Bruce Boyd Raeburn
Curator of the Hogan Jazz Archive, Retiring after 38 Years of Service

Born in a Livery Stable - “First Jazz Record” Turns 100
The first jazz record turned 100 this year, and the Hogan Jazz Archive turned 59. Meanwhile, Bruce Boyd Raeburn, Curator of the Jazz Archive, will turn 69, and he has decided to retire at the end of this year. Nobody knows the Jazz Archive better than Bruce. He came aboard as a student assistant in 1980 and worked his way up the ladder, becoming a staff member in 1984, and then taking the helm in 1989, as the fourth in a noteworthy succession of curators: Bill Russell, 1958-1962; Dick Allen, 1962-1980; Curt Jerde, 1980-1989. While putting his own distinctive brand on the place, Bruce wisely incorporated what he observed to be the most positive insights of his predecessors. During his long, eventful tenure, Bruce has nurtured more than a few promising students, and he has gone the extra mile to avail the full Jazz Archive experience to the widest possible constituency, from local backstreet musicians to scholars and pilgrims from around the world. The Hogan Jazz Archive will hopefully continue to reap the rewards of his successful efforts to build a stronger and more diverse institution.
Unraveling the Dawn of Recorded Jazz

By David Sager

The Original Dixieland Jazz Band, who made the first jazz recordings in February 1917, has received left-handed compliments and faint praise for their recorded efforts. More often, they have been maligned by jazz historians, musicians, and aficionados, who have repeatedly branded their work as mechanical, stiff, corny – or, at best – derivative.

By assessing the ODJB’s recordings side-by-side with those made by other bands several years later, under very different cultural circumstances, one can see that these critics have skewed musical history by inventing outcomes based on personal prejudice and a narrow view of musical progression. The critics also helped plant the idea that jazz on record follows the same chronology as the music itself. Somehow, they have ignored the fact that the ODJB played an unnamed New Orleans-style dance...
music that shared common musical properties with King Oliver, the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, Louis Armstrong’s Hot Five, and others. Instead, the ODJB gets lumped together with their contemporaneous imitators who knew nothing, or at least little, about musical counterpoint or playing creatively using chord changes.

Much of this is due, in part, to the fact that the ODJB – a white band – was largely represented in later years by bigoted and obtuse remarks from their cornetist, Nick LaRocca, who made some particularly odious comments about the African American role in jazz. Also, because their musicianship is sometimes hard to discern through the fog of acoustical recordings and the frenetic pace of the then popular one-step tempos, the ODJB has never been given an objective listening to by most. This article is an attempt to rehabilitate the ODJB’s reputation and make their music more accessible to modern ears.

Here, I ask the reader to indulge me in a good-faith attempt to acquire a semblance of musical neutrality. Please consider these points:

- Suspend all notions about jazz – what it sounds like and who plays it – and begin to think of jazz in terms of musical intent, rather than a style, or even a genre.
- Turn attention to the fact that there was, back in the early 1900s, an unnamed type of dance music down in New Orleans that was born in the black neighborhoods.
- Note that musicians who played this sort of music called it ragtime, although it was not the formal piano ragtime of Scott Joplin. Some said it sounded like “ragtime played by ear.”
- The music – with a variety of names – was slowly unleashed to the country by both black and white bands performing in cabarets and on the vaudeville circuit.

**Introduction of “Jass” to the General Public**

In late April 1917, it was business as usual at the Victor Talking Machine Company. The furniture department in Camden, New Jersey, was busy turning out various models of the Victrola, the company’s signature record player. Also in Camden, the record pressing plant was churning out hundreds of newly-recorded discs. These included Victor’s famous Operatic “Red Seal” records; the most expensive and prestigious in the catalog. There were the blue-labeled titles by personalities such as Nora Bayes and Harry Lauder, as well as second-tier classical vocalists such as Reinald Werrenrath. The black-labeled popular series – the lowest priced and best-selling – included songs from the latest stage musicals and current light or comic popular songs, mostly performed by in-house artists who made steady money as record makers.

The newly pressed discs were rushed to the stores, where talking machines and records were sold. Also on hand were copies of Victor’s May 1917 supplement, which announced all the new titles issued since the month previous. May’s issue sported a photo of one of its top selling artists on the cover, John McCormack, famous for his sensitive renditions of sentimental Irish-tinged songs. A turn of the page found the latest recording by Enrico Caruso, the most famous opera singer and recording artist of the day. There were new titles by Frances Alda and the Elman String Quartet. Also, there were jaunty fox trots and peppy one-steps by Joseph C. Smith’s Orchestra, Victor’s leading dance band.

