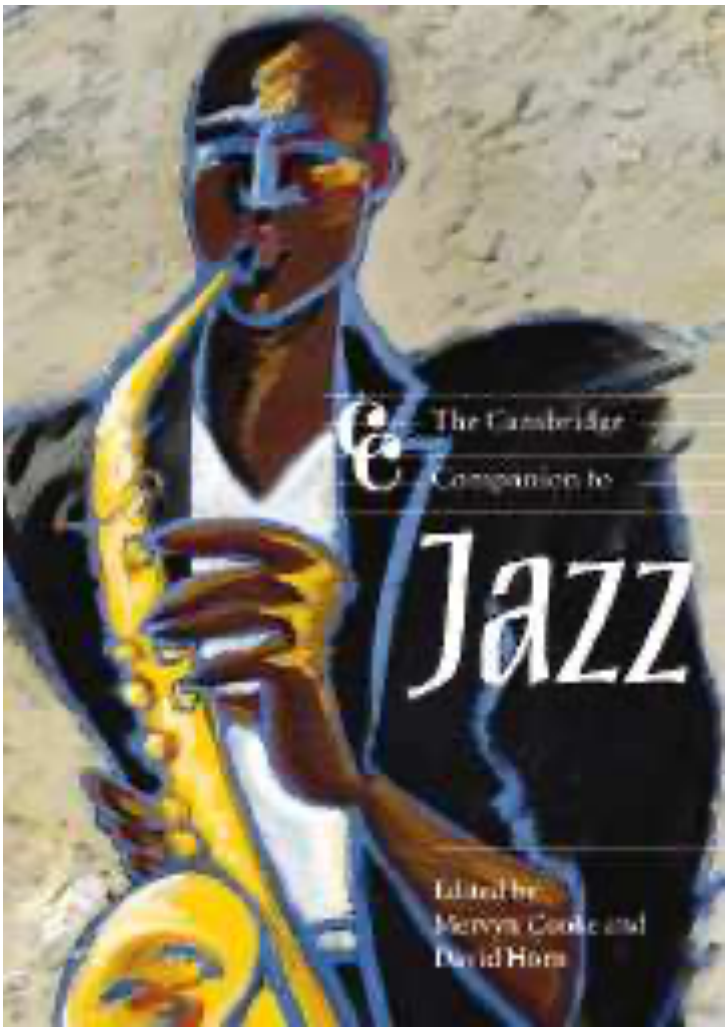

History, Myth and Legend:
The Problem of Early Jazz
by David Sager

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History, Myth and Legend: The Problem of Early Jazz

There are many tantalizing tales of early jazz and its origins that conjure up both romantic and tragic images of an evolving musical tradition. These tales become a bit hazy as they are passed down, and details are usually lost. But from that loss of detail emerges something quite grand and important - the aura, mystique, and muscle of legend. Legend stands somewhere between myth and fact as a catalyst that keeps the past, which is dear to us, alive. Through legend and folklore we create heroes out of real persons, dead or living. Perhaps it would be accurate to refer to the earliest figures of jazz history as legends and the feats they are noted for as the myths… or perhaps the misunderstandings.

One of the great characters and chroniclers of New Orleans jazz was guitarist/banjoist Danny Barker (1909-1994). He had a long and distinguished career, performing regularly in New Orleans before moving to New York in 1930. In New York, he experienced and worked first hand with some of the greatest names in jazz including Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver, James P. Johnson and Cab Calloway. He could tell a story like no one else! His stories were immensely entertaining and had an authority about them that resonated with many audiences. Accompanied by his sly humor and a wink of the eye they stretched a bit of fact here and there. His recalling of the New Orleans he knew as a child sets an appropriate tone for our discussion of the mystique that surrounds the origins of jazz.

> **One of my pleasantest memories as a kid growing up in New Orleans was how a bunch of us kids, playing, would suddenly hear sounds. It was like a phenomenon, like t h e Aurora Borealis-maybe. The sounds of men playing would be so clear, but we wouldn't be sure where they were coming from. So we'd start trotting, start running-'It's this way!' 'It's that way'-And, sometimes, after running for a while, you'd find that you'd be**

nowhere near that music. But that music could come on you any time like that. The city was full of the sounds of music.[1]

Barker's comments are similar to many of the stories of early jazz, which promote the romance and mystique of New Orleans. The tale he told is typical of the type, which gave rise to many of the myths and legends of early jazz. Having lived for sometime myself in the Crescent city, I can attest to the acoustic properties of the French Quarter, with its narrow building-lined streets acting like a series of sound chambers. Hearing a band off in the distance and walking in that direction only to find that the sound is now behind me...and the sound of the calliope coming from the Natchez Steamboat some eight blocks away…

King Buddy and Friends

…One of the great legends of the pre-history of jazz was cornetist Buddy Bolden (1877- 1931). To many he is considered to be the first of all jazz musicians. Stories of his powerful cornet are among the earliest and most prominent of jazz. Legend tells us that Bolden played loud and low down, drank heavily, ran with fast women. His music was exciting and intoxicating. No recordings exist of Bolden (despite the persistent rumors of an Edison cylinder having been made) and what little we know about his playing style comes from the comments of a few old-time musicians, contemporaries of Bolden, who were interviewed. For many years the only hard evidence of him having existed at all was an eerie, faded photograph showing Bolden and the men on his band.

