

Antecedents of Jazz

Although jazz originated and evolved in the hands of African American and Creole musicians, its antecedents were multicultural. At first, the music was syncretistic, combining many musical traditions simultaneously, in an integrated manner. Of course, there were no recordings in the first decade of the 20th Century, so we cannot hear for ourselves the sound of that music. But we can hear many of the musical genres that combined to form jazz: marching band music, ragtime (a syncopated, notated piano music coming out of black musicians in the midwest, as well as in New Orleans), “ring shouts,” gospel and other black church-related music, European dances like the quadrille and schottisches, and the harmony of European folk and concert music, much of which was filtered through the military bands. The environment in New Orleans in the first two decades of the 20th Century was ideal for a multicultural merger. Jazz could only have originated in New Orleans because of the unique mix of musical cultures and a thriving entertainment district that brought these musicians together and kept them employed.

The Louisiana territory was occupied first by the French (who named it after Louis XIV). It was ceded to the Spanish in 1763, but returned to French rule in 1800. In 1803 Napoleon sold it to the young, expansionist America for 15 million dollars. The largest city in the new territory was New Orleans (originally Nouvelle-Orleans) which was importing African Slaves, free men of color from Cuba, Haiti (a Creole speaking people), and elsewhere in the Caribbean, as well as the European immigrant population — the white citizens of German, Irish, and Italian descent. One hundred years later, early in the 20th Century, despite segregated neighborhoods, New Orleans created an entertainment district originally designed to control prostitution and gambling. It was called Storyville, named after the politician Sidney Story who had proposed the idea. Opening in 1898, Storyville was a melting pot of all the cultures in the city and included musicians from the Caribbean, Creoles of Spanish and French descent, and American Negroes, the descendants of slaves. The music that evolved into jazz drew from all these traditions.

Storyville was closed down in 1917 because the naval base in New Orleans considered it bad for the morale of the sailors. A law had been passed at the national level that there could be no “vice” district within five miles of a military installation. The city either had to close down the 38 blocks of Storyville or lose the revenue produced by the naval base. Closing down Storyville prompted musicians to join the migration of many blacks at that time to the northern cities, especially Chicago, Kansas City, and New York. Of course, there were other factors that drove “Negros” north — the “Jim Crow” laws of the South (a form of legalized discrimination) and lack of employment, at a time when heavy industry was hungry for workers in the north. Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton were two among hundreds of musicians who moved to Chicago, which is where their historic recordings were made: Louis Armstrong and his Hot Five and Hot Seven (1926 - 1928), Jelly Roll Morton and his Red Hot Peppers (1926 - 1927).

Evolution: Marches to Ragtime to Stride (1890s — 1930)

If you follow the links below, you can trace the lineage of one of the components of jazz from marching band music, to ragtime, to “stride” piano which is one of the building blocks of the jazz piano tradition. If you listen to the examples below in order, you will hear the two-beat

march (Stars and Stripes Forever) with their repeated themes reflected in the two-beat meter and repetition of themes in ragtime compositions by James Scott and Scott Joplin. (Not all marches are in 2/4 time signatures; many are 6/8.) Ragtime is virtually a replication of 2/4 march music but syncopated and performed on a piano.

Stride piano is a 4-beat meter more relaxed and including improvising and occasionally blues tonality. In this vein, you can hear the joyous powerhouse, Fats Waller (1928), creating an irresistible rhythmic piano music that is a flagship example of “stride” piano ((in which the left hand strides between the bass and middle register) that is inventive and tuneful. Finally, you can hear how Duke Ellington imbued the stride style with a more sensuous dimension in his “Black Beauty” (1928). (The Youtube links will take you to a public and free recoding of the music, but if you have a music streaming service, you can get somewhat improved audio quality.)

Links:

The Stars and Stripes Forever (John Phillip Sousa, 1896)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAnky-QJwII>

Grace and Beauty Rag (James Scott, 1909)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONJ35Mnbmlc>

- with musical notation

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJGcVgGcyhE>

Scott Joplin, “Maple Leaf Rag.” (1899)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9uR9IPBX8I>

Fats Waller, “A Handful of Keys” (1928) (Stride piano)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kIFoAwJPtm4>

Duke Ellington, “Black Beauty” (1928) (Stride piano)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AEh3iCQbNt8>