The Goodson Sisters: Women Pianists and the Function of Gender in the Jazz Age

The Goodson Sisters at Billie Pierce's funeral

In 1966, Billie Pierce (born Wilhelmina Goodson) told Bill Russell about her early days of learning the piano at home in Pensacola. The Goodson home was one where such "devil's music" as jazz and blues was not condoned. As Pierce recalled, "I started playing blues. My mother and father, you know, were very religious people." When the parents were out of the house, "Me and my sisters would get around a piano and have a good time. Somebody watched out for Daddy and when he'd come, we'd break into 'What A Friend We Have in Jesus.' He never knew the difference." Mr. and Mrs. Goodson, the parents of six musical daughters (Mabel, Della, Sadie, Edna, Wilhelmina, and Ida), were devout Baptists who expected their daughters to cultivate "respectable" music such as hymns and gospel songs. But four of the sisters, Edna, Sadie, Billie, and Ida, early on succumbed to the lure of jazz and blues, and they were to pursue these devilish genres throughout their careers, in settings far from the church. Only Ida, the youngest, was to turn away from "sinful" music. In the 1950's she gave up a life of playing the blues, returned to the church, and thereafter

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devoted herself exclusively to gospel music.\(^2\)

The role of female musicians in early jazz has only recently been taken up by jazz historians.\(^3\) An interesting issue yet to be fully explored is why women were largely restricted to piano playing in early jazz bands, such as those of King Oliver, Oscar Celestin, William "Bebe" Ridgley, and Manuel Perez.\(^4\) Since female musicians had to compete in an industry dominated by men, the Goodson sisters’ experiences raise important questions about how gender factored into early jazz history and also how the seeming handicap of being female could sometimes be turned to good advantage.

Since the time of Louis Moreau Gottschalk in the middle 19th century, New Orleans had been widely known as a piano town, endowed with gifted players from throughout Europe and the Americas. By the turn of the century, as Jelly Roll Morton bragged to Alan Lomax in 1938, “New Orleans was the stomping grounds for all the greatest pianists in the country.” Lily attributed the mélange of “Spanish, colored, white, Frenchmen. Americans,” and others “from all over the world” to the fact that New Orleans lively market for classical music and its sporting houses created “more jobs for pianists than any ten other places in the world.”\(^5\) While Morton’s claim may be exaggerated, there is no denying that the city’s rich European musical tradition and its open social life led to plenty of opportunities for pianists, from the church to the bordello.

Though such an environment might be expected to produce them, little is known about female concert, church, or ragtime pianists during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was only during the Jazz Age of the 1920’s that women pianists became widely known. Such artists as Mercedes Gorman Fields, Willa Bart, Jeanette Salvant (Kimball), Edna Francis, and Emma Barrett became key members of jazz bands, both as pianists and singers.\(^6\) While the Goodson sisters came from Florida, their careers blossomed after their move to New Orleans, and they became an integral part of the city’s jazz scene in the 1920’s. Two of the sisters, Sadie and Billie, enjoyed flourishing second careers during the New Orleans revival of the 1940’s and 1950’s. During the 1960’s and after, their association with Preservation Hall made them nationally and internationally.

The question remains as to why women were so narrowly associated with the piano in early jazz bands. The Jazz Age was a transitional period when older Victorian views toward the place of women in public

\(^2\)For comments on Ida’s “conversion” see Al Burt’s Article ca. 1985 in Ida Goodson vertical file. Hogan Jazz Archive.


\(^6\) See Vertical File subjects: Women & jazz
- local. Hogan Jazz Archives.
careers were yielding to modern views that allowed them greater professional mobility and visibility. The emergence of female pianists and vocalists in jazz bands was a case in point. Most of them, such as the Goodson Sisters, Emma Barrett, and Jeanette Salvant, were young women from conservative middle-class homes in which music making was part of their cultivated gentility. And the parlor piano, in African-American as well as white households, was the primary vehicle for genteel musical education. Young middle-class women, white and black, were expected to learn piano and many went on to become piano teachers.

In New Orleans during the early teens, for example, the large majority of African American music teachers in the city were women. And New Orleans was certainly not alone in this respect. Women piano instructors guided the early training of many future giants of jazz. Just as Jelly Roll Morton's first lessons were with the hapless Miss Moment in New Orleans, so Fats Waller in Harlem, Duke Ellington in Washington, Teddy Wilson in Tuskegee, and Count Basie in Red Bank, New Jersey were introduced to the keyboard by women teachers.⁸

Even for working women who did not adhere to strict middle-class values.

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The Jazz Archivist
playing was an accessible activity. In New Orleans, Camilla Todd was a well-known music teacher at 1916 Seventh Street who, according to Punch Miller, also played in the houses of prostitution in Storyville. And the bassist Eddie Dawson recalled that in the early 20th century, “many hustling women could play the piano but weren’t professional...they played for pleasure.”

Indeed, women were so universally associated with piano playing that in some quarters it was considered an un-masculine endeavor. Jelly Roll Morton claimed that as a young man he had initially mastered the guitar and drums and was inspired to try the piano after attending a classical recital at the French Opera House. “The only trouble,” Morton admitted, was that the male recitalist he admired “had long, bushy hair,” and that “the piano was known in our circle as an instrument for a lady.” This “confirmed me in my idea that if I played piano I would be misunderstood.” “I didn’t want to be called a sissy,” Morton added. “I wanted to marry and raise a family and be known as a man among men when I came of age.” Morton’s concern was fueled by the fact that one of the best pianists of his youth, Tony Jackson, was considered to be “one of those gentemns that a lot of people call them a lady or a sissy.”

The Rise of Women in Early Jazz Bands

The question of women and pianos aside, how did women from families that embraced middle-class values come to play in jazz bands? The Goodson sisters’ story may provide some insight. Though “devil’s music” was shunned, the Goodson home embraced more than just sacred music.

According to Sadie, while their mother, who had a beautiful voice, sang and played spirituals in church and at home, she also played “old time records” of such popular songs as “Home Sweet Home.” Sometime during the 1910s, the girls became exposed to jazz and blues and they were immediately drawn to these styles. According to Billie, the first tune she ever picked out was a blues, even before she could talk plainly. As Sadie recalled, her father eventually found out about their fondness for “jazz and stuff” yet “there was nothing he would say about it.”

In other words, Mr. Goodson, a Deacon at Mt. Olive Baptist, would not explicitly prohibit them from performing in these styles.

Even as the Goodson parents attempted to discourage the girls from attending dances where jazz and blues were played, Billie claimed that the girls snuck out of the house anyway. Eventually, the parents allowed the daughters to perform at house

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12 Billie & Dede Pierce interview April 2, 1959. transcript reel 1. 3. Hogan Jazz Archive.

13 Sadie Goodson Peterson interview. December 12, 1984; transcript 3. Hogan Jazz Archive.

parties and dancehalls. This slackened supervision was partly the result of their mother’s death around 1919 and their father’s frequent absence from home as a train porter with the L & N railroad. Of the two older sisters, Mabel began playing at house parties, while Dalla played at churches but also performed ragtime.\footnote{Ibid: transcript 1. 4.}

By the late teens Sadie gained a reputation as a top pianist in Pensacola, so much so that a local undertaker who hired touring bands from New Orleans always booked her to perform with Buddy Petit, Arthur Duvermay and Mack and Mack when they came into town. During this period Sadie also took lessons from a local woman named Florida Beck, and eventually she began playing for Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, vaudeville troupes, and even a Barnum and Bailey Circus that passed through Pensacola.\footnote{Sadie Goodson Peterson interview December 12. 1984: transcript 9. 18-19.}