The men in the band stare toward the camera, their eyes barely discernible due to the faded quality of the photograph. The first jazz band? What did they sound like? Sounds coming from

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[1] Nat Shapiro and NatHentoff (eds), 'Hear Me Talkin' To Ya', New York, Rinehart and Company, inc., 1955, p. 3.

somewhere, magical, exciting sounds, but from where? Many who remembered Bolden said his horn could be heard “for miles” from where he was playing. In one instance, Jelly Roll Morton claimed it was “ten or twelve miles.” It is commonly believed that Bolden blew loudly, but loud enough to project for several

miles? Music teacher Manuel Manetta recalled being able to hear Bolden's horn coming from Globe Hall (just west of the French Quarter) all the way in Algiers, Louisiana (east of the French quarter and across the Mississippi). Although both claims sound like tall tales, there is wide possibility for truth, albeit fantastic sounding. Manetta pointed out in a 1957 interview that it was a relatively short distance (about 9 small city blocks plus the narrow width of the river) from Algiers to Globe Hall. Without the noise from traffic it was much quieter in those days and it is well known that sound does carry across water. It is not too difficult to imagine how such stories grew into legend. The legend of Buddy Bolden blowing his horn so loud that it could be heard for miles is quite clearly an exaggeration, but it does inform us that Bolden was a loud player. In this regard, the legend is valuable.[2]

I began to listen to and love jazz as a child. Then later I began to pay attention to the record liner notes and shortly thereafter began reading books about jazz. I learned all sorts of wonderful things about early jazz and its musicians: “Kid Ory was the greatest of all Tailgate trombonists.” “Buddy Bolden was the first know jazzman… he went mad in the streets… they put him away and he was never heard from again… he may have made a cylinder record.” “Bix Beiderbecke, Bunny Berigan and Buddy Bolden were all cornet/trumpet players who shared initials and an insatiable thirst for alcohol.” I loved the stories and began to regard the musicians as super-humans who could dash off

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[2] Donald Marquis, 'In Search of Buddy Bolden', p. 102-103

brilliant improvisations on the spot. The more challenged they were financially or physically (as in the case of Django Reinhardt or Chick Webb) or the more inner conflict plagued them (like Bix or Bessie Smith) then the more I was drawn to their music.

Behind the Jazz Legends

Jazz, regardless of its genre, is a continuously evolving, living tradition. It is one that involves the manipulation of either pre-existing music or original composition. The manipulation of rhythm, time, space and melody creates the excitement we perceive in the music. Perhaps “jazz” is what we do to the music rather than the music itself.

“Jazz" as a verb seems to me a less problematic way of approaching a definition; it makes it easier to regard music regardless of style or genre: for instance, I could say, “Hey listen to those musicians jazzing up that Calypso song!” Such usage refreshingly allows pigeonholing to fly away. “Jazz,” the noun, is the cause of the so-called “problem of early jazz!” We are so enthralled with our musical heroes that we hanker for tangible things to help make the music and its players seem more tangible yet retain magic. The quest for what makes their “special” music unique usually leads to a search for its beginnings. This requires careful looking into the depths of folklore, legends, myths, lies and sometimes simple, profound fact.

Armed with a dozen or so pounds of jazz records and some hefty histories and critical works on jazz, a studious listener/researcher begins their journey into the music filled with an excited hope of finding a clue to jazz's origins. Our conception about the dawn of jazz is vaguely colored with now familiar landmarks that fill the jazz histories books. For example: such as the complexities of African drumming which have been dubbed “cross rhythms,” thought to be the ancestors of syncopation. There are also tales

about abandoned Civil War instruments left in New Orleans. (In these tales, Blacks were provided access to inexpensive instruments found no doubt in pawnshops.)[3] The shouts of joy and anguish a slave would send across the cotton fields are referred to as “field hollers,” an antecedent of the blues. Moreover, the tales of slaves dancing in the Congo Square, a public space, showed us the strength with which the enslaved black in New Orleans clung to their African heritage. Such stories were rich with imagery and

an artist's pen and ink drawing in a variety of accounts supported these images. Such images could be associated with an imagined sound. There is much disagreement between various authors such that it begins to appear as finger pointing, with one jazz scholar calling the other's work “mythology.” Another way we get our jazz folklore is by believing one or another of these historians and not taking the whole picture under consideration.