Another turn of the page and suddenly there appears an instrumental quintet known as the Original Dixieland Jass Band. Although they are wearing suits, their pose is irreverent compared to the other rather prim photos; their posture is appalling. The unapologetic Victor copy reads:

> The Jass Band is the very latest thing in the development in music. It has sufficient power and penetration to inject life into a mummy, and will keep ordinary human dancers on their feet till
Victor’s May 1917 supplement featured popular Irish tenor John McCormack on the cover; on page 16, readers encountered a photo of the Original Dixieland “Jass” Band, accompanied by the release announcement for their first recording (courtesy John Secrist Collection, Recorded Sound Collection, Library of Congress).

breakfast time. “Livery Stable Blues” in particular we recommend because, on the principle that like cures like, this particular variety will be a positive cure for the common or garden type of “blues.”

There was no mention of their home city.

Earlier in the year, at Victor’s new recording laboratory, located in New York at 46 West 38th Street, on the twelfth floor, the typical assortment of performers had paraded into the impersonal recording room with the ominous gaping metal horn. Recordings were then made mechanically, or
acoustically, without the aid of electricity. Singers, speakers, and instrumentalists faced the recording horn and carefully aimed to the sweet spot that would efficiently vibrate the recording diaphragm and stylus. If there were to be sudden changes in dynamics, the artist would have to adjust his or her proximity to the horn. For louder tones, one needed to pull away and vice versa. Performers complained bitterly, since this would alter the intended dynamics and potentially obliterate any sense of musicianship. Still, with patience and experience, successful recordings were made. On February 26, 1917, after a supposedly disappointing audition for Columbia Records, the five-piece Original Dixieland Jass Band – ODJB – came to record.

**Brief Background**

Here is a capsule history of the ODJB, one that treads on very familiar turf: A quintet of New Orleans musicians, known as Stein’s Band from Dixie, arrived in Chicago in March of 1916 to fulfill an engagement at a dive known as Schiller’s Café. As the story goes, a drunken patron yelled out to the band, excitedly, “Jass it up, boys,” and New Orleans-style ragtime got a new name. The tale, while fanciful, has a ring of truth to it: the word “jass,” with various spellings, had been kicking around the Barbary Coast and the southwest for at least a decade. Its connotations were often vulgar; its more polite meaning meant “with pep” or “lively.” The raucous band was a huge hit. Al Jolson, the famous star of Broadway, heard them while on tour in Chicago. Impressed, he sent his agent, Max Hart, over to listen. Hart listened and made plans for the band.

**To New York**

Shortly thereafter, with a new name and some changes in personnel, the Original Dixieland Jass Band left for New York to begin an engagement at the far classier Reisenweber’s Restaurant. They consisted of cornetist Nick LaRocca, Eddie Edwards on trombone, Larry Shields, clarinet, pianist Henry Ragas, and drummer Tony Sbarbaro. It is surmised that Max Hart got them their recording date at Victor. The record caused a sensation; it was unlike anything else in the Victor catalog, or on any other label, for that matter. It had swagger and guts. There was also a sense of novelty, which no doubt helped sell the recording. One side featured animal imitations depicting a barnyard. The flipside was played at a breakneck tempo; each instrument contributing a different, but complimentary, part.

At the time, recordings rarely had any percussion featured, especially the bass drum, for it was easy to disrupt the delicate tracing of the groove. However, Victor’s chief recordist, Charles Sooy, went to great lengths to place the musicians so as to balance the level of all the instruments, and to not sacrifice Tony Sbarbaro’s wildly resonant bass drum.

Reactions to the band and its first record were in part negative, due to tempo, volume, and the fact that they were thought to be musically “discordant.” In actuality, the ODJB was hardly discordant. All the parts mesh harmonically in near-perfect counterpoint. However, the band’s boisterous approach disguised much of their musicianship.

As to the band’s name, Nick LaRocca said he never heard the word “jazz” until he was in Chicago in 1916. Also, the ad copy writers at the Victor company seemed mystified by the word. Shortly after the February session, on March 29, Ernest John, the manager of Victor’s editorial department, wrote to Eddie Edwards:

> As to the spelling, we were a little uncertain ourselves, but we noticed that on your cards and it seemed to us that in an early advertisement of Reisenweber’s, the word was spelled JASS, so that on the poster we followed that spelling and in the catalog we also followed the spelling.
given on the cards as the original Dixieland Jass Band.

