

New Orleans Background

New Orleans was a multicultural city, a musical melting pot that was fertile ground for the growth of jazz for many reasons. From 1700 – 1800 (approximately) the Louisiana Territory was governed alternately by the French and Spanish. In 1803 it was sold to the United States by Napoleon. The society remained multicultural. The French Quarter and Congo Square were central to the city's nightlife. Music from Europe and Africa mingled among the non-white population. The Creoles (of mixed French, Spanish, and African descent) and African Americans lived in separate communities, although racially mixed families became more common by 1900. The Creoles studied music formally and patronized opera and concert halls. The African Americans learned music through an aural tradition and “apprenticed” in marching bands and informal groups.

By 1900, New Orleans bands were a prominent part of public life playing at weddings, dances, funerals, and for public ceremonies. Instrumentation was compatible with the need to march through the streets or play at picnics and other outdoor events. Trumpet, cornet, clarinet, tuba (playing what later became the bass line), trombone, banjo, guitar, and drums were the familiar choices. Pianos were saved for the “tonks” and “jouk” joints, a term that survives in the word jukebox. The string bass was generally not used until the early 1930s. In the 1920s, for socioeconomic reasons, African-Americans migrated in large numbers to Chicago, where employment and opportunity was increasing and racism was less overt.

Ferdinand LaMenthe (“Jelly Roll”) Morton and Louis Armstrong

Comparisons of these influential musicians, both born in New Orleans, highlight two distinct traditions of jazz that evolved in New Orleans. Although both matured musically in New Orleans and as part of the community of New Orleans musicians, their mature music was played and recorded in Chicago (the first stop for most New Orleans musicians) and in New York (the home of the recording industry).

(PAGE 2 OF 2)

There were some similarities in their early recording careers. Their most influential and innovative jazz recordings were made in the 1920s in New York with bands that they formed specifically for recording, not for performing in public. Morton's Red Hot Peppers band was recorded in RCA Victor in New York in 1926 and 1927. Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and Hot Seven bands were also recorded in New York by the Okeh label in 1927 and 1928.

Jelly Roll Morton (1885 – 1941)	Louis Armstrong (1900 – 1971)
Creole, European cultural influences, esp. French and Spanish; Creoles were mostly shopkeepers and craftsmen living downtown	African descent; Afro-Americans were mostly day laborers and field workers who lived outside of the downtown area.
Studied classical piano, appreciated ragtime, a composed band music, also marching band music	No classical studies, influenced by marching band music and blues
Significant as a composer and arranger, secondarily as a pianist	Significant as an improviser, no enduring compositions
Music was highly arranged, although leaving room for improvisation, it was carefully orchestrated for a group	Music was spontaneous and innovative, pioneered the improvised solo and individual creativity and expression
Arrogant and antagonistic personality, unsuccessful as an entertainer	Charming, joyful personality, the ultimate entertainer