By 1920, the Goodson Sisters’ collective reputations as pianists led to their hiring by most any touring act. As Sadie recalled, “If they didn’t have a pianist, they would always get a Goodson Sister.”\footnote{Ibid.: transcript 18.} And as she started playing with the travelling blues singers, her younger sisters inherited the gig after she went to New Orleans around 1920 with Buddy Petit. It is said that, in 1922, Bessie Smith hired her to replace Clarence Williams when he got sick on a tour through Florida. Billie also played for Ida Cox and Ma Rainey.\footnote{Billie & Dede Pierce interview October 7. 1959; transcript reel II. 12-13.} During that period, Billie and Edna began to tour all over Florida as pianists and dancers with the Mighty Wiggle Carnival.\footnote{Billie & Dede Pierce interview. April 2. 1959; transcript reel I. 4.} The youngest, Ida, also began to follow in her sisters’ musical footsteps when she started playing for silent movies, travelling medicine shows, and at clubs and dance halls. At one club during a police raid, the owner claimed Ida was his daughter to
prevent her being taken downtown as a minor.20

The New Orleans that Sadie Goodson moved to in 1920 was a city full of opportunity for black female jazz pianists.21 As Sadie recalled, when Buddy Petit told her “You play too much piano to be in Pensacola,” she decided to make the move and join Petit’s band on the lake steamer Madison.22 At about the same time, Sweet Emma Barrett began playing with Celestin and Ridgley’s Original Tuxedo Orchestra, while Mercedes Gorman Fields and Camilla Todd played with John Robichaux’s Lyric Theater Orchestra and also with Manuel Perez.23 When William “Bebe” Ridgley and Oscar Celestin split up the Original Tuxedo Band in 1925, “Sweet Emma” went with Ridgley while Celestin hired Jeanette Salvant, a native of Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, who got her start much like the Goodsons.24 Jazz bands in the North were tapping black female pianists from other regions, with much the same social and musical background as their southern counterparts. Lottie Taylor, originally from Kentucky, played piano in Bill Johnson’s band with King Oliver on cornet. Later, when Oliver took over the

Creole Band in 1921, he hired Lil Hardin, a graduate of Fisk University from Memphis, Tennessee. He then used Bertha Gonzalez in California, before rehiring Hardin in Chicago in November 1922. Hardin, of course, went on to make jazz history as a founding member of Louis Armstrong’s Hot Five and as a leader of such recording groups as the New Orleans Wanderers.25

What accounts for the impressive crop of female pianists in black jazz bands and vaudeville troupes in the 1920’s? An obvious answer is their talent and availability—Jeanette Salvant. Lil Hardin, and the Goodsons were part of a generation of competent female church and parlor pianists ready to move into the world of professional entertainment. A second factor is sex appeal: bandleaders may well have viewed having an attractive feminine presence on the bandstand as a real selling point. It was also a way to capitalize on the youthful rebelliousness that characterized much of the Jazz Age. In a time when older Victorian moral codes were yielding to more relaxed views of sexuality, the presence of a female in the band could be regarded as innovative and fashionable. Yet, from the women’s point of view, they were there because they could play. In Pensacola, as the sisters would tell it, no men could come close to the Goodsons on piano during the teens and twenties. Similarly in New Orleans, Jeanette Salvant found that Papa Celestin preferred her as a musician over her male predecessors.26 And in the eyes of King Oliver, Lil Hardin

[Notes]


23. Alex Bigard 430 60 and Jeanette Kimball 2 10 62; --Punch Miller. 9 1 59, reel iii. 19; and 8 20 59, reel ii. 15; and 9 25 59, reel ii. 14].


25. M. Unterbrink, Jazz Women at the Keyboard. 22-30.

proved to be superior to the men who preceded her.\textsuperscript{27}

The Goodsons’ local reputations never approached the national fame of Lil Hardin or, especially, Mary Lou Williams during the Swing Era. Sadie relinquished her gig on the Madison to move to New York, where she studied to become a registered nurse. Billie replaced her on the boat, but when the Depression hit and the steamer was sold, she fell back on playing the bars and honky tonsks along Decatur Street.\textsuperscript{28}

By 1935, Billie had married DeDe Pierce, and their foundering performing careers reflected the general decline of traditional jazz under the onslaught of the Swing Era. Throughout the later 1930’s and 1940’s they played low profile jazz and blues engagements around New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast. By the latter 1930’s male stride and swing pianists were dominating the national spotlight—few women pianists drove modern bands.

During the later New Orleans Revival of the 1950’s and 1960’s, Billie Goodson Pierce gained international fame as a star of the Preservation Hall Jazz Band. After Billie’s death in 1974 her sister Sadie filled in and was a regular pianist at the Hall from 1985 to 1995. But up to her death in 2000, Ida remained a faithful convert, performing to the end at her family’s hometown church, the Mt. Olive Baptist Church in Pensacola. Researcher and musician Barry Martyn, however, claims that Ida continued to play “low-down blues,” and an interview


\textsuperscript{28} Billie and Dede Pierce interview October 7, 1959, transcript reel II, 12.
with Ida and Billie at the Hogan Jazz Archive bear this out. In her 1961
terview Ida plays “The Florida Riff,” a
boogie-woogie blues, and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” back to back.29 Some
habits died hard.

Conclusion

What we learn from the careers of the
Goodsons, Jeanette Salvant, Lil Hardin, and
the rest is that the entry of women into the
jazz and commercial entertainment world
followed a common route. Almost without
exception, they began their musical study
as pianists, and the church was where they
gained the training and experience to
become professional performers. When
black women crossed over to jazz and blues
the piano was their vehicle, since it was an
instrument common to both church and
dance hall. Eddie Dawson remembered a
woman in the 1910’s from “back o’ town”
who played jazz at nights and organ at
St.Katherine’s church.30 And Lil’ Hardin,
who began as a church pianist, exclaimed,
“I might have known I was going to end up
in jazz because I played ‘Onward Christian
Soldiers’ with a definite beat!...it was real
funny, and the pastor used to look at me
over his glasses.”31 Ironically, the
embracing of jazz and blues by these
women allowed them to breathe new life
into the music of the black churches that
blossomed into the soulful, rhythmic gospel
style of artists like the Reverend Thomas A.

29 Ida Goodson interview by Dick Allen,
May 6, 1961; transcript 20-21; “Al Burt’s Article”
ca. 1985 in Ida Goodson verticle file. Hogan Jazz
Archives.

30 Eddie Dawson April 5, 1972, reel 1, 10.

31 From “Lil’ the Forgotten Armstrong,”
Ebony, 14 (September 1965) as quoted in M.
Unterbrink, Jazz Women at the Keyboard, 22.

Sadie Goodson by John McCusker (1993)

Dorsey in the 1930’s. By freely crossing
between sacred and secular musics these
women precipitated an open blending of
blues, gospel, and jazz that foreshadowed
not only modern gospel music but also the
more recent entry of gospel artists (Ray
Charles, Aretha Franklin, et al.) into
commercial pop.

The decisive rise of women pianists and
singers in the Jazz Age did not entirely
erase older stereotypes about the “weaker
sex” and the presumed limits of their
musical capabilities.32 They were often
perceived as “intruders” into a male
domain, as when Olivia Charlot Cook was
hired by John Robichaux over the

32 See “Why Women Musicians Are
Inferior.” Down Beat, 5, 2 (February 1938), 4;
“Says ‘Most Men Are Superior to Gals.’” Down
Beat, 5, 5 (May 1938), 4; B. Fossum, “Girls
Shouldn’t Play Too Much Jazz. Say Ada.” Down
Beat., 9, 23 (December 1942), 14.
objections of his sidemen. But women also served to temper the tarnished image of jazz as a music of corruption and vice. The presence of a lady such as Jeanette Salvant in Celestin’s band, for example, showed that jazz bands were not as dangerous as had previously been supposed. As can be seen in photographs of the Original Tuxedo Jazz Orchestra, a poised Salvant is always front and center, contributing an image that was clearly good for business.

But, while bandleaders were undoubtedly trading on their novelty and sex appeal, these women benefited in return. For them, joining jazz bands was the path to self-determination. It proved their professional competence and earned a degree of respect from their male colleagues. Billie Pierce and Sadie Goodson, Sweet Emma Barrett, Olivia Charlot Cook, and Jeanette Salvant Kimball all played vital roles in keeping the traditional New Orleans sound alive during the Preservation Hall era. They were survivors—in the business for the duration.