We did, however, rather side-step the issue by beginning our special supplement announcement in this way: “Spell it Jass, Jas, Jaz or Jazz – nothing can hurt a Jass Band.”¹

That first disc, Victor 18255, also made news in regards to the string of lawsuits that it created – almost immediately. Briefly, the Victor company considered the title “Livery Stable” too vulgar for its still prim and uninformed audience. Victor changed it to “Barnyard Blues” but failed to tell the label copy editors. Meanwhile, the band’s agent, Max Hart, copyrighted the song on the band’s behalf as “Barnyard Blues.” The record was released with the “Livery” title, which was free and clear to be claimed, which it was by some disgruntled former ODJB members and associates.

Meanwhile, someone at the music publishing firm Jos. W. Stern & Co. heard the record’s flipside, “Dixie Jass Band One-Step,” and recognized its trio as a portion of a Stern Publication, “That Teasin’ Rag,” written by black composer and pianist Joe Jordan. The labels were then modified to reflect the interpolation, avoiding any further trouble.

Suddenly, within weeks after the band’s first recording became available, ensembles calling themselves “jass” or “jazz” bands were popping up everywhere – in cafes, restaurants, and on recordings. The demand and supply could not be vanquished by the negative feelings and comments of those who could not accept the new music; it was brash, loud, and discordant. Also, it was immoral—dangerous to the dancing youth. The word “jass” at that time was as much a verb to describe what was being done to music, as it was a noun. In either case, it implied noise and novelty, and missed the essence of the ODJB and New Orleans dance music.

Some of the comments were back-handed compliments, such as a newspaper ad for the band’s engagement at Reisenweber’s that advertised “Untuneful Harmonists Playing ‘Peppery’ Melodies,” as if “untuneful” had suddenly become a drawing point.²

Mimics

Tin Pan Alley composers began cranking out songs, most of them rather inane, about the ODJB and their music. One, rather significantly, was recorded six weeks prior to the ODJB’s first Victor date. “That Funny Jas [sic] Band from Dixieland,” composed and written by Henry I. Marshall and Gus Kahn, recorded on January 12, 1917, featured the minstrel dialect team of Arthur Collins and Byron G. Harlan. There is little in the way of instrumental illustration as to what exactly “jas” is: the house orchestra goes into an instrumental rendering of the song’s chorus with lots of siren effects and loud percussion, giving the impression of a rather chaotically good time. Then, the duo breaks into spoken dialogue. Harlan, in the guise of a black woman, asks Collins, “What is a jas band?” Collins: “A jas band am essentially different from the generality of bands.” And to illustrate, the various members of the house orchestra
play a few discordant tones, winding up with a militaristic bugle call accompanied by a loud snare drum and cymbal.

Collins and Harlan and the Victor Orchestra had better luck with their explanation four months later, when they recorded Lew Hays and William J. Hart’s “Everybody’s Jazzin’ It.” Here, with exhortations from Collins and Harlan, the orchestra leaps into a full-blown caricaturized imitation of the ODJB. This is complete with loud, sloppy trombone glissandos, squealing clarinets, and seemingly out-of-time wild percussion effects. In the midst of this lampoon there is melody present: sometimes the rather loopy trombone doubles a distant cornet. However, there is no intelligible second or third voice. Nor does the percussion emphasize or reflect anything about the song’s melody, let alone the manner in which it is being played. All good fun, but the parody foreshadows some unfortunate reality that was to come.

Listening to and Understanding the ODJB

The Victor company promoted the ODJB discs as dance records; there was no copy anywhere about jass or jazz being listening music, and listening is where the ODJB runs into trouble, both during their day and in retrospect. Historians, critics, and jazz fans have not universally praised the ODJB. The critics have complained about their loudness, that they were anachronistic, and that they played way too fast. In a recent article in Slate, Michael J. West provides some specifics:

... “Livery Stable Blues,” became the hit, with its novelty “animal sounds” hook. But its rhythm is stiff: stolid 4/4 time, brass and piano playing even eighths with little variation. If there’s improvisation present, it’s hidden behind verbatim repetitions. “Dixieland Jass Band One-Step,” which became a standard, is looser and more playful—but still rote and unimprovised.3

West seems to be holding this performance up against a masterpiece by King Oliver, or maybe the New Orleans Rhythm Kings. The band’s, and particularly LaRocca’s, rhythm is anything but stiff or stolid. True, it does not swing with the ease of a hot jazz classic of the 1920s, but compared to recordings by the ODJB’s soon-to-be competitors, their rhythmic concept is well developed: loose and flexible. Also, West ignores the near perfect counterpoint: three divergent voices complementing each other harmonically as well as rhythmically. LaRocca’s melody lead is decorated expertly by Larry Shields’s upper countermelody, and is supported by Edwards’s rhythmic punctuation and lower-voice countermelodies. Their counterpoint sounded extemporaneous and was near-perfect. LaRocca later quipped, “I cut the cloth, Shields adds the lace, and Edwards sews it up.” More to the point: as a result of the interaction between the three voices, combined with the steady propulsion of piano and drums, the music moves forward. Each instrument contributes an important piece to the whole.

