white" line of influence came to be known as *Dixieland* because a band of that name – most of whose members got their start with Laine – came north in 1914. (*Dixieland* has other connotations but this is the most usual one.) New Orleans had several important Negro bands but all were closely interwoven. Louis Armstrong, who to many represents the greatest single figure in jazz, had his first lessons in improvised jazz from Bunk Johnson, a cornetist who played with Buddy Bolden.

Veterans of the 'nineties say that jazz began in "uptown" New Orleans. This section – South Rampart Street and its environs – was populated by "other-than-Creole Negroes." The Creole Negroes, most of whom were trained rather than untutored musicians, contributed many clarinet, string bass, and piano players to jazz. One white-haired Creole Negro advances the credible theory that jazz began "uptown" because it grew out of the blues, which naturally were less often heard on the Creole Negro side of town – where musical tradition was strongly French with its center in the old Opera and its most familiar songs in Creole patois.

The adaptation of vocal blues style to brass band instruments may be attributed chiefly to two factors. First, New Orleans had been a great brass band city for nearly two centuries. Second, job opportunities were plentiful in segregated Storyville. At night men played in the low honky-tonks and the flashy cabarets back of Basin Street. Their instruments consisted mainly of cornet, clarinet, trombone, string bass, guitar, and drums. (Piano and saxophone were almost always excluded from early jazz bands; dance halls like Tin Type and Longshoremen's, where the Bolden band played, did not even have pianos in them.) During the day they used the ordinary brass band instrumentation, playing for parades of fraternal societies, funerals, and other functions. On the advertising wagons, from which came the term *tailgate* for a style of trombone playing, instrumentation was sometimes that of a jazz band. And speaking of funeral ensembles it is doubtful that, important as they have been in the religious rites of Europe, they ever took a form like those of the Negro in New Orleans where both sorrow and joy were fully expressed. Cornet, clarinet, and trombone, sounding slow sweet dirges on the way to the graveyard, would come back to town playing bright tunes like the famous *High Society* (available by New Orleans Jazzmen on Blue Bird-10434).

Wearing the same aprons they put on for the funerals, but the other side out, they would swing down south Rampart Street in a parade, the "second line" of kids mimicking their rhythmic movements. A clue to its vigor, these early phenomena of jazz also explain the tendency, in fast stomp tunes, to suggest brass band music.

Storyville, which in its hey-day boasted a population of from 500 to 1,000 "girls," was roisterous and gay, wicked and alluring. Its habits tended to leave their inhibitions at home, and that meant musical inhibitions too. The cabarets insisted upon jazz bands, though they weren't then called by that name. From 1890 to 1917, close to two hundred prominent jazzmen found employment there. The gilded "palaces" of Basin Street took the piano players such as Tony Jackson and Jelly Roll Morton; the brightly lit cabarets of Franklin Street took the raucous jazz of King Keppard, Louis Armstrong, and Sidney Bechet; and back in the lowly tonks of Gravier and South Rampart Street one could hear the bottom blues, so-called after the bottomlands of the Red River Valley, moaned out by singers and instrumentalists alike.

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What is the instrumental style that is basic to New Orleans jazz and is different from the popular dance music of the last century? Some of its salient characteristics must be grasped if one is to understand how this "raggedy" music from the delta came so completely to change the picture of American popular music.

An almost revolutionary innovation was the New Orleans development of small band instrumentation, composed of solo wind and percussion in place of the predominantly string orchestra. The unique and effective use of each instrument meant a gain rather than loss in lyricism, and brought variety and intensity of expressiveness, as well as an increase in dynamic and tonal range.

Naturally a musical system which is based largely on improvisation and features individual freedom, will nurture many highly personal styles. And since the majority of New Orleans musicians were not "note readers," it was easy to describe them as "fake" or "hokum" players. But in their collective improvisation these small orchestras soon learned to make the most of small means. The result was a maximum of "swing" produced by working and feeling the music together. As each instrument explored its own role in the ensemble, it developed its own characteristic features. And so a most idiomatic orchestral usage was perfected.

A new kind of dynamics was needed. This involved more natural tone production and less attempt to adjust or modify the natural dynamics and volume. Each instrument was forced to find its most telling style. A transparent polyphony gradually replaced the massive sonorities of European orchestras. With the application of solo style to the ensemble there was no longer a need or a place for the doubling of parts, unison passages, exact repetition of motives, nor even the much over-stressed precision of performance. A rich and frequently dissonant polyphony resulted.

The freedom and abandon that characterized the work of the soloist, was applied not only to melody but to jazz rhythm. Jazz syncopation consists not merely of the use of accents displaced and note values suspended in the European sense. There is also a frequent, almost infinitesimal delay or anticipation of melodic voices above the regular rhythmic pulse of the more percussive instruments. The melodic parts of a jazz improvisation are at times so free of the throbbing accompaniment that the outcome is almost a-rhythmic.