As late as 1990, the Times Picayune reported that, as Sadie and her husband Kid Sheik Colar were about to go onstage at Jazz Fest, the Kid was besieged by reporters while Sadie was “all but unnoticed.” Undaunted, Sadie proudly responded to one reporter: “They always did call me a star.” She knew her worth.

Dr. Charles Chamberlain

A Note from the Curator

What a year! Between two years of the Louis Armstrong centennial and the debut of the Ken Burns’ Jazz series on PBS in January 2001 (and since), the visibility of jazz in American media could hardly be higher. NPR did a Louis Armstrong series in summer 2000 that used oral history from the Archive. Burns used photography from the collection as well as on-camera interviews with the Curator, and this year New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival devoted much of the grandstand to a Louis Armstrong centennial exhibit that employed several dozen images from our photographic holdings. The Louisiana Philharmonic used 40 slides from the collection to illustrate “Satchmo and the Symphony,” a program presented at the Mahalia Jackson Theater for Performing Arts in May, featuring Dr. Michael White’s Liberty Jazz Band, vocalist Thais Clark, sacred drummer Luther Gray, and narrated by actor Tony Molina. The Curator also had the honor of joining Barry Martyn in presenting a lecture/demonstration on New Orleans drummers and drumming to a full house at the Historic New Orleans Collection’s second annual William Russell lecture at the Williams Research Center on April 19. Members of the Archive staff have also been very active in presenting lectures and oral history workshops at the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park visitors center in the French Quarter, which maintains a busy schedule of concerts and lectures pertaining to New Orleans jazz.

Finally, once again it is time to remind the Friends of the Jazz Archive to submit yearly dues of $25 to defray costs of producing the newsletter, checks payable to Hogan Jazz Archive.

Bruce Boyd Raeburn

35 Olivia Charlot Cook interview August 30, 1999 at Hogan Jazz Archives, at ca. 29 minutes.

“Brown Skin (Who You Really For?)”

The first band known to have publicly identified itself with the word “jazz” is Stein’s Dixie “Jass” Band. During their Chicago cabaret engagements of 1916, this group of talented, young, white New Orleans musicians scored heavily with mainstream Northern audiences. They were the immediate precursors of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. In New York in 1917, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band landed a recording contract and put out several highly successful dance records, considered to be the first recorded examples of “out-and-out” jazz. These were signal events in the popular recognition and dissemination of jazz, and the demonstration of its commercial potential.

The seemingly spontaneous advent of jazz has never been convincingly explained. By the time this new music was named, all that remained was the credit-claiming, which began in earnest almost immediately. After the Original Dixieland Jazz Band arrived in New York from Chicago at the end of 1916, advertisements heralded them as the “Creators of Jazz.” It was an impressive-sounding slogan, and the band’s outspoken leader and cornet player, Nick LaRocca, maintained to his dying day that it was literally true.

As early as the 1930s jazz historians such as Orin Blackstone, Charles Edward Smith, and Marshall Stearns began to call into question the Original Dixieland Jazz Band’s real significance in the origins of jazz. In response, LaRocca launched a protracted campaign of legitimization and self-aggrandizement, exchanging contentious correspondence with scholars and firing off letters of protest to newspapers, journals, and magazines.¹

LaRocca was not one of those salt-and-pepper neighborhood types who inhabit the folklore about how different races of people used to get along in “easy” laissez-faire New Orleans. He told anyone who would listen that he was influenced not-at-all by black music or black musicians. He insisted, in writing, that he never “fratizined [sic] with the Colored or played music with them.”² Pitting himself against the rising tide of jazzology, LaRocca came to see himself as the victim of a “Yankee,” “Jewish,” “Communist,” “pro-Negro” conspiracy to discredit the white man’s claim to jazz. Before turning his scrapbooks over to Tulane’s Archive of New Orleans Jazz in 1958, LaRocca spiked them with vitriolic commentary intended to vindicate his claims and expose “all the lies about jazz.”

All the lies about jazz will never be exposed. On the other hand, letters, clippings, and memorabilia in LaRocca’s scrapbooks serve to undermine his brash pronouncements. They reveal, in no uncertain terms, a personal history of back-handed relationships with black musicians, black vernacular music, and black people in general. Two episodes stand out in particularly bold relief: LaRocca’s legal battle for a copyright on “Livery Stable Blues” and his meddling with Clarence


Williams and Armand J. Piron’s first big hit, "Brown Skin (Who You For?)."

**The Ruckus Over “Livery Stable Blues”**

The Original Dixieland Jazz Band’s February 1917 recording of “Livery Stable Blues” was an immediate smash hit. LaRocca had the song copyrighted, and he published a sheet music version of it under what appears to have been the band’s original working title, “Barnyard Blues.” Clarinetist Alcide Nunez, who was in the band when they first worked it up in Chicago, also published a version under the title that was used on the Victor recording. LaRocca filed a suit against Nunez, and the case was heard in Federal District Court in Chicago. Coverage in the local dailies began with a patronizing report in The Chicago American: “Federal Judge George A. Carpenter is going to get deeper and deeper into something awfully deep. He has to decide October 10 [1917] whether Dominic LaRocca, a cornet player, or Alcide Nunez, a clarinet player, wrote ‘Livery Stable Blues,’ a jazzy chef d’oeuvre with a moaning motif as of a pony neighing, or maybe a ‘mool.’ And what does a federal judge know about hoss-trading? Each claims authorship, and LaRocca has filed a petition for an injunction restraining Nunez from publishing and affixing his name to this livery stable thing.”

A headline in The Chicago Journal put “LaRocca vs. Nunez” on a first-name basis: "Dominic Claims Alcide Purloined His Tone Picture of Emotions of Lovesick Colt.” Painting the proceedings as a comic spectacle, reporters took particular delight in mimicking LaRocca and Nunez’s distinctive, blue-collar New Orleans neighborhood accent. One reporter described how LaRocca took credit for originating the song’s much-touted animal imitations: “I was swell at imitating animals… I came to Chicago with the original Dixie jazz band and we played in the Schiller Café. See? Well, one night after the regular piece had been played der was a goil skylarkin’ on the floor, see? So I picks up the cornet and lets go a horse neigh at her.”

The case took a turn when Nunez launched his defense: “Snearing defiantly at the assembled clans of song boosters, pink shirted composers, and the repute of Tin Pan Alley, Nunez cut loose with the real dope. ‘You see,’ he said. ‘nobody wrote “The Livery Stable Blues.”’ Naw. Nobody writes any of that stuff... We was in the Schiller Café, rehearsing. see? And I suggests that we take the “More Power Blues” and hash ’em up a bit… All the blues is alike. They come from a sort of song that all the colored folks sings when they gets lonely.”

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3 “Jazzy Blues To Moan Lure In U.S. Court.” Chicago American (October 3, 1917). clipping from LaRocca scrapbook, Hogan Jazz Archive.

2 "Jazz Band Masterpiece Authorship in Dispute," Chicago Journal (October 11, 1917), clipping from LaRocca scrapbook, Hogan Jazz Archive.

1 “Discoverer of Jazz Elucidates in Court.” undated clipping from LaRocca scrapbook, Hogan Jazz Archive.

Nick LaRocca in 1917.