West also complains about a lack of improvisation. But he does not take into account that this
The tenet of jazz performance was fairly unimportant to the first generation of jazz players. Instead, a set melody, routine, or variation, was worked out, memorized, and repeated faithfully, if not identically, each time. A marvelous piece of supporting evidence is Louis Armstrong’s 1924 copyright lead sheet of “Cornet Chop Suey,” which he recorded just over two years later, in a near-exact rendering of his manuscript.

The band’s frequent use of one-step tempi – the most popular dance of the time – may be the largest strike against accessibility; it creates an air of novelty, even caricature. Involving only one step per beat, the one-step was performed with two beats to a measure, and fast, around 126 beats per minute. Also, it was characterized by strong upbeats. LaRocca recalled in later life that the band had been playing in the slower ragtime-oriented two-step tempo, but they adapted, at dancers’ requests, to the more up-to-date and smoother tempo; hence, the rather furious pace found on many of the ODJB recordings. However, the band’s version of the one-step was without the marked upbeats that gave the music lift. Instead, it comes off as top heavy.

The ODJB’s musical qualities shine when contrasted with recordings by their contemporaries, who were simply pop-up imitators. In June 1917, Earl Fuller, the orchestra leader at the famous Rector’s Restaurant on Broadway, began recording with his “Famous Jazz Band,” for Victor. The results were an obvious and tasteless attempt to mimic the ODJB’s overall timbre, without any of the harmonic or rhythmic touches. Their September 10 recording of “Li’l Liza Jane,” sounds not unlike the parody by the Victor Orchestra on Collins and Harlan’s “Everybody’s Jazzin’ It.” The only difference is that the Fuller group is not joking around.

Whereas the individual voices of the ODJB fit together in an interconnecting counterpoint, the Fuller Band relies on unisons and effects. While ODJB cornetist Nick LaRocca plays a rolling style with a smooth and easy subdivision of the beat, Fuller’s cornetist, Walter Kahn, is truly stiff and could easily be mistaken for a parody. Eddie Edwards’s trombone provides rhythmic thrust as well as often zeroing in on the harmony note that best balances the melody. Harry Raderman, Fuller’s trombonist, plays dead-end glissandos that do not move along the musical proceedings. Larry Shields provides lithe and fluid clarinet lines that perfectly decorate the lead, while Ted Lewis, clarinetist in the Fuller organization, whines and cries.

Bluin’ the Blues

Earl Fuller’s band is not an isolated example of the ineffective mimicry that plagued much of what was called “jazz.” Nearly every ensemble on record, described as a “jass” or “jazz” band prior to 1922, fails at capturing the essence of the ODJB or New Orleans-style dance music. That is not to say that some, if not much, of this material is interesting. Groups like the Frisco Jazz Band (Edison) and Wilbur Sweatman’s Jazz Band (Pathe and Columbia) are fascinating examples of how the remnants of ragtime were being transformed into something acceptable to the dancing public. Still, it is nearly always self-conscious and stiff.
A good illustration is the ODJB’s June 25, 1918, recording of “Bluin’ the Blues,” a performance replete with panache, swagger, and guts that gives lie to their alleged stiffness and stolid approach. If one cannot grasp the compelling impact of this recording, then a quick listen to some other versions of this tune may help do the trick.

A contemporaneous Edison recording by Lopez and Hamilton’s Kings of Harmony has the cornet and clarinet playing in unison for much of the performance. Occasionally, the clarinet ventures away from the lead, but never far and always quick to return. The trombonist, somewhat under recorded, can be heard copying some of Eddie Edwards’s work, but in a stiff and unconvincing manner. In fact, the rhythmic feel here merely highlights the ODJB’s authenticity and sincerity.

A circa June 1919 vocal recording, made for Gennett, by New Orleans minstrel Al Bernard, is more convincing, thanks to Bernard’s apparent — if limited — understanding of the genre. However, his accompaniment is unintentionally comical. The overly precise, ricky-tick introduction sounds undeniably juvenile in concept.

A somewhat better rendition was recorded by Wilbur Sweatman’s Original Jazz Band for Columbia, the following December. Sweatman’s version actually sounds suitable for dancing; there is a sense of flow to the ensemble. Still, there is quite a bit of unison by the cornet and clarinet, rather than harmonic interaction. However, the short solo breaks are embarrassing.