The ability of performers like Armstrong enables them, even when seeming continually to lag behind the beat, to maintain a driving momentum and forcefulness of accent. This a-rhythmic quality, which is both so disturbing and exciting, is more essential to the vitality of jazz than its more publicized polyrhythms and cross-meters. *Stop time* is an unusual form of a-rhythmic syncopation; the melodic part continues while the "rhythm section" rests, except for a staccato thump to mark off every eight counts. (See the fourth chorus of Armstrong's *Potato Head Blues*, Columbia-35660).

Jazz trumpet style is to some extent based on the natural "bugle call" (broken chord) pattern largely determined by the mechanical and acoustical construction of the instrument. Even in the blues, where the pitch of certain notes of the diatonic scales is modified, descending arpeggios are a prominent feature. Perhaps this pattern explains the meaning of Bunk's style of "driving the blues down." For examples of inspired blues, listen to the playing of two of Bunk's pupils - Louis Armstrong on *S. O. L. Blues*, Columbia-35661 and Kid Rena on *Low Down Blues*, Delta-803.

The most notable single feature of the New Orleans trumpet style was the adaptation of expressive vocal features, including vibrato. This is a natural enough development, considering the use of breath, throat, tongue, and lips, in trumpet tone production. The usual function of the

trumpet in the New Orleans ensemble is to play the "lead" in a rather simple and direct way, such as was followed, for instance, by Tommy Ladnier in *Really the Blues*, Blue Bird-10089, a record which also features some remarkably expressive playing by Sidney Bechet. The trombone as played in the vigorous if crude New Orleans *tailgate* style, not only furnished a rhythmic bass line interspersed with occasional glissandi smears, but at times improvised counter melodies. Kid Ory ably illustrates this in Armstrong's *Twelfth Street Rag*, Columbia-35663, on the reverse of which, in *Knockin' a Jug*, the great flexibility and expressive qualities of slide trombone are demonstrated by Jack Teagarden.

The third voice in the trio of essential melodic jazz band instruments is the clarinet. New Orleans clarinetists, doubtless under the influence of the French woodwind tradition, developed facile technics and also added unlimited new expressive possibilities. Characteristic of clarinet style are fluent runs and figurations around the cantus firmus of the trumpet. Johnny Dodds (who recorded with Armstrong on the previously mentioned records) often played solos in the chalumeau register with many off-scale notes and glissandi suggestive of blues singing. Dodds also developed a more forceful style, using at times repeated notes and wails in the highest register, to cut through the polyphony of the ensemble.

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Although jazz bands came North as early as 1911 and individual musicians had even before that, the exodus from Storyville coincided with its closing during the World War. Then the riverboats of the Mississippi, the river cities like St. Louis and Kansas City, heard enough jazz to soak it in. The celebrated Bix Beiderbecke first listened to it when the Mississippi boats docked at his native Davenport, Iowa.

Chicago was strongly influenced by both white and Negro bands, but it was the Negroes who continued to be the primary source for jazz style as they had been thirty years before. The "Chicago style" that developed during the 1920's thus represented an outgrowth of jazz as played by Negro bands (King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, and others) and as played by white bands (Rappolo and the New Orleans Rhythm Kings; Bix and the Wolverines). The blowzy, gangster-controlled speakeasies of Chicago took the place of fabulous Storyville in nurturing this music. Chicago style was essentially a variant of New Orleans though it perhaps exhibited less rhythmic bite and was, on the whole, more succinct melodically.

Under the influence of New Orleans, good bands developed in Kansas City and throughout the Midwest. Meanwhile a new tendency had appeared in jazz. Instrumentation was often enlarged to "name-band" dimensions; choirs of instruments began to replace the one-of-a-kind setup. Much has been made of this development, for it has produced orchestras like Count Basie's and Benny Goodman's. Actually this new "big-band" jazz utilized fewer of the technical features of "the real old jazz" than is generally supposed. To some extent it even represents a dilution. Big-bands are big business, their music is a commercial product. This doesn't altogether preclude a worthwhile achievement. But it is a fact that in trying to carry over the jazz strain, this larger and more commercial world tends to fit it into the tattered, soiled garments of popular dance music.

Because radio championed it, popular dance music with its shot-in-the-arm of jazz, won recognition long before Armstrong and his colleagues were known outside the cabarets and the "race" lists of the record companies. In matters of orchestration, the big bands show a high grade of craftsmanship and they achieve brilliant effects. But for those who really know New Orleans jazz, the new polish hardly makes up for the old lustre.