A little-known vocal edition of the Nunez publication of “Livery Stable Blues” includes a verse that refers to an African-American source of the melody:

Way Down in Alabama
It was in Birmingham.
There was a lazy colored fellow named Lee
Instead of working all day.
Upon the stable brush he’d play.
To the horses he’d sing.
And play upon one string.
This sad and lonesome melody. 9

Judge Carpenter quickly concluded that the animal imitations in “Livery Stable Blues” were irrelevant to the case because they were not reflected in the copyright deposits, but he took up deeper musicological matters when he considered the melody. He based his decision on testimony concerning the historical relationship between “Livery Stable Blues” and “More Power Blues.” Apparently, Chicago-based African-American piano professor and ragtime composer James “Slap” White was called in to testify as an expert witness, and what he had to say influenced the judge’s ruling. In handing down his decision, Judge Carpenter noted: “No claim is made by either side for the Barn-Yard calls that are interpolated in the music; no claim is made for the harmony. The only claim appears to be for the melody... The only question is, has there been a conceived idea of the melody that runs through this so-called Livery Stable Blues. I am inclined to take the view of Professor Slap White in this case, that it is an old Negro melody, that it has been known for a great many years. The last witness says this More Power Blues is fifteen years old and the plaintiff’s best witness Mr. LaRocca says it is ten years old... But the court is satisfied, from having

“Livery Stable Blues” (1917)

looked over the manuscripts. That there is a very decided resemblance between the aria—the melody of More Power Blues and the Livery Stable Blues. The finding of the Court is therefore that... neither the plaintiff nor the defendant is entitled to copyright.”

“Brown Skin (Who You For?)”

Within a few months of their arrival in Chicago, Stein’s Dixie “Jass” Band factionalized, and LaRocca emerged as the head of the contingent that went on to become famous as the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. In 1917 the Original Dixieland Jazz Band took up residence at Reisenweber’s Restaurant in New York City, and LaRocca recalled in a 1958 interview that: “When we were at Reisenweber’s, we were a big hit. [A.J.]

Piron sent me a bundle of music to try to play for him... and among them was... “Brownskin Who You For?” which they [Piron and Clarence Williams] later placed with Will Rossiter of Chicago... You’ll find cards to that effect in the Tulane repository that will prove to you that we didn’t discriminate against the colored man.”

Clarence Williams composed “Brown Skin (Who You For?)” and submitted it for

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10 Court transcription of Judge Carpenter’s opinion in Max Hart et al. vs. Roger Graham in LaRocca scrapbooks. Hogan Jazz Archive. Max Hart was LaRocca’s agent.

11 Nick LaRocca interview by Richard B. Allen. June 9, 1958. Hogan Jazz Archive. This is LaRocca’s compacted recollection of an historical relationship with Piron that spanned several years. In a January 13, 1937 letter to Marshall Stearns, LaRocca stated that before leaving New Orleans with Stein’s Dixie “Jass” Band in 1916, he “had become acquainted with A. J. Piron, a colored orchestra leader of that city.” An August 13, 1922 letter from Piron to LaRocca confirms that LaRocca did receive “a bundle of music” from Piron, not during the Original Dixieland Jazz Band’s Reisenweber engagement but instead in response to a personal inquiry from LaRocca regarding Piron’s song hit of 1921: “Sister Kate.” Both letters can be found in the Nick LaRocca Collection. Hogan Jazz Archive.
Promotional postcards for Reisenwebers (1917)
copyright in 1915. It was said to have been inspired by a popular black street expression. Published in collaboration with business partner A. J. Piron and the local Dugan Piano Company. "Brown Skin" became the runaway hit of the 1916 Carnival season. Although Williams originally intended it as "a song for the people of color," its infectious call and response chorus quickly spread across race lines. "Brown Skin, who you for? I'm for you my sweet papa."

12 For an account of Williams' initial success with this song, see Lynn Abbott, "'Brown Skin (Who You For?)': Another Look at Clarence Williams' Early Career," The Jazz Archivist, vol. 8, nos. 1 & 2 (December 1993), 1-15.


Williams was not exaggerating when he declared, "The whole town is 'Brown Skin' crazy, and all the whites and blacks are praising this latest hit." 16 When Nick LaRocca, Johnnie Stein, and company left New Orleans for Chicago on March 2, 1916, five days before Mardi Gras, "Brown Skin" was on everybody's lips. 17

Upon their arrival at the Schiller Café in Chicago, 318 East Thirty-First Street, Stein's Dixie 'Jass' Band instituted "Brown Skin" as the "house ditty." The Chicago Herald of April 23, 1916 reported that "Long before you enter the Schiller Café you know it is there. A block away you can hear its brassy call... At 11 o'clock Thursday night the room was crowded almost to capacity with at least 200... BAND PLAYS—MUSIC? The center of the room is railed off for dancing. The music is furnished by Stein's Dixie 'Jass' Band, imported direct from the 'Pup Café' in New Orleans for an unlimited engagement... The waiters, entertainers and most of the regular patrons joined in the house ditty, a ballad with endless verses: 'Who you for, Brown Skin? I'm for you, white folks. Who you for, Brown Skin? I'm for you, white folks.' Over and above the hoarse mauldin harmony is the insistent, never-ending blare of the band. Through it all the submerged singing: 'Who you for, sweet mama? I'm for you, sweet papa. Who you for, sweet mama? I'm for you, sweet papa.' The dancing? It is typical cabaret dancing only more so—fifty-seven varieties of wriggle."

Except for the interjection of "I'm for you, white folks," this report could have been describing an evening at Clarence Williams' own cabaret back in New Orleans. In his 1958 interview LaRocca recalled it this way: "We featured 'Brown Skin. Who You For?,' which Will Rossiter published; that's one of [Piron's] numbers... and we also featured 'Sister Kate'... We had special arrangements on them; we used to get up—we didn't sing, but we used to holler... I'd get up there and start, [sings a bit of 'Sister Kate'], and so on... They were good numbers and we played 'em, the same as 'Some of These Days,' 'Dartkown Strutter's Ball,' or many other tunes that was owned by colored people we played... In other words, when we got out there: 'Who're you for, Brownskin? I'm for you, white folks.' Stuff like that, that would appeal to the Northern man." 18

LaRocca insisted that it was the Original Dixieland Jazz Band's success with "Brown Skin" that enabled Williams and Piron to place it with Chicago-based sheet music publisher Will Rossiter. Indeed, "Brown Skin" was placed with Rossiter, but not by Williams and Piron. The version of "Brown Skin" that Rossiter introduced during the summer of 1916 was credited on the cover to Roy Barton and Jerry Mills. An additional credit on the inside cover says "by Sam Seligman, Roy Barton, and the Original Dixie Jazz Band." 19

Aside from the credit to the Original Dixie Jazz Band, the most conspicuous name attached to the Rossiter publication of "Brown Skin" is that of Jerry Mills. Originally from Toronto, Canada, Mills was a black performer whose professional career got under way before Clarence Williams and Nick LaRocca were born.

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During the late 1890s Mills toured South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand with McAdoo’s Minstrel and Vaudeville Company. His relationship with Will Rossiter began in the spring of 1912 when he accepted a job as “Dancing Master of [the] Will Rossiter Musical Publishing Company.”

There appears to have been a concerted effort by the people involved with the Rossiter version of “Brown Skin” to alter the melody and lyrics enough to deflect any accusations of copyright infringement. Moreover, the chorus—the heart of the song—which Clarence Williams originally fashioned from a traditional South Rampart Street greeting, was now absurdly contorted for the edification of the “Northern Man”: “Who’re you for, Brown Skin? I’m for you white folks.”

When the Original Dixieland Jazz Band moved from Chicago to New York their popular “white folks” parody of “Brown Skin” went with them. LaRocca’s scrapbooks preserve a 1917 souvenir postcard from Reisenweber’s which advertises “Brown Skin” as the Original Dixieland Jazz Band’s “own New Orleans creation” (see illustration).

Meanwhile, the rival Johnnie Stein faction of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band kept the “white folks” version of “Brown Skin” alive in Chicago, and they also staked a claim in the song’s New Orleans origins. The November 1917 edition of Ragtime Review carried this story: “Little Johnnie Stein and his famous jazz band—the original New Orleans jazz band—have been playing successful engagements. They have certainly helped to make jazz popular round about the country for some time. The singing dance, hailed as the latest dancing innovation...is really an old idea in a new dress. Johnny Stein and his jazz band were the rage in New Orleans and throughout the South playing ‘Who Yo’ Fo’ Brown Skin,’ a quaint basic singing dance, which delighted countless tourists season after season from all over the world, who visited New Orleans during the racing season and for the Mardi Gras festival.”