To understand the origin of jazz is to take in a number of the disparate views, not choose any one in particular. By standing in the middle of histories we can achieve a more multitudinous perspective, and at the same time enjoy the legend for how it best serves us-as an archetypal metaphor of what may have really occurred.

I would like to present some notions regarding early jazz and its origins and highlight some of the various views that historians have taken.

Way Down Yonder — Where?

Many historians argue in favor of the notion that jazz was born solely in New Orleans. There are also strong arguments for the converse, that jazz was a product of African- American music

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[3] Rudi Blesh, 'Shining Trumpets'. 2nde d n , New York, Da Capo, 1976, p. 154.

meeting white rural music in a variety of places in the United States, particularly backwater and rural locations. There are also cases made for the role which ragtime and blues played in jazz's origin. One argument suggests that ragtime and blues went through an evolution and helped give birth to jazz. Another is that elements of both ragtime and blues intermingled with the burgeoning music but remained distinctive and that elements of all showed up in performances as well as in published works. Arguments both for and against New Orleans as the sole birthplace are strong. Writer/historian Robert Hickok suggests that New Orleans holds only an honorary title. In his text *Exploring Music*, Hickok says rather assuredly,

> **Although jazz began to emerge wherever African and European music came into contact- which is to say, wherever black and white Americans came into contact-some places offered a more favorable climate for its growth than others. For a variety of reasons, the great cosmopolitan city of New Orleans has been granted the honorary title of birthplace of jazz.**[4]

Thomas Fierher opposes this theory convincingly in an article about the Creole contribution to the birth of jazz entitled "From Quadrille to Stomp: The Creole Origins of Jazz." The Creole ingredient, he argues was not only the catalyst that bridged Afro-American and European styles into jazz, but was also responsible for New Orleans to have been *the* birthplace.

Before we continue, we must tackle another problem often associated with the origins of jazz and the center of a few myths itself: “What is a "Creole?" The term gets tossed around in New Orleans to such a degree, one would think it represents everyone and everything local and “native." In Latin-American countries it is “criollo” and means "of the land" but not indigenous. For instance, the musicians of 19th century Peru who were of Spanish

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[4] Robert Hickok, 'Exploring Music', 2n ed, Philippines, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, inc., 1979, p. 422

descent and played music that used guitars and had a Spanish flavor were “los criollos” and they played “la Musica criolla" as opposed to the indigenous Peruvian musicians who played the pan-pipes and wooden flutes, widely associated as a stereotype of Peruvian music.[5]

The first people to be called “Creole” in New Orleans were the families of the French colonists who settled in New Orleans, referred to as “White Creoles.” The term eventually came to be applied to anyone of both Negro and French or Negro and Spanish blood, or for that matter any mulatto. These people are generally referred to as “Creoles of Color.” Mr. Fiehrer regards “Creole” as being an Afro-Caribbean transplanted in New Orleans. He argues that the St. Dominguan/Haitian refugees who came to New Orleans in droves during the winter of 1809-10 created an environment that allowed jazz to flourish.

Fiehrer complains that while there is too much emphasis placed on the idea that New Orleans was a “melting pot” of ideas, the musics which become jazz did not converge onto the Crescent City, but exploded from it. He sees New Orleans as place whose diverse cultures coexisted with and without incident and produced memorable music. Fiehrer's opposition to the 'melting pot' theory is strong and his explanation complex. He tells us that the origins of jazz are often obscured due to the subscription of 'a contrived melting pot ideology that conceals the unique history and character of south Louisiana…[6]

In addition, Fiehrer refers to ragtime as a musical parent to jazz. He feels that it is often wrongly thought of as the progeny of Missouri. He quotes from William Schaefer’s *Brass Bands andNewOrleans Jazz*, which tells us that the “taproots” of Ragtime

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[5] Henry Jova, conversation with author, 1999

[6] Thomas Fiehrer, 'From Quadrille to Stomp: the Creole Origins of Jazz', Popular Music10/1 (1991), p. 22

were in the Deep South and was a reflection of the real musical nature of the Mississippi Valley. "It was a powerful influence on a new instrumental music, later called 'jass' or 'jazz', which grew in the region in the years around 1900." (Fiehrer p26) Fiehrer reminds us that St. Louis and all of Missouri were once part of upper Louisiana's Spanish territory. Also, legendary ragtime composer Louis Chauvin shared his surname with one of Louisiana's premier early families. His point, perhaps overstated, is that ragtime did not evolve into jazz. Ragtime does not seem to have roots independent of the deep- south and coexisted and mixed with the Caribbean influenced music which would grow into jazz:

> **The same "foreign" influences that generated early jazz were contemporaneous with ragtime and represent not a break, but a topographical as well as aesthetic continuum.[7]**

His closing paragraph offers a succinct summation of his argument that tells us that jazz could have only emerged in the colonial subtropics. This is due not only to the Euro-Afro synthesis, but also to the igniting factor of an emergent Creole culture. If that "catalytic variable" hadn't been present jazz could not have occurred:

