

Early Jazz



Blues is to jazz what yeast is to bread—without it, it's flat.
Carmen McRae

Chapter 2



Ragtime ¶



Traditional Jazz (dixieland) ¶

When black slaves were brought from Africa both to America and the Caribbean, they arrived with nothing but their personal and cultural memories. For our discussion, the most important of those memories are the musical traditions that eventually led to the development of jazz. Before we take a look at some of the components that came together to create jazz, here are two definitions to keep in mind. Both terms apply roughly to the period 1890 to 1929. **Ragtime**—An early mixture of African, African-American and European musical elements—no improvisation. **Traditional Jazz (dixieland)**—A later mixture of African, African-American and European musical elements—lots of improvisation.

In his book *Writings in Jazz*, noted jazz scholar and performer Nathan Davis raises some interesting general questions about the unique situation that led to the development of jazz. Perhaps there are really no satisfactory answers to these questions, but they should certainly give you cause for thought. With the above definitions in mind, consider this:

What kind of music might we have had if African slaves had been taken to China or Japan or any other part of Asia instead of to the Americas? On the other hand, what would have been the results if the Africans had been the captors and supplied various African territories with European slaves? Would we have a form of music similar to the music we now call jazz? These and similar questions arise when we try to solve the mystery of jazz.¹

Much of the music the slaves carried in their memory was what we call functional music—music created for work, religion and ceremony. World music scholar David Locke describes it this way: “African music often happens in social situations where people’s primary goals are not artistic. Instead, music is for ceremonies (life cycle rituals, festivals), work (subsistence, child care, domestic chores, wage labor), or play (games, parties, lovemaking). Music-making contributes to an event’s success by focusing attention, communicating information, encouraging social solidarity, and transforming consciousness.”²

As generations of slaves grew in a new land, their music underwent a series of transformations and transliterations that all played a role in the creation of jazz as a musical style. The key element to keep in mind is the concept of embellishment. All of the formats we will discuss from traditional African culture and music created by African-American culture contain some type of musical embellishment, which gives the music an unending set of variations. These variations run the gamut from slight alterations to an almost total reworking of a given song. Said another way, the performers can sing the same song over and over again, but no two performances will be exactly alike.

Some Precursors of Jazz

Work Songs

Many different cultures have created music that coincides with the rhythm of movement required to perform a given task, basically



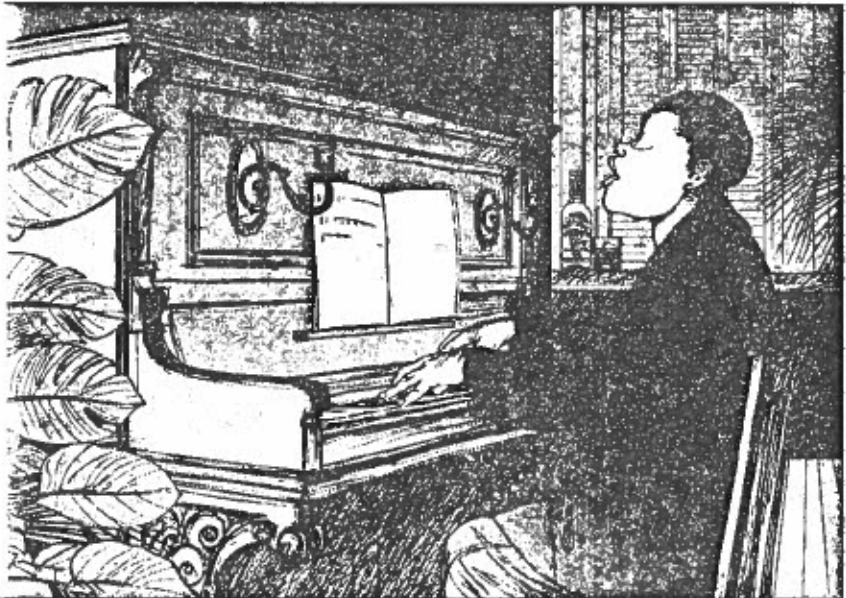
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following the philosophy of “whistle while you work.” Most African slaves were brought to the new world to perform repetitive, manual labor. To help lighten the burden of this work, music was created that fit the work being done. This was a long-standing African tradition that was incorporated into African-American slave culture. Many of the work songs featured the technique of **call and response** as a basic component. This technique of musical conversation was practiced in African drumming, ceremonies and physical work situations. One singer or group of singers creates a musical line (the call), which is then repeated or in some way answered by another singer or group (the response). Different work situations created different types of songs, as dictated by the physical rhythm of the work. For example, one common form of work song was the ax song, which takes its rhythm from chopping down a tree. In general, you sing on beats one, two and three, then swing the ax and hit the tree on beat four. The ax song, like most work songs, tends to have a series of repeated lines similar to the blues format. Listen again to the song *Berta, Berta* on your CDs. This is a perfect example of a group of men singing a typical work song.