Who was “Brown Skin” really for? Nick LaRocca, Johnnie Stein, and others seemed to feel they had every right to expropriate the tune, establish their own reputation on it, take credit for its creation, and profit from it while simultaneously perverting it for the edification of the “Northern man.”

A backward glance at Ethiopian minstrelsy and ragtime-era coon songs reveals the historical basis for these assumptions.

Nick LaRocca was a champion and defender of the “old order” of things. His court battle with Alcide Nunez over the commercial control of an “old Negro melody” and his role in co-opting and corrupting Clarence Williams and Armand Piron’s original black New Orleans song hit, “Brown Skin (Who You For?),” illuminate the uphill struggle of African-Americans to establish a self-determined cultural image in the context of American race history.

Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff

20 “See The Freeman (Indianapolis) (February 1, 1908), The New York Age (March 7, 1912), and The Chicago Defender (March 16, 1912).

New Orleans Jazz Photography

On April 20, 2001 the New Orleans International Music Colloquium presented a panel discussion, "In Praise of Bedou and Paddio. Porter and Crawford. Kuhlman and Cahn: The Photographers Who Have Documented New Orleans Music." at the Old U.S. Mint in tandem with the French Quarter Festival. Panelists included local photographers Harold Baquet, Keith Calhoun, Chandra McCormick, Michael P. Smith, Eric Waters, and Girard Mouton III, who co-chaired the session with the author. The panelists discussed the works of photographers who were instrumental in documenting the city’s musical and cultural heritage. The names of photographers given in the session title were not intended as a definitive list of those active in and around New Orleans from the early days of photography on. To the contrary, this was just a starting point for research yet to be done on the many practitioners deserving of wider recognition for their efforts in capturing and preserving New Orleans life style, and especially its musical heritage, on film.

Jazz, designated by Congress as one of America’s most original cultural contributions to humanity, is one of the few art forms that have been photographically recorded from the beginning, and New Orleanians are most fortunate to have visual documentation of the jazz legacy preserved at home, as well as having representative samples scattered throughout the world. Fortunately, the cameras captured for posterity not only the musicians, but also the instruments, dance halls, clubs, and neighborhoods where the music was performed. The artistically trained eye can observe the adeptness of these talented photographers as artists and jazz scholars can appreciate the importance of these works as a window to the early days of jazz. Without the foresight of early jazz photographers, it is possible that we would never have seen the likeness of Buddy Bolden, called the “first man of jazz,” or images of Papa Jack Laine and his Reliance bands marching in full regalia in early Mardi Gras parades; lost forever would have been images of Storyville, such as those shot by Ernest Belloq, when the establishments of Tom Anderson and Lulu White were keeping the multitude entertained with music and other pleasures.

Photography historian Girard Mouton III discussed the works of Arthur P. Bedou and his protégé, Willard Paddio, whose work had been displayed in the Hogan Jazz Archive during the “Eyes of Jazz” exhibit and were also featured in an earlier article in this publication (see The Jazz Archivist, vol. VI, no. 1 [May 1991]). Although they had very different styles, Bedou and Paddio photographed many important jazz figures: they both did Louis Armstrong individually (especially in 1931 on his first trip home), and there are also important portraits and band shots of Oscar Celestin, Clarence Williams, Armand J. Piron, and Manuel Perez. Girard, a gifted photographer himself, presented slides of his work as well, showcasing his many years of extensively documenting New Orleans musical culture, including Carnival and the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival. His photo hobbyist father, a merchant seaman who collected camera gear from around the world, introduced him to photography at an early age. Girard is an honors graduate of the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York and did graduate work as a business student at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. Through his research into the history of photography, he has assisted the Archive many times in helping to identify the work of given photographers, especially African
Sugar Boy Crawford by Marion Porter (1960)
Americans, and he was also indispensable in mounting the “Eyes of Jazz” exhibit.

Eric Waters paid tribute to Marion Porter and his works. Mr. Porter, whose images depict what life was like for African Americans in New Orleans, was the official photographer for the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club, the Longshoremen’s Association, Louisiana Weekly, and New Orleans Data Newsweekly. Dubbed “the consummate photojournalist” by the pioneer African American disc jockey, journalist, and Master of Ceremonies George W. “Tex” Stephens (who joined the panel at Mr. Waters’ invitation), Mr. Porter could be found in any inner-city neighborhood, camera in hand, ready to shoot what was happening: his motto was “anywhere, anyplace, anytime—take the picture, get the picture, apologize later.”

Mr. Waters, owner of Ebon Images (a website dedicated to the promotion of photography as art), is passionate in his campaign to bring greater awareness to the extensive collection of photographs taken by Marion Porter.

Eminent American painter and photographer Ralston Crawford, although born in Canada, adopted New Orleans as his spiritual home. During his visits to the city from the late 1940’s through the 1960’s, he was often accompanied in the field by the Curator of Tulane’s Archive of New Orleans Jazz, Richard B. Allen. Mr. Crawford attended and photographed parties, picnics, funerals at private residences, saloons, churches, and in the streets. He went wherever the common people of New Orleans would routinely go.
His photographic eye embraced not only scenes related to the music but the totality of New Orleans life style, presenting a portrait of an era. The Hogan Jazz Archive has approximately 750 of these images, illustrating how well he resounded to people, recording the revival of interest in New Orleans jazz as well as its social and cultural context.

John Kuhlman specialized in photographs of New Orleans musicians, but he was not limited to that subject, photographing many weddings, banquets, and other social events around the city after World War II. He was elected president of the Professional Photographers Guild of Greater New Orleans in 1953. Mr. Kuhlman was the official photographer for the New Orleans Jazz Club, and many of his images have appeared in the pages of the club’s journal, The Second Line, over several decades. He attended almost every Jazz Club event from its inception in 1948, thereby providing a visual history of the club’s activities with hundreds of pictures, some of which are housed in the Jazz Archive, while others are at the Jazz Club Collection of the Louisiana State Museum or held by private collectors.

Harold Baquet, who comes from a long family tradition of New Orleans Creole artisans and musicians, discussed the work of the late Jules Cahn, a local businessman whose undying love for jazz is shown through the thousands of prints and dozens of films of New Orleans bands that are credited to him. (Many of these prints have graced the Jazz Tent during New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, along with the work of Michael P. Smith.) An avid humanitarian, Mr. Cahn was a familiar sight at many marching club parades, funerals, Mardi Gras Indian events, and Jazz Fest programs, as well as at civil rights
marches during the turbulent 1960’s. His collection is now housed at the Historic New Orleans Collection. Baquet spoke affectionately of Cahn, who was a personal friend and a major benefactor to many local photographers. Baquet is the staff photographer for Loyola University in New Orleans and a relative of notable jazzmen George and Achille Baquet. Baquet’s own work as a documentary photojournalist and archivist is a tribute to New Orleans and its unique African American culture. After the session, Mr. Baquet donated four of his beautifully mounted prints to the Hogan Jazz Archive.

Local photographer/ethnographer Michael P. Smith prepared a series of slides showcasing his many years of chronicling the New Orleans music scene. During an interview with *Times-Picayune* reporter Chris Waddington for an article appearing on May 3, 1995. Mike stated that “When I’m out there on the streets or in a club. I’m enjoying myself in the authentic environment of New Orleans culture, but I’m also acting out an obsession with documenting as much as I can about the music. In New Orleans, if you want to find out what’s going on, follow the music.” And he has followed the music for over thirty years, using the camera to tell a story of the music, the musicians, and the traditions ubiquitous to New Orleans.

Mike Smith, the author of several books on the music and culture of New Orleans (including Jazz Fest, Mardi Gras Indians, and Spiritualist churches), has donated many of his images to the Hogan Jazz Archive.