> **Like its Cuban cousin charanga,jazz could have only issued from a unique Euro-Afro synthesis… and could have only made its appearance where it did… Otherwise jazz would have appeared in South Carolina, Mississippi, Jamaica or even Angola, but it didn't.[8]**

In *Jazz:A History*, Renaissance music scholar Frank Tirro attempts to show the happenings that led to the emergence of jazz by examining different geographic locales in the United States. He

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[7] ibid., p. 27

[8] ibid., p. 36

seems to be in agreement with Robert Hickok with this uncontroversial statement,

> **...it is clear that the story of jazz begins neither with theorigin of the word nor with the magic of a single creativegenius in a specific isolated locale...Jazz developed in America during the last decades of the nineteenth century with a kind of spontaneous combustion that singed both coasts.[9]**

Tirro is of the 'melting pot' school that Thomas Fiehrer refutes. Tiro also has a stab at the relationship between jazz, ragtime and blues. He briefly lumps them together as one genre. While discussing the first published blues and rags, Tiro boldly and with alarming unconcern states,

> **If we count ragtime as jazz, and there seems to be no stylistic reason for not doing so, then we can find an even older publishing history.[10]**

Jazz educator and musician Lewis Porter points out there is much evidence that jazz was a product of New Orleans. Among such evidence are the facts that pioneers of the music like Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver, Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet had an amazing impact on the music scene in Chicago during the late teens and early 20s.

These men were all products of New Orleans and each added a distinctive, unique ingredient to popular dance music in the Windy City. Early sound recordings tell us that these styles were absent prior to the arrival of these musicians.

Between the extremes of Thomas Fiehrer's Creole argument and the 'spontaneous combustion' notions of Tiro and Hickok, there is a sober middle ground from Lewis Porter:

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[9] Frank Tirro, 'Jazz', p. 53

[10] ibid., p. 52

It is undeniable that ragtime was being played and partially improvised elsewhere, and the blues was gradually spreading out of the South, and as a resultsomething like jazz probably developed in other cities. Yet it seems equally undeniable that the music we think of today as jazz was initially a product of New Orleans and its environs.[11]

The Ethnicity of Jazz

Is jazz black music? That question has been answered in as many different ways as there are genres of jazz. I have to say that I think jazz was first created by black musicians and therefore is a type of black music. However, white musicians were involved very early on and in significant ways. To quote jazz educator Dr. Lewis Porter, “jazz is black music — not that whites were not involved with its creation, but ti did originate in the black neighborhoods of New Orleans… Sure it was a mixture from different cultures, but it was the black musicians who did the mixing.”[12] Let us look at a few differing opinions:

Thomas Fiehrer calls jazz a "Latin-American type of music" and says that terms such as "Afro-American" or "black" are simply vague adjectives when describing the music. Robert Hickok's view is that jazz was created every time Negro and White music met in rural America. Frank Tiro's contribution ("no specific locale") curiously echoes this theme.

Composer/educator Gunther Schuller's very detailed and often obfuscated work *Early Jazz*, first published in 1968, places great emphasis on the importance of rhythm and inflection in jazz, and goes into painstaking detail to explain various rhythmic concepts as they relate to both jazz and classical music. All this is done so that he can clearly explain and support the notion that the basic

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[11] Lewis Porter, 'Jazz From Its Origins' p. 19-20

[12] Lewis Porter lecture-Rutgers 1998

elements of jazz rhythm “derive exclusively from African musical antecedents.”[13] Schuller's first chore is to explain that there have been many attempts to study, analyze and explain African music/rhythm which have been flawed by one consistent blunder: using European methods of music analysis and not consulting with master African musicians. Schuller cites A.M. Jones' pioneering work *Studies in African Music* as a breakthrough to understanding African music on its own turf as an alternative to the perspective of European classical theory. Interestingly, Jones's work, however, has since been shown, according to Lewis Porter, to have been Euro-centric in several respects. Jones conducted his research in British occupied lands only, thus missing many traditions of African music, for example, those that emphasize strings and not drums. He also notated African music in polymeters, with different meters for each part. More recent published research of David Locke has shown that Africans hear all the parts in a common meter (either duple or triple, depending on the piece in question), and hear all the seemingly conflicting rhythms as crossrhythms rather than as different meters. Porter adds that in fact polymeter is a device that only exists on paper and not in any aural culture.[14]

As musical examples, Schuller uses multi-staved transcriptions of African chants featuring a “cantor" and drum ensemble. The complexity and relationship of the different players of the example brings Schuller to say, "We have been certain for many years that jazz inflection and syncopation did not come from Europe, because there is no precedent for them in European 'art music.' In fact, the few examples of syncopation we do encounter, were borrowed from simplifications of this African influence as found American popular music in the late nineteenth century.”[15]

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[13] Gunther Schuller, 'Early Jazz', p. 6

[14] Lewis Porter, correspondence with author

[15] G. Schuller., p15

(Schuller's notion is extreme since there *was* syncopation in European classical music.)