Signifying Songs

Another form closely related to the blues is the signifying song, which also originated in Africa. Nathan Davis describes these pieces as songs of ridicule. "Members of a tribe who had committed a particular crime were often punished by being subjected to impromptu songs being sung by their fellow tribesmen about the deed or crime. Signifying songs in the U.S. had their beginnings on the plantation. In fact, it is safe to say that without the signifying songs, the blues we know today would not exist."³ In general, the musical patterns found in these songs are the same basic forms used in the blues. Davis goes on to say that later the signifying songs in America made their way into minstrel shows and other gatherings during the nineteenth century. He finishes by suggesting that "the Afro-American signifying song can be compared to the West Indian calypso in that both were designed to carry a message of social significance."⁴

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Religious Music

Most of the slaves who came to America eventually adopted Christianity as their major belief system. Over the generations, European hymns were adapted and incorporated into what we now call black gospel music. In addition, new music was created that made use of many of the African musical techniques we are discussing. Of those, perhaps the most important is the call and response format. Singers perform music in this give-and-take format, choirs and congregations create textures of call and response, and as the preacher delivers his sermon, he expects input from his parishioners. Most good sermons have an inherent rhythm, which often includes some singing from the preacher. At the same time, the crowd responds with shouts including "Amen," "tell it," and "God almighty." There can also be responsive singing from the choir

and/or the congregation. This singing can be actual words or a simple melodic moan.

The Blues

Basic forms and vocal techniques used in the blues can be traced directly back to various parts of Africa. The way certain notes are bent or otherwise embellished is one of the most important techniques a jazz player can learn. The ability to convincingly imitate vocal blues styles on a horn is considered a mark of musical maturity. Louis Armstrong was a master of both playing and singing the blues. All the wonderful nuances found in the blues are contained in his performances. Also, as you saw in Chapter 1, the formal structure of the 12-bar blues was, and is, perhaps the most commonly used form in jazz music. If arriving at a solid definition for jazz is difficult, it's even harder to pin down exactly what the blues is. One of the most famous quotes from a musician is that "the blues ain't nothing but a good man feeling bad."⁵

Minstrel Shows

The history of American minstrelsy is one of the most complex and unpleasant components in the development of American popular music. These shows carried, and in some cases created, many of the most offensive racial stereotypes ever to appear in America. Some of the racial biases we battle to this day can trace at least a portion of their roots back to the American minstrel shows.



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At the same time, some unique styles of American humor and music were also widely exposed to the entire country for the first time via minstrel show performances and the published sheet music that followed.

In the early 1800s, white performers began to impersonate the music and dialect of black slave culture. Mostly in the American South, the syncopated rhythms of black society fascinated some white performers and composers. As the shows developed, white performers would put on "blackface" by covering their faces with burnt cork and using white and red makeup to exaggerate their eyes and mouth. The music they performed was often copied from (read "stolen from") black slaves. The shows contained comedy skits, solo song performances and larger choruses of both singers and dancers. For many people outside the South, these shows were their first exposure to black culture. White minstrel performers created a highly stylized and usually negative picture of blacks in America. As minstrel shows became popular across America, some basic characters began to emerge. In his book *This Is Ragtime*, Terry Waldo offers this description: "During this period the comic image of the happy-go-lucky, wide-grinnin', chicken-stealin', razor-totin' darky became rigidly embedded in the psyche of white America. And from this tradition came a flood of pseudo-Negro entertainment that persisted throughout the ragtime era."⁶ A white performer named Thomas "Daddy" Rice is credited with creating two of the most lasting characters found in American minstrel shows. His *Jim Crow* character was a rural, uncultured, uneducated black with thick dialect and slow wit. This character was the butt of most jokes in the show. In fact, the term "Jim Crow law" was based on the wide knowledge of this characterization. The other major character "Daddy" Rice created was *Zip Coon*. This character was a "citified" fast-talking con man, full of humor and always ready for a party or a fight.