The collective works of husband and wife team Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick provide insight not only into the social life of New Orleans but also into the life style of working class people in
outlying river cities. Both photographers have spent several years chronicling the everyday lives of African American sugar plantation workers. They presented a video clip about their photography that had recently been featured on CBS News Sunday Morning program. Keith and Chandra also participated in the 1997 Magic Bus Civil Rights History tour as part of University of New Orleans history professor Douglas Brinkley’s “On the Road with the Magic Bus” class, which took eighteen New Orleans high school students and eight of their teachers on a six-state, twelve-day educational tour.

Representative examples of Calhoun and McCormick’s photography were most recently published in Deborah Willis, *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present*.

In addition to the participants in the panel, a number of well-known jazz photographers from New Orleans and elsewhere were present in the audience, and the entire entourage gathered together for a portrait taken by Al Kennedy. From the left are, front row, Ray Avery, Pat Jolly, Chandra McCormick, Arthur Tong, and Keith Calhoun; middle row are Girard Mouton III, Morris Jones, and Al Peters; back row are Michael P. Smith, Harold Baquet, and Eric Waters.

The panel session was sponsored by the Ethel and Herman L. Midlo International Center for New Orleans Studies, the University of New Orleans, the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, and the New Orleans Jazz Commission, in association with French Quarter Festival Inc. The event, which was free to the public, was videotaped by Parker Dinkins, under the auspices of the National Park Service. The videos are available for screening at the Hogan Jazz Archive.

Alma Williams Freeman
The Strangest Bedfellows: Nick LaRocca and Jelly Roll Morton

“Consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.” Ralph Waldo Emerson

As a long-time admirer of Jelly Roll Morton (and present owner of his boyhood home at 1441-43 Frenchman Street), I have followed with some bemusement the ongoing controversies over his personality and his music. And, in my biographical research on “Papa” Jack Lane and his various protégé musicians, the controversial figure of Dominick “Nick” LaRocca has come into focus. At first glance, these high-profile figures in opposite racial camps in the early jazz era would seem to have little in common. Both men have their advocates as well as their detractors, which has fueled spirited debate. In the often strident literature of jazz criticism-posing-as-jazz history the two are often pitted against each other. But the closer one examines the two— their attitudes and their music—the more similarities one discovers. I would like to offer here a few of those similarities.

To begin with, they were born at about the same time into lower middle class but marginalized ethnic groups. Dominick James LaRocca came into the world on April 11, 1889 in an Italian-American family of reasonably comfortable means. His father was a shoemaker/retailer who, as a skilled craftsman and businessman, was an upwardly mobile member of his lower middle class society. 1 As Italian-Americans in a city that showed open hostility toward that ethnic group, all the LaRocca’s aspirations were especially acute. 2 LaRocca later noted that he viewed his experience with the Original Dixieland Jazz Band (ODJB) as his one “opportunity in life to make a success.” 3 Success was essential to demonstrate that he had made the right choice in following a profession in music, over the strenuous objections of his father. The senior LaRocca was himself a cornetist who often took his family to hear him in concert. He taught his older son, Rosario, and his two daughters, Antonia and Maria, how to read music, but refrained from teaching the young Nick, probably because the boy showed a more serious aptitude for music. 4 His advice was ruefully recalled by LaRocca: “I told you before, son. I don’t

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1 Nick LaRocca, interviews May 21, 1958-October 26, 1959 (numbered sequentially 1-262 in box). Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.
2 Richard Gambino, Vendetta (New York: Doubleday, 1977), passim., especially with regard to the lynching of eleven Italian-Americans in 1891.
3 LaRocca boxed interviews, p. 96.
4 LaRocca boxed interviews, p. 1.
comfortable means. His father, Edward J. LaMothe, was a high-living building and demolishing contractor who also owned some property and generally earned a good living. His immediate family was not as stable as LaRocca’s — his father exited early and both his mother and step-father, Willie Mouton, died by the time he was fifteen years old. But his extended family and their homes were available to him and his sisters, and the family was not without resources. As Creoles, they, too, had a strong sense of propriety and social entitlement. Although French-speaking members of a formerly elite cultural class, Creoles of Color had become decidedly more marginalized in the wake of Plessy vs. Ferguson and its ever-increasing restrictions. Morton’s diamond-studded gold tooth, his fancy cars, and his expensive suits were self-conscious symbols of success, the more so since the career he chose had gone against his family’s values and expectations. When his half-sister Frances Morton Oliver visited him in Chicago in 1925, she suspected him of borrowing an automobile nicer than his own just to impress her. Like LaRocca. Morton grew up in a musical household — there were always musical instruments around — but his paternal grandmother, the ruling matriarch, discouraged her grandson’s serious aspirations toward music. Her negative attitude toward music as a profession was no doubt influenced by the activities of Edward Lamothe, a music-loving ne’er-do-well who wasted time at

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6 Ibid.

7 William Russell, Oh Mister Jelly (Copenhagen, Denmark: JazzMedia Aps, 1999), p. 88.
the French Opera and playing trombone in
dance bands. When Morton began
playing in the bordello of Storyville, he
and his grandmother argued, and she threw
him out of the house. His sister Amédeé
related how their grandmother “told Ferd
that anybody who went on stage, doing
things in public, was just common.” 10

Nick LaRocca and Jelly Roll Morton
both claimed to have invented jazz, as did
Emile “Stalebread” Lacoume. In A Life In
Jazz, Danny Barker recalls an incident
when he worked at the New Orleans Jazz
Museum:

Once a smart-aleck couple came in, and after a
while softly asked me, “Who created jazz? Was it
Jelly Roll, Nick LaRocca, or Stalebread
Lacoume?” I thought for a while and answered,
Those three men came up in an era when there
were few, if any, press agents handling jazz
artists, so they blew their own horns, played their
special kind of jazz, even had some success,
and believed what they boasted. They were
extroverts, maybe born under the same signs. I
guess. They had lots of gumption, guts, heart,
determination; they believed in themselves.
They all had imitators catch on—and does that
answer your question?” The couple both
looked straight into my mouth and eyes as I
spoke, and sheepishly grunted, “Uh-huh!” 11

Though Danny is effective in tackling the
issue head-on, it is arguable that each of
the three truly believed that he invented jazz
and were not mere idle boastlers. The
answer to their claims may lie in the fact
that jazz evolved over a thirty-year period
during which a number of gradual musical
components were adopted, each essential to
the development of the music. At any step
along the way, with each added musical

component, jazz can be said to have
“begun.” Thus, any boasting “inventor”
could be honest in his conviction.
Stalebread Lacoume’s daughter, Rose
Lacoume Weaver, followed his wishes by
having his claim engraved on his
tombstone. In a recent interview she stated
that her father honestly felt that he had
invented jazz. 12 Stalebread based his claim
on the raspy sound and impromptu spirit of
his Razzy Dazzy Spasm Band, which
performed on the street of New Orleans as
early as 1896 and was touted in the New
Orleans Item in 1919. 13

In August, 1938, Down Beat magazine
published a letter in which Jelly Roll
Morton claimed to have invented jazz “in
1902,” apparently basing his claim on the
composition of “Jelly Roll Blues” around
that time. 14 LaRocca was the most specific
of all in his claim. He stated in interviews
that the “miracle” happened in Chicago in
1916 at the moment when the ODJB made
a fateful rhythmic adjustment to
accommodate a theatrical dance team: a
shift from a 2/4 pulse to a 4/4 pulse
transformed the feel from ragtime to jazz. 15

Their claims as inventors aside, both
LaRocca and Morton contributed a core of
“standards” to the developing jazz
repertoire. LaRocca and the ODJB left us

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10 Lomax, pp. 4-6, 34.
11 Lomax, pp. 37-41.
12 Danny Barker. A Life in Jazz (New York: Oxford
13 Rose Lacoume Weaver, interview for New
Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, September
24, 1999, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.
14 “Orleans’ Product: Stale Bread’s Fiddle Gave
Jazz to the World.” New Orleans Item (March 9,
1919).
15 Jelly Roll Morton, “I Created Jazz in 1902, Not
W.C. Handy,” Down Beat, vol. 5, no. 8 (August
1938), 3. Although “The Jelly Roll Blues” was not
published until 1913, by Will Rossiter in Chicago,
Morton claimed to have written it much earlier. It is
an elaborate and innovative piece that figures
prominently in the history of New Orleans music.
16 LaRocca boxed interviews, pp. 50-51.