Schuller maintains that the African's love and penchant for complex cross-rhythms and cross-accentuations, survived the transition from freedom ot enslavement by,

> **…translating these polymetric and polyrhythmic points of emphasis into the monometric and monorhythmic structure of European music. Syncopation, preceding or following the main beats, was the American Negro's only workable compromise.**[16]

The fact is, however, that Schuller does a little translating himself. He takes a complex transcription excerpted from the Jones volume and transforms it into "a typical 1920s instrumentation". He assigns the trumpet and trombone to play an adaptation ofthe original drum part. He assigns them pitches that fit into Schuller's scheme - He is obviously attempting to imply a 12-bar blues here. He takes so many liberties with the Jones transcription, attempting to justify his reasons, through his libertine musical practice eventually undermines his theory.[17]

Thornton Hagert's excellent and unfortunately unpublished work *Before Jazz*, takes us into the heart of American music from about 1820 to 1920. He focuses on traits in black and white, formal and informal types of music. Hagert carefully explains two disparate musical traditions of 19th century America and how one of them leads us in a direction towards understanding the ethnicity of jazz. Hagert describes this tradition as "…the everyday music making of ordinary people…" This would include congregational singing and music which would accompany dancing "…of a sort now called 'square dancing," he adds. It was simple uncomplicated music, the type of which was easily learned by ear and "…changed at a relatively slow rate." The newer type Hagert

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[16] ibid., p. 15

[17] ibid., p. 19-21

refers to was a style of composed music mostly imported from Europe. It usually was labeled as “high art” or “up-to-date,”

> **…and it included elaborate pieces for the newly-improved pianoforte, songs from opera and the theater, hymns “approved” by a committee of hymn-writers, and the new couples-dances such as the waltz, galop and schottische. Some of it was hard to learn by ear and required trained musicians to perform.[18]**

As this newer style began to take hold in the cities, the older style was found to survive mostly in northern backwater regions and rural areas of the South. As enslaved blacks were sold off and dispersed through the newer territories, the older style of music found new life. "By 1860," Hagert writes, "the majority of Blacks in the United States were heavily concentrated in rural areas of the South and near West." In these regions, Blacks, retaining whatever they could of their cultural traditions from Africa and the Caribbean mixed with Whites who had retained the older style of music making, although some significant mixing also took place nearly sixty years earlier. Ironically there were Whites and Blacks living in eastern cities who had never heard this older style! One of the significant modifications Blacks made to the older style of music was to be found in congregational singing. White congregational singing frequently used a five-note scale that avoided use of the fourth and seventh tone. An example of this, which Hagert offers is a spiritual song, called "Roll, Jordan, Roll.” This version was found in hymnals from 1855 and as late as 1911. The original published version that was the source of these was allegedly from an 1820 hymnal called “The Supplement to the Kentucky Harmony”. Some pioneering folksong collectors of the early 1860s transcribed five different versions of "Roll, Jordan, Roll" from freed blacks in South Carolina. They noted a slower pace than usual and elaborately subdivided rhythms. One of these collectors said that the song had an effect like “the waves

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[18] Thornton Hagert, 'Before Jazz', p. 2

rolling on the beach". Hagert notes another innovation: The use of the flattened 7th degree of the scale was an important element found in some Black congregational singing. These flattened 7ths were sung in a "consonant" manner, differing from the way they sound on a piano and without any attempt to shift the key of the music.

But the flatted 7th degree of the scale was not the only innovation noted by the song collectors referred to in Thornton Hager's essay. One other innovation seemed to be new treble parts sung by the women. Also, each of the five versions of "Roll, Jordan, Roll" seemed to be at the same time connected to the "standard" white version and also in a state of stunning re-composition. Hagert notes some over-all differences of singing styles between Blacks and Whites in the rural south of the mid-1800s. Generally the Blacks (or "freedmen" as the song collectors eloquently called them) seemed to re- compose their songs each time they sang them. They altered the melodies and rhythms to surprising degrees. Hagert quotes from one of the song collectors,

> **[…the Freedmen] strike sounds which cannot be precisely represented by the gamut [scale] and abound in slides from one tone to another…**[19]

Improvisation

Probably the most referred to component in jazz of any genre is improvisation. Over the years this has become the rule for understanding and misunderstanding not only how jazz is played, but also how it came to be. The basic theme is simple, the setting feverish and romantic: Itinerant New Orleans musicians "jam" feverishly into the night come up with "a new kind of rhythm," and new works of music which would pass into the canon of early jazz, a spontaneously improvised music, one that is

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[19] ibid., p. 16

created in the head and heart. Musicians would gather and magically create wondrous new melodies and then spin endless variations. This type of thinking has done wonders for the mystique of the jazz musician, regardless of the genre performed. It has ignited similar thoughts by writers such as jazz/ragtime historian Rudi Blesh, who described a