After the Civil War, many black artists also worked in minstrel shows. The height of irony was that these black performers also put on the "blackface" makeup and copied many of the negative stereotypes created by white performers. The often overlooked fact, however, is that the quality of music being composed went way up. Yes, there were still very bad racial stereotypes being portrayed by both white and black artists, but the music created during the latter part of the 1800s opened the door for both ragtime and traditional jazz. Most important to our discussion is the dissemination of syncopation as a basic rhythmic structure. To this very day, these wonderfully complex rhythms are the basis for most jazz.

The Development of Ragtime

Ragtime music brought together many of the previously discussed elements and mixed them with the European march format. This style fused African syncopation with African-American and European harmonic styles. In the years around the turn of the last century, almost every piano in the front parlor of an American home had a pile of sheet music on top of it. Remember, there was no radio or television. If you wanted entertainment at home, you had

to make it yourself. The concept of rhythmic syncopation was brought into these homes first by music from the minstrel shows and later by ragtime, the hottest musical rage of the late 1890s and early 1900s. To hear an example of ragtime, listen to the *Maple Leaf Rag* on your listening CDs.

One of the major creators of this new ragtime style was Scott Joplin. Mr. Joplin is often mistakenly given almost sole credit for creating this new music. Certainly there were other black composers who also helped in developing the music that would become ragtime. At the same time, Joplin has been overlooked by some white-biased scholars who have tended to paint him as “only” a ragtime composer. Joplin wanted to be much more. In *This is Ragtime*, Terry Waldo, an accomplished ragtime and jazz musician in his own right, gives us a more balanced view of Scott Joplin’s life.

The Piano Professors

Out of the ragtime tradition came the piano “professors.” These men were highly skilled piano players (mostly black) who performed ragtime and early jazz at social functions, dances, and in bars and houses of ill-repute. When several of these players came together, they would often take part in **cutting contests**. These competitions were usually in a festive party atmosphere where different “professors” would try to outplay one another. They frequently sped up known tunes to outrageous tempos and added radical embellishments. These embellishments were improvised on the spot, reflecting the spontaneous quality that makes jazz such a unique art form. Even today, the idea of a solo piano player taking a given song and adding his or her own musical ideas and embellishments is a mainstay in jazz culture. The difference today is that cutting contests take place on the various commercial recordings released rather than face to face in front of an audience.

cutting contests |:

Ferdinand “Jelly Roll” Morton, one of the first true innovators of jazz as a musical style, describes a typical scene for a group of piano professors in New Orleans, and he also gives us a great description of after-hours life in New Orleans.

Band Traditions in America

The final element we need to bring into this mix is the tradition of band music in America. A man named **John Philip Sousa** directed a band in the Marine Corps called *The President’s Own*. This band provided music for social occasions around Washington, D.C., as well as the traditional marches used by the military in both Europe and America. In addition to being a world-renowned band leader, Sousa was also a great march composer. He wrote some of America’s most famous marches including *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, *The Washington Post* and *The Liberty Bell March*. You should recognize these march tunes even if you don’t know their titles. *The Stars and Stripes Forever* is played every Fourth of July, *The Washington Post* is still one of the most popular marches used by American military bands, and *The Liberty Bell March* was used as the theme song for the comic television show *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*.

John Philip Sousa |:

After Sousa retired from military service, he started his own civilian band and began touring the country. He played his own marches, band transcriptions of classical music and band arrangements of American popular music. Minstrel show tunes and ragtime pieces were also a popular part of the band's standard shows. More importantly for our discussion, the popularity of the Sousa band created a wave of imitators in almost every city and town in America. In New Orleans, bands made up of black and creole musicians began to embellish the written music. Again, similar to the cutting contests held by piano professors, with the addition of improvisation, jazz was born. It's such a simple thing to say—jazz was born—but it changed the history of American popular music forever.

Notes

1. Nathan T. Davis, *Writings in Jazz*, 5th ed., (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1996), p. 15.
2. David Locke, "Africa," In *Worlds of Music*, 3rd ed., ed. Jeff Titon, (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), p. 74.
3. Davis, *Writings in Jazz*, p. 25.
4. Ibid.
5. Original source unknown.