And then there is “Tiger Rag.” Morton and LaRocca had decidedly different ideas of the origins of this song. In the Lomax interviews, Morton argued that the song was based on an old quadrille called “La Marseillaise” (not the French national anthem). Though a printed version of his song has never been discovered, Alan Jaffe, of Preservation Hall, did turn up a music box disc from 1867 with a few measures of the first strain of “Tiger Rag” (the so-called “Get over dirty” theme).  

Belgian jazz author, Robert Goffin, recalled the song as “the distorted theme of the second tableau of a quadrille I used to hear as a boy, at all the balls of Walloon, Belgium.” Neither of these references, though, would account for the fully developed version recorded by the ODJB in 1918. Nick LaRocca explained that “Tiger Rag” was a patchwork of various musical sources. These included an extension of the popular two-measure phrase known as “Get over dirty,” a stop-time reduction of “London Bridge Is Falling Down,” a chorus built on the chord progressions of the march, “National Emblem,” and a downward “rip” after the lyric “Hold that tiger” said to be inspired in the outhouse. The ODJB recording also uses an eight-measure excerpt from one of Schubert’s Sixteen German Dances, Opus 33.  

LaRocca and Morton worked from common song material other than “Tiger Rag.” The 1921 ODJB recording of “Bow Wow Blues,” a novelty blues by Cliff Friend and Nat Osborne, was recorded in a variant version by Morton and His Kings of Jazz in 1924 as “Fish Tail Blues.” credited to the cornetist, Lee Collins. He recorded the same strain in 1926 with his Red Hot Peppers, this time as “Sidewalk Blues,” with himself as composer.

Such “fast and loose” handling of musical material in the early twentieth century was typical. The modern concept of legal “intellectual property” did not yet exist. The music publishing business was rapidly expanding at the turn of the twentieth century, and advances in printing technology, along with a peak in piano manufacture and sales, resulted in a sharp increase in the production of sheet music. In the rush to print, many “floating folk strains” were being published for the first time. In the process, these traditional melodies were subjected to various modifications, including disassembly, re-assembly in different order, and insertion into other pieces as beginnings, middles, or endings. They sometimes crossed subcultures, where they were adapted to different words and stories and played in markedly different styles. Here was a repertoire of ephemeral melodies being tapped by music publishers—and their stable of composer/arrangers—who suddenly saw the value of ownership in a previously “un-owned” realm. This was to eventually lead to the formation of ASCAP, the first conscious attempt to rationalize ownership in the music industry. The appropriation of traditional song material for commercial exploitation affected all

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The Jazz Archivist
popular music, but especially ragtime, blues, and jazz, since these genres drew more heavily from various folk sources.

Many New Orleans musicians and publishers jumped into this murky musical territory. After the high-profile Livery Stable Blues vs. Barnyard Blues court battle, publishers began to look closely at their copyright holdings. For example, the publisher Joseph W. Stern & Co. claimed that the trio of “Dixie Jass Band One-Step” (1917) was taken from “That Teasin’ Rag,” written by Joe Jordan in 1909 and now owned by their company.\(^{20}\) The same strain also appears in the “Junkman Medley” recorded circa 1913-1914 by banjoist Fred Van Eps on an Edison Blue Amberole cylinder. Beyond these, a number of Reliance Brass Band members from the 1910’s remember the strain as “Meatball” or “Praline” in New Orleans. Another case involves Jelly Roll Morton’s “Hyena Stomp,” published by Melrose Bros. in Chicago in 1927. Its third strain (or trio) is very similar to the trio of Lucky Roberts’ “Bon Ton,” published in 1915 by Ricordi, in New York. That trio, in turn, is reminiscent of the trio of “Jolly Molly” by F. C. Schmitt (published by Cable Piano Co., New Orleans, in 1910). Another “floating folk strain,” based on a descending chord progression, found its way into a number of different instrumental pieces of the period, including “Wild Cherries” (1908) by Ted Snyder, Morton’s “Perfect Rag” (1924), and into at least two jazz standards, “Buddy’s Habit” (King Oliver) and “Little Rock Getaway” (Joe Sullivan).\(^{21}\) Among the most liberal appropriators of tune material were the song-writing team of A.J. Piron and Clarence Williams. Louis Armstrong claimed in an interview that he sold “Sister Kate” to them for a promise of fifty dollars, which he never received, noting ruefully that “you can’t get everything that’s coming to you in this life.”\(^{22}\) In 1930, Williams published an edition, with himself and Piron as co-composers, of “High Society.” This was a clear copyright infringement since the original was published as “High Society.” in 1901 under the name of its true composer. Porter Steele, director of the Yale University Orchestra and Band. The sheet-music printing was issued by the banjoists Ruby Brooks and E.J. Denton, and an orchestration (with the famous piccolo-turned-clarinet solo) was published by the violinist-arranger, Robert Recker.

A well-known link between LaRocca and Morton is their Victor recording contracts. By the 1910’s, Victor was the prestige label in the early recording industry. The company generally had the best sound, the best distribution system, and the most distinguished stable of stars. From recording sessions between February 26, 1917 and December 1, 1921, Victor issued twenty-three records by the ODJB. many of which set unprecedented sales records, beginning with the very first release, “Livery Stable Blues” / “Dixie Jazz Band One-Step.” Jelly Roll Morton’s success with the company was similar. From sessions between September 15, 1926 and October 9, 1930, Victor issued sixty-six records, many of which sold extremely well, starting with the first releases with the Red Hot Peppers. Both LaRocca and Morton attempted to jump-start their flagging careers in the latter 1930’s by recording again with Victor. LaRocca resurrected the ODIB for the

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\(^{20}\) Brunn, pp. 85-87, 102-103.


sessions (between September and November 1936) and also cut some sides with a bigger, swing style band. Morton put together a New Orleans-based group and from sessions in September, 1939, Victor issued eight records under the group name Jelly Roll Morton’s New Orleans Jazzmen.\(^{23}\) Sadly, neither group’s records sold well; time had passed the two jazzmen by and they disappeared from the national scene—just a few years before the start of the traditional jazz revival. The ODJB shattered after a squabble over money in 1938 and Morton met an untimely death in 1941.\(^{24}\)

It is perhaps significant that neither LaRocca nor Morton had advanced their styles to meet changing trends in the way that other New Orleanians such as Louis Armstrong, Louis Prima, Wingy Manone, or Red Allen did. The music of both men remained encapsulated in the past. Although the sound of the ODJB in 1936 was less raggy and more relaxed than that of the 1917 records, it could hardly match the high-powered energy of the swing bands. The same was true of Morton. He recorded a few swing arrangements for the General label, but, again, they fail to capture, particularly in their rhythm, the buoyant quality of contemporary swing bands. Neither of the early jazz stars seemed to have had his heart in developing a new style since they were fully committed to the superiority of earlier jazz.

The most conspicuous final legacy of the two jazzmen is what might be called their

\(^{23}\) For discographical details see Brian Rust, Jazz Records, 1897-1942 (Chigwell, Essex: Storyville Publications, 1972), 1240-1244 and 1160-1169.

\(^{24}\) Brunn, pp. 238-239; Lomax, p. 258.
“great verbal opuses.” Both were demonstrative, talkative men and, when engaged by interviewers late in life, gave them an earful. On May 23, 1938, Morton strode into the Coolidge Auditorium of the Library of Congress and began a series of interviews with Alan Lomax that resulted in more than ten hours of narrative, punctuated with piano demonstrations, about the early years of jazz. Though giving some credit along the way to Buddy Bolden, Tony Jackson, Freddie Keppard, Kid O'Sharp, and others, he placed himself front and center, as the creator of jazz. (His impetus, he claimed, was the pressure to develop a new and different piano style in order to make his mark on the highly competitive New Orleans piano scene.)