> **beater… hunched over the battered upright piano… a lonely figure, tapping his foot, humming in a rough voice the bare and melancholy phrases.**[20]

We can turn to the pioneering work Jazzmen for more excitement and mystery. We learn that the authors of this popular work referred to the early jazz musicians as "fake" players; musicians who could not read music, and had to rely on their seemingly natural ability to hear the music. The authors romanticize notions of natural ability:

> **Although naturally influenced by the music of their former masters, the Negroes retained much of the African material in their playing… characteristic New Orleans polyphony… became a dissonant counterpoint that antedated Schoenberg.**[21]

It is important to note that it may seem odd that the writers of Jazzmen would compare their beloved New Orleans jazz with the very different harmonic language of composer Arnold Schoenberg. We should remember that one of the authors who made this comparison was William Russell, himself a musically diverse composer. In addition to his love and involvement with early New Orleans Jazz, Russell also composed atonal music, most notably for percussion ensemble.

The same paragraph in *Jazzmen* tells us that young aspiring Negro musicians, who could not afford music lessons, went beyond the

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[20] Paul Oliver, 'That certain feeling', Popular Music 10/1 (1991), p. 13

[21] Frederick Ramsey Jr., 'Jazzmen', p. 9-10

technical limitations of their instruments since there was no teacher to show them these limitations.

> **In classical music the wind instruments had always lagged behind in their development. Especially the brasses were subordinated to the strings.[22]**

Obviously Mr. Russell was not thinking of the myriad of brass soloists who were truly the pop stars of late 19th century. Players like Jules Levy (cornet) and Arthur Pryor (trombone) were just two of the many brass virtuosos who could play with the speed and accuracy approaching that of a fine violinist. But on the other hand, Russell points out that with the lack of traditional education the young jazz pioneer was free from the restraints that might inhibit the creation of a unique jazz style.

As far as music education is concerned, we must remember that New Orleans was still a major center for classical music and opera. Young children learning a musical instrument generally took lessons with an experienced player/teacher and read from any number of standard note spellers (i.e. method books). There was a fierce sense of pride in learning music. Hopefully one day the fruits of practice would pay off and a student would be allowed to join a marching band or an orchestra. This was the case not only in the more privileged Creole families residing downtown but also in the black African-American families in the more dingy uptown area. White families lived scattered all over the city, sometimes sharing the street with black families uptown. For example, white clarinet playing brothers Harry and Larry Shields lived literally next door to Buddy Bolden and brother Larry went on to become a member of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, the first group to record jazz. Musicians in New Orleans at the turn of the 20th century were of a wide variety of musical skills. To put it simply: some were adept at reading music and

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[22] ibid.

had a somewhat “classical” training; others were not and did not. The music publishing business at the time was booming. At Werlein's Music Store on Canal Street not only music sheets for piano and voice, but dance orchestrations and band arrangements were on sale. Many of the early black music groups in New Orleans used these published arrangements which could be purchased almost anywhere in the country. Those who were better music readers coached the others in learning their parts. The semi or non-reading participants could play a semblance of the written part and more than likely improvise a part that was even better! I believed it was this kind of “by the seat of the pants” approach that gave legendary cornetist Freddie Keppard his unique style. Keppard, basically a non-reader, was one of the many cornet “Kings” of New Orleans. The stories of his power and imaginative playing abound. He recorded relatively late in life after some physical decline. But there is enough left to give a glimpse into his musical persona. Being a non-reader did not keep Keppard from working with high-class reading dance and show orchestras like that of Charles “Doc” Cook whose orchestra was in residence during the mid 1920s at Chicago's Dreamland Ballroom. On his recordings with Cook, Keppard plays fiercely with a wild vibrato, playing a second cornet part too loud to balance with first cornetist Elwood Graham's lead. It is possible to surmise that during his tenure as a New Orleans brass band musician, Keppard grew accustomed to being given the easier second cornet parts and proceeded to sort of learn them. What his reading lacked, his ear and ego more than made up for and the *second* became the *lead*.

There is another route we must take in order to “fill out” our discussion of the development of improvisational playing during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The orchestrations designed for both theatre and dance orchestra pit work often had a written out obbligato part to be played by the first violinist, who

invariably was the orchestra leader. Turning to Thornton Hagert's unpublished essay *Before Jazz* we find that,

> **In European Art music, the term obbligato usually indicated an elaborate counterpart to a melody written for an especially skilled performer. The part was necessary for the piece, and was therefore, "obligatory…" In dance orchestras of the early 1900s, this term obbligato took on a new meaning, nearly the reverse of "obligatory." The obbligato, usually written out for the leader-violinist, was intended to be played only if there were not enough instruments in the group to play all the normal parts.**[23]

Hagert points out that eventually even when there was a full complement of instruments on hand, the leader could signal certain players to drop out of the ensemble while he would play an obbligato. The obbligato became more and more a solo part, and was often played even with the main melody absent. Eventually it became common for players to embellish on written obbligatos or make up their own as had already been done in baroque and classical music but of course in very different styles.

