

Jazz of the 1920s



Jazz is played from the heart.
You can even live by it. Always love it.
Louis Armstrong

Chapter 3

In order to bring together everything you've learned in the first two chapters we need to take a look at the city of New Orleans, Louisiana. The ultimate party town, New Orleans was, and is, unique among American cities. It has existed under Spanish, French and American rule, and the town's European flair is still quite evident in its food, architecture and general lifestyle. While Louisiana was a slave state before the Civil War, New Orleans had both a free-black and a slave population. In addition, there was a white population of both European and American citizens. Many of the Spanish and French men married or had affairs with black women. The children of these unions were called "creoles of color" and were generally treated as members of the aristocratic class until the late 1800s. Most of these creoles were educated in Europe or at least in the European tradition. For many years creoles were a powerful political and social force in New Orleans. In the years after the Civil War many Southern whites feared they were losing their dominance, and eventually the creoles were reduced in social status to the level of blacks after Reconstruction. Both groups were forced to live under severe Jim Crow law restrictions. From all of this injustice, two musical traditions were forced together and the birth of jazz as we know it was just a few small steps away.

New Orleans had a number of "sporting houses," where prostitution and gambling were the major sources of income. Of course, all these establishments wanted to offer the finest in musical entertainment. First they employed piano professors and soon many were offering bands modeled on the popular tradition of the day. Eventually, crime and vice in the city grew out of control. At the same time, however, it was a major source of revenue for the city. A city councilman named Sidney Story came up with the idea of isolating the bars, sporting houses and other dens of iniquity into one small area on the edge of the modern day French Quarter. This area, **Storyville**, was named in the councilman's honor. The development of Storyville helped accelerate the evolution of jazz by placing all these musicians in close proximity to one another. There was a wonderful and continuous exchange of musical ideas and techniques. At the same time, there was also a certain amount of showmanship as the different bands and piano players were constantly trying to outplay one another. In 1917, the U.S. Navy effectively shut down Storyville, fearing the spread of disease and a loss of control over its sailors. Around that time, blacks from all over the South were traveling to northern cities including Chicago and New York in search of a better way of life. As there was less work to be found in New Orleans, many of the city's best musicians followed.

From the book *Mister Jelly Roll*, here is Jelly Roll Morton's account of life in turn-of-the-century New Orleans. Take note of some of the musical terms, which you will see again in the next section of this chapter. One particular point of interest is Morton's discussion of what he called the "Spanish tinge." Many think that Latin influences in jazz are fairly recent additions, but Morton and others have pointed out that to some extent Spanish influences were in jazz from its very beginnings.



Traditional Jazz Band Techniques

One of the most important things to remember as we discuss jazz in New Orleans is that no early recorded performances of traditional jazz in New Orleans exist. The first jazz recordings were made in New York and Chicago. Most of the traditional jazz recordings you will study were made in Chicago from 1923 to 1929 and made use of both solo and collective improvisation. Almost all of the jazz played by bands in New Orleans, however, was done in a collective improvisation style.

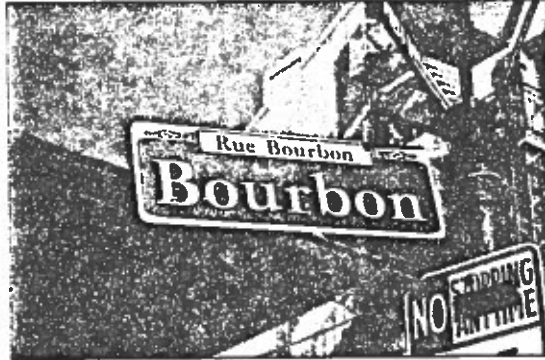
Most of the bands in New Orleans took their cues from the American band traditions discussed in Chapter 2. The big difference is that jazz musicians agree on

a basic melody, chord structure and rhythmic format; then they just improvise the rest. Each instrument has a specific role to play in the band, and the musicians learn how to improvise within the constraints of their individual jobs. The typical set-up for a traditional jazz band consists of both front-line instruments and rhythm section instruments. The **front line** is usually made up of one clarinet, one trumpet and one trombone. The **rhythm section** consists of a drummer, tuba or string bass, and chord instruments including banjo and/or piano. All of these instruments can function in the role of soloist.

These are the main jobs for the instruments of a traditional jazz band:

- Clarinet—"noodles." Plays fast embellishments heard at the top of the musical texture
- Trumpet (or cornet)—plays the melody
- Trombone—plays the countermelody
- Drums—keep the basic beat going, add rhythmic color
- Tuba/string bass—plays the bass notes of the harmony, helps define the basic beat
- Banjo/piano—fills in the notes of the harmony, supports the basic rhythm

Some of the tunes these bands performed had many sections, like a typical march or ragtime piece. Other tunes, like those based on the blues, could have a simple 12-bar format that was repeated over and over. Here are some structural terms to know. We call the main melody of a typical jazz tune the **head**. The head is almost always played at the beginning of a jazz tune's performance. Each player will embellish the written melody following the jobs described above. As the improvisation continues, you can have **ensemble choruses**, where everyone extends their embellishments. Remember that this was the common format for performances in New Orleans. Later, musicians including Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet began to break away from the ensemble texture, which allowed them more freedom as soloists.