This historic interview, a fascinating mixture of fact, anecdote, and musical demonstration, makes for enjoyable listening but it is as much a document of folklore as it is of history. LaRocca left a similar document for posterity. Between May, 1958 and October, 1959, he did a series of interviews for the Hogan Jazz Archive at his home (at 2218 Constance Street, the house with the notes of “Hold That Tiger” on the screen doors). These sessions resulted in about ten hours of narration, commentary on phonograph records, and singing. LaRocca offers an autobiographical sketch of his life, going into great detail about his early years and his experiences with the ODJB. Where the tone of Morton’s narrative is a kind of charming braggadocio, LaRocca’s is an edgy polemic, more like Morton’s famous letter to Down Beat attacking W.C. Handy. But LaRocca’s account is quite different from the shoot-from-the-hip rambling of Morton’s. Its detail-filled information is presented in a systematic way, like a lawyer stating his case in court. He produced, for example, a notarized affidavit from a Mrs. Alice Kern (the organist at the Happy Hour Movie Theater in LaRocca’s neighborhood) attesting that between 1914 and 1916, she set down on paper various compositions written by him. Though it is filled with hyperbole and mistakes, it contains a surprising amount of indisputable fact—making it a somewhat more usable historical document than Morton’s.

Both LaRocca and Morton make repeated references to experiences at the French Opera House in New Orleans. Perhaps ironically, it was the “colored” Morton who was in the audience and the “white” LaRocca who worked backstage as an electrician. An influence of opera music can be seen, albeit indirectly, in the compositions and playing of both, especially in their use of riffs. Riffs, as emphasized by Morton, are repeated figures that are essential devices in early jazz. Their equivalent in opera are called basso ostinato.

Many writers have dismissed the music of both LaRocca and Morton as too stiff and raggy to qualify as true jazz. This hind-sighted view sees their music as a kind of novelty jazz before it learned to “swing” with Louis Armstrong and Earl Hines. The fact is that it is much easier to appreciate their musical achievement if one approaches it from their starting point, in the ragtime era. From this perspective, they are seen as creators and innovators—it explains why ragtime musicians, writers, and listeners hold their music in higher regard than do most jazz musicians, critics, and listeners. Both Morton and LaRocca, in fact, began


composing in the three-strain structure of ragtime and branched out into more varied and extended pieces from there.

The common wisdom in former jazz writing was that Duke Ellington was the first great arranger of jazz music, in the sense of subjecting the elements of spontaneous jazz to written orchestrations. But this was challenged by Gunther Schuller, in Early Jazz, who claimed the achievement for Jelly Roll Morton and his tight, 3-minute compositions fashioned for his Red Hot Peppers. Schuller’s analysis of Morton’s output is now generally accepted, crediting his compositions as the landmark in composed jazz that they are. Though a systematic case has yet to be fully made for LaRocca, I would submit, based on my own bar-by-bar analysis of the carefully patterned ODJB recording of “Tiger Rag,” mapped out by LaRocca, that he, too, was a pioneer in pre-arranged jazz.28

It has become something of a fashion among recent writers to demonize both LaRocca and Morton, an easy enough thing to do, given the strong wills and loose-tongued verbosity of both men. Such demonizing is usually selective and gives a distorted picture. For example, in the recent musical Jelly’s Last Jam, author George C. Wolfe casts Jelly as an individual who has subverted his soul and his true black cultural roots to the persona of a high falutin’, French-descended, opera-going Creole.29 This ignores the extent to which opera in New Orleans shaped the sensibilities of a whole generation of early jazz figures, including Louis Armstrong. Again, in Tornatore’s cult film, The Legend of 1900, Jelly is cast as a nasty-natured, foul-mouthed braggart who gets his comeuppance in a cutting contest with the legendary pianist. “1900.” What we have in these portrayals are one-sided caricatures of Morton that obscure the true and more interesting complexities of his personality.

In “Part I: Gumbo” of Ken Burns’ Jazz, LaRocca is similarly treated. Harry Connick Jr. read aloud a statement to the effect that Negroes got jazz from the Whites and that the early black musicians couldn’t play as well as the white musicians. This is followed by a pregnant pause and a comment by Wynton Marsalis that is eclipsed by a wistfully exasperated facial expression. Is this a statement made by LaRocca? It is unclear in the documentary, but the implication is that it is LaRocca’s — and a review of his interviews at Tulane shows that it is. But the statement is given out of context, in isolation from LaRocca’s further elaborations on the subject of black versus white musicians.30 In his Archive interview LaRocca goes on at some length about the failure of various white New Orleans bands in their Northern adventures because of their inferiority to the ODJB. He dismisses several black bands in the same way. Burns and Ward seem to read this as racial dismissal when it is actually dismissal of all other bands, white and black. The last part of LaRocca’s statement quoted on the documentary is, “The Negro did not play any kind of music equal to white men at any time.” Isolated in this way, this is a blunt and inflammatory utterance. But Burns and his writers omit the mitigating

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effect of the follow-up statements by LaRocca: “Even the poorest of the white men played better than the Negroes in my days, with the exception of [men] like Piron and—this...Robichaux, and this...there was another one—Manuel Perez...[all] had note-reading band[s].”

It is reflective of the complex layering of New Orleans culture that both the “white” LaRocca and the “black” Morton were racially bigoted. In the Archive interview, LaRocca proclaims himself a segregationist—not a surprising position for any white of his age in the South at the time (1958-59). One wonders if this stridency at that particular time was a result of the infamous Marshall Stearns letter of January 11, 1937. In his personal dealings with blacks he seems to have been respectful and sometimes generous as when he gave the late “Father Al” Lewis his first banjo. As a self-consciously proud Creole, Morton seems to have felt real disdain for the large uneducated black population. His wife Mabel reported that “he was so well liked by the white people that he never had to play a colored engagement...Really, Jelly didn’t like Negroes. He always said they would mess up your business.” This characterization, however, was contradicted by his sister Frances, who dismissed his purported racist attitude as unfounded, adding that “he was crazy about King Oliver and King Oliver was a great black man.” As with LaRocca, there was real ambivalence in his feelings toward blacks.

In the end, it is difficult to say the last word on either Nick LaRocca or Jelly Roll Morton. The two have inspired, in equal measure, detractors and supporters—a reflection of their complex, contradictory personalities. Both men are decidedly at odds by today’s “politically correct” standards: it is all too easy to read them both as intolerant and bigoted. But it would be well to remember that they were men of their time, not ours. To understand them (and their music) better, they need to be judged in light of the prevailing values of their time. Theirs was a time in which blunt ethnic humor was at the core of show business and entertainers were engaged in a free-for-all struggle up the ladder for a place in the mainstream. Of course, their music was their art and it should be judged on its own merits, free of social or political considerations. If both men are full of ambivalence and contradiction, they were born in and shaped by a city itself full of ambivalence and contradictions. If they were not quite two peas from the same pod, they grew on the same vine—that densely entwined, hybrid vine that was New Orleans.

Dr. Jack Stewart

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31 LaRocca boxed interviews, p. 147.
32 The Stearns letter read “Between you and me, our last argument should furnish you with plenty of publicity. I do think, however, that you failed to give colored musicians a break...and that is why I have exaggerated the other extreme, since the public is inclined to believe you and musicians of your opinion.” LaRocca’s comments on the reverse of the letter from Marshall Stearns contained in the LaRocca Collection at the Hogan Jazz Archive make obviously pejorative reference to Stearns being Jewish, yet LaRocca did have cordial relations with Mr. Rothchild, a club owner, and David Herman, a notary, both Jews; for Morton references to Jews in letters to Roy Carew, see Russell, pp. 246-251.
33 Interview with Jimmy LaRocca. April 21, 2001 and “Jazz Picker ‘Father’ Al Lewis Dead at 87.” New Orleans Times-Picayune (April 15, 1992), B-4.
34 Lomax, 42.
35 Russell, p. 91.