Repertoire

Published band and orchestra arrangements were the foundation of what was to become the jazz repertoire. The chief forms of musical entertainment largely included both the (military) band and the salon (dance) orchestra. Many selections offered were popular tunes of the day such as "O' Didn't He Ramble," "High Society," "Panama," "Maple Leaf Rag" and others. These tunes have become part of historic jazz lore and by the late 1930s the new breed of jazz scholars were regarding these as folk melodies, which sprang up from a fountainhead of African-American inspiration. They for the most part were composed by New York based tunesmiths, and recorded frequently by New York based bands, orchestras and vocalists. Oftentimes today, these selections

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[23] Hagert, p. 25

are thought of as “traditional” and have become the staple of repertoires of old-time style jazz bands.

Some of the classic recordings of early jazz have also generated a mystique around the musicians involved. An example of this is the Jelly Roll Morton recording of “Steamboat Stomp.” Certainly Kid Ory's simple and memorable solo has been regarded as a true moment of pure improvisation. But alas! By looking at the Melrose stock arrangement we see that Ory was trying to capture the line originally intended to be played by the trombone and saxophone section! A similar incident involves another Jelly Roll Morton recording. This time it's Morton's 1924 accompaniment to Joe Oliver's rendering of Morton's “King Porter Stomp.” This is a record that has been longtime prized by collectors for its rarity more than for its value as a dynamic musical excitement. I have often heard collectors wonder why Oliver played so conservatively and “unhot” on this recording. Indeed, Oliver is not playing with bluesy abandon here, which he is usually noted for. Instead it is a straight, rather workmanlike rendering of Morton's melody. A look at the Melrose stock orchestration explains the reason. The first cornet part is what Oliver plays verbatim. He reads it directly from the sheet music. This may crumble and dash some of our fantasies about the creativity of our jazz heroes, but it also lets poor old King Oliver “off the hook” for not being the legend we had imagined. In fact it tells us that he must have been a rather good music reader.

The Dance at Place Congo

Tales regarding the origins of jazz often contain references to “Congo Square.” This was a green plaza known also as “Circus Square,” located across from the canal basin. In 1817 a law was passed restricting slaves from dancing and playing music in public with one exception. These activities could take place on Sundays at Congo Square before sundown. Here, the enslaved

Blacks were allowed to dance and make music freely in their native manner.

The standard jazz histories seem to be based on various New Orleans tourist guidebooks going back to the 1840s. Many accounts tell of Negroes dressed in elaborate costumes, men wearing jangling anklets, and performing traditional African dances such as the *Calinda* and the *Bamboula*. They would shout "Dansez bamboula, dansez calinda — badoum, badoum!" Actually these dances were Afro-Caribbean and had apparently spread to other cultures before they reached the shores of Louisiana, for example, a citing of Nuns dancing the *Calinda* in 17th century Martinique exists.[24]

Many accounts of the "Dance at Place Congo" have been written and here I present a few differing views:

Frank Tiro points out that drumming by slaves was often outlawed, particularly in the South. Hand clapping and foot stomping was soon substituted so that typical African rhythms could be "practiced and perpetuated without offending the white master." (Tirro 47) He then briefly cites the Place Congo as the important exception to the drumming problem. Here slaves could gather on Sundays to "dance, sing and play percussion instruments."[25]

The estimable book Music in New Orleans by Henry Kmen devotes a chapter to "Negro Music" and goes into some detail regarding Negro dances at Congo square and at other places before the 1817 law was in effect. According to Kmen's research a tourist reported in 1799, "vast numbers of negro(sic) slaves, men, women and children, assembled together on the levee… dancing

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[24] Fiehrer, p24

[25] Tirro, p. 47

in large rings."[26] Similar reports emerge from 1804 and 1819. The 1804 report obliquely makes the ritual sound quite exciting with great masses of Negroes making themselves "glad with song and dance." The report goes on to describe the costumes of the principal dancers as "wild and savage… ornamented with a number of tails of the smaller wild beasts." Kmen also cites a contrasting view made by architect Henry Latrobe. Latrobe described two women who "set to each other in a miserably dull & slow figure, hardly moving their feet or bodies."[27] The Sunday dances began to meet with some objections by the early 1820s and were shortly thereafter forbidden. K e n tells us that the privilege was restored in 1845 possibly due to the popularity of the dances with tourists.