**Grappling with a Definition**

It seems that, by the proliferation of these inept imitations, the compelling nature of New Orleans-style dance music was lost on a large number of professional dance orchestra musicians and their public. It was a mystery to all — even those who played the music. On May 3, Victor’s editor Ernest John sent Eddie Edwards another letter, which read:

> We have been asked to furnish the definition of the Jass Band. What we want to know is where the word came from, and just exactly what constitutes a Jass Band. We have already enough information to enable us to write advertising matter on the subject, but what we want now is a little specific, and above all things, accurate information. If you can help us in this respect or refer us to any authority on the subject, we shall be very much obliged to you, and we would urge also that you let us have that information at your earliest convenience.\(^4\)

Edwards’s response, if any, is not known. However, his statement from the previous March to a *New York Globe* reporter will suffice, if not confuse:

> A Jass Band is composed of oboes, clarinets, cornets, trombones, banjos and always a drum...But the music is a matter of the ear and not of technique. One carries the melody and the others do what they please. Some play counter melodies, some play freak noises, and some just play. I can’t tell you how. You ‘got to feel’ Jass. The time is syncopated. Jass I think means a jumble [sic].\(^5\)

The situation was no better a few years later. In the October 1923 edition of *Jacobs’ Orchestra Monthly*, the “New York Gossip” column featured a section titled “Definitions of jazz by a number of New York’s leading musicians.” Here are some of the offerings, none of which equate “jazz” with harmony, rhythm, counterpoint, or New Orleans:

- Arthur Wedel (Orchestra leader for several seasons with Sir Harry Lauder) “Jazz is a
conglomeration of noises, very few players know what they are playing.”
- Clifford E. Ridgley (bandmaster of the 69th Regiment Band) “Jazz is a disease. War’s aftermath. Curable by time.”
- Freddie Buhl (New York’s 100% sure-fire bass drummer, whose work is the model as well as the envy of his competitor) “Jazz, between you and me and the lamppost, doesn’t mean anything. It is the most disgraceful music you can listen to. It sounds like a lot of fish peddlers.”
- Philip Lemlein (former leader of the N. Y. Hippodrome orchestra) “Jazz, that’s easy. When a clarinet player, say ten years ago, happened to squeak on a note, he was called rotten. Now he can’t squeak enough. That’s jazz.”
- Julius Rosenberg (Associated with celebrated restauranteur Louis Sherry, in this city and Newport R.I.) “Jazz is a disease in the public’s mind to keep them moving. Real dancers always prefer legitimate tempo without discordant harmony. The publishers are to blame for such monstrosities.”
- A. E. Simmert (pianist with a range from blues to symphonies) “Jazz is, – let me think a minute. Cacophony, nothing but a discordant jamboree, a dessert of overtones.”
- Louis Roeder (formerly musical director at the Winter Garden) “Jazz is an irregular instrumentation. For instance, take a tin whistle, a banjo and a drum, put them to work, that’s jazz.”
- Jack Halloway (trombone player with the phonograph concerns and society leaders) “Jazz is a momentary craze. Every member or the orchestra burlesques.”

Chronology

It is apparent that the word “jazz” described different things to different people. Bands like Earl Fuller’s and Wilbur Sweatman’s did not play in a style that would survive as recognizable jazz. The ODJB’s music was conversational and musical. It may have featured some novelty effects, but its essence was that of New Orleans dance music.

The following chronology begins with some precursors of New Orleans jazz on record and carries on through to the first recordings of King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band. By listening to these recorded examples, one can compare the ODJB’s sense of musicality and authenticity with others who offered genuine hints of jazz-to-come — not novelty — on pre-1917 recordings. These are examples of the informal black and southern dialect that gave popular music a looser and more conversational feel than conventional pop music of the time.

It is important to note that while jazz and the phonograph and record industry grew up together, jazz itself did not develop along the same timeline as did jazz on record. A particularly dated-sounding style from 1920 may have been preceded in time by something far more comfortable to modern ears. By the same token, the ODJB playing a comparatively jerky sounding one-step in 1917 does not represent what may have come before. Keep in mind that jazz changed and developed as dance styles changed, and vice versa.

The Chronology

- Ca. 1903 – Buddy Bolden records informally for Oscar Zahn (Not extant)
- Ca. 1904 – Wilbur Sweatman records “Maple Leaf Rag” in Minneapolis (Not extant)
- 4/19/1911 – Gene Greene records “King of the Bungaloos” for Victor. Greene, a vaudeville performer