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front line {};

rhythm section {};

head {};

ensemble choruses {};



 solo choruses {}

 out chorus {}

 solo break {}

 stop-time chorus {}

 trading fours {}

These **solo choruses**, as they are called, continue to be supported by some or all of the rhythm section players. (Keep in mind that these new solo improvisation techniques didn't start to happen until the mid-1920s in Chicago.) Eventually, when the musicians are ready to end a tune, they perform the **out chorus**. The out chorus is a return to the melody of a jazz tune similar to the head, but the last chorus tends to be played more aggressively, with larger deviations from the original melody.

In addition to the basic format stuff above, here are a few general things to listen for during a typical dixieland tune. A **solo break** is where the band stops playing and one musician improvises (usually two measures). These breaks can occur in the head, the out chorus and both ensemble and solo choruses. A **stop-time chorus** is a technique of accompaniment where the band plays just the first beat of every measure (or two) while one soloist improvises. You can hear Louis Armstrong playing a great stop-time chorus on your CD's recording of *Potato Head Blues*. And finally, we come to the technique of **trading fours**, where two or more musicians alternate four-measure improvisations. This often becomes a sort of musical conversation that runs through one or more solo choruses. These are just a few of the improvisation techniques you will run into as you learn more about jazz, but this is plenty to get you started. You can listen to Jelly Roll Morton's Red Hot Peppers playing *Black Bottom Stomp* on your listening CDs to experience many of the techniques described above. To hear an example of a more modern style of traditional jazz, listen to the George Lewis Band play *When the Saints Go Marching In*, also found on your listening CDs.

The People Who Made It Happen

Buddy Bolden

As you study the history of jazz, the first person you often come across is a New Orleans trumpet player named Buddy Bolden. Photos of Bolden are rare, and there are no recordings of his playing. All the New Orleans players who went on to Chicago talked of Bolden as being one of the first band players to add extensive embellishments to the written music, but this historically obscure pioneer never made it out of New Orleans. He was said to be a very loud player who could dominate an entire band with his sound. According to both jazz legend and written legal documents, Bolden eventually went insane and was in and out of a Louisiana asylum until his death in 1931.

Joe "King" Oliver

Joe "King" Oliver was another of New Orleans' great early improvisers. He was the lead trumpet player in several of the city's most popular bands. When Storyville shut down, Oliver was one of the first band leaders to take a band to Chicago. For our discussion, however, perhaps his most important contribution to jazz was his association with Louis Armstrong. As an older musician, Oliver served as a teacher and mentor to the young Armstrong. When Oliver went to Chicago, where he eventually formed his famous

Creole Jazz Band, all of his best New Orleans jobs were passed on to Armstrong. A few years later, it was King Oliver who sent back to New Orleans and brought Louis Armstrong to Chicago in 1922. It was in Oliver's Creole Jazz Band that Armstrong first began to venture into more aggressive and innovative solo improvisation. In just a few years, Armstrong would completely revolutionize jazz in both Chicago and New York. You can hear both Oliver and Armstrong perform the tune *Dippermouth Blues* on your listening CDs.

Sidney Bechet

A classically trained creole musician, Sidney Bechet was another of the important early innovators of improvisation in New Orleans. Bechet started as a clarinet player but later pioneered the use of the soprano saxophone as a front-line instrument in the jazz band. He liked the sax because the sound was much more powerful than that of the clarinet. Instead of always playing the high embellishments on clarinet, Bechet sometimes liked to compete with trumpet players for the lead melodies in the band. (To this day, the soprano sax can be a very loud and dangerous weapon—think Kenny G!) A man of great skill but also great temper, Bechet was often in trouble with the law, both in this country and in Europe. In spite of his troubles in Europe, he spent much of his musical career overseas, and especially later in his career, European musical influences can be heard in his playing. Although often overlooked today, his improvisation skills rivaled those of Louis Armstrong.



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Original Dixieland Jazz Band

One of the most controversial early bands to come out of New Orleans was a group of white musicians called The Original Dixieland Jazz Band. Over the years the band members, especially trumpet player Nick LaRocca, have been vilified as racist musical imitators who blatantly stole from their black counterparts. Sadly,

these facts are mostly true. These musicians were not great improvisers, but they were pretty good musicians who were able to copy the styles they heard in New Orleans. They are important to our discussion of jazz history for two reasons. For better or worse, in 1917 they were the first jazz band to be recorded. The general American public was exposed to jazz styles for the first time via these recordings. They were also the first jazz band to take this new American art form to Europe. In his book *That Devilin' Tune*, Allen Lowe offers us a fairly balanced view of the ODJB.