A vehement discussion of the Congo Square dances appears in *New Orleans Jazz: A Revised History* by R. Collins. Collins dismisses the free dances at Congo Square as an absolute myth. Where Kmen sites references from 1799 and 1804, Collins reaches no further back than 1845. Collins quotes from Norman's *New Orleans and Environs*. The quote refers to "olden times" when "thoughtless" Negroes whiled away their cares dancing to tunes such as "Old Virginia never tire performing the unsophisticated break- down double-shuffle." Collins refers to this passage as "… the most authentic description of the slave dancing in Congo Square that we are likely to encounter…"[28] (Since Mr. Norman mentions the "Old Virginia" tune, Collins insists that this is proof that Slaves were not dancing the *Calinda* or *Bamboula*, "whatever they may be." He adds. No, they were dancing to popular tunes just like white folks.

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[26] Henry Kmen, 'Music in New Orleans' p. 227

[27] ibid., p. 226-7

[28] R. Collins, 'New Orleans Jazz', p17.

Collins seems to miss the point entirely by ignoring the many references made to the dancing prior to 1845. When he does cite a more reliable work such as Kmen's he does so disparagingly. Collins insists that the “myth” of Congo Square was invented to motivate tourism. His further explanation tells us that it was in 1845 that the city council passed an ordinance permitting the public dances. Prior to this “slaves were prohibited from such time wasting activities.” The ordinance was to show the abolitionists that the slaves were truly happy. Unfortunately, no slaves appeared at the Square and the Daily Picayune fictionalized the whole thing![29] In Collins' summary of Congo Square he finally admits that some unpaid "servant-slaves" occasionally held neighborhood dances on the local village green. The only point upon which Collins and Kmen agree occurs when Kmen acknowledges the restoration of the 1845 dancing privilege as being a probable ploy for tourism.

So, were the Sunday dances wild, joyous, uninhibited affairs or were they solemn and staid? Perhaps a clue to the answer lies in an 1823 report from a missionary named Timothy Flint who visited the Crescent City in 1823. Flint describes joyous, boisterous gatherings, however he suggests that the joy and boisterousness did not occur every Sunday:

> **Every year the Negroes have two or three holidays, which in New Orleans and the vicinity are like the "saturnalia" of the slaves in ancient Rome.The great Congo-dance is performed. Everything is license and revelry. Some hundreds of Negroes, male and female, follow the king of the wake… For a crown he has a series of oblong, gilt-paper boxes on his head, tapering upwards, like a pyramid… They dance and their streamers fly, and the bells they have hung about them tinkle…[30]**

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[29] ibid., p. 19

[30] Dena Epstein, 'Sinful Tunes and Spirituals', p. 133

But how long did the Sunday dances continue? Kmen probably does not address this because his work does not cover history beyond the year 1841. This question has caused many debates amongst jazz historians regarding the actual contact that some of the first generation jazz musicians had with the dancing and African traditions. The venerable and myth-laden Jazzmen claims that Buddy Bolden was already a teen before the free dances were discontinued. If this is true, then Bolden's 1877 birth-date would put the existence of the dances in the 1890s.[31] However most jazz histories give Bolden a much earlier birthdate, usually ca. 1868 which would likewise place Bolden's encounter with the dancers a decade earlier. In a similar vein, soprano saxophonist and clarinetist Sidney Bechet (born in 1897) tells along and colorful tale about his enslaved grandfather Omar drumming in Congo Square. Bechet's tale takes place ir 1855, which is plausible according to Kmen. Thanks to venerable jazz historian John Chilton, we know that Bechet's story is pure fiction. Chilton details in his biography of Bechet, the family lineage. We learn that Omar was actually Bechet's fatherand the paternal line can be traced back to Illinois! In another instance, historian Frank Tirro simply states that the dances were allowed until the Civil War.

While the accounts of various aspects in jazz history may be quite different and even at odds, we must not forget to regard each as part of an intricate puzzle. When we attempt to assemble the pieces we see many layers of fact and fiction, scholarly revelations and popular myths. It's that attempt at completion that allows us to see a broad picture with one scene disqualifying or perhaps validating another. R. Collins' extreme skepticism cannot be fully appreciated without the balance of Henry Kmen’s more sober and conservative efforts. Similarly, the scattered way in which Frank Tirro explains the diverseness of music in America is made much clearer when juxtaposed with more carefully explained works like

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[31] Ramsey, 'Jazzmen', p.9

Thornton Hager's or Thomas Fiehrer's. There are scores of contemporary scholars chronicling all genres of jazz. Those who document jazz since the advent of bebop have the advantage of accessibility to both musicians still living, or the documented interviews they left behind. We hope that the careful chronicling and accessibility to reliable information will insure a greater percentage of accuracy. This will save a great deal of time and effort at un-tangling myths and sorting legend from lies and myths. or will it? The "pre-preservation" of jazz lore will not destroy the music's mystique, nor will it preclude the evolving of legends or perhaps some myths. No amount of careful record keeping will diminish the spark of a jazz performance. Nor will such meticulous attention to details suppress the storytelling of a jazz musician. Let the legends live and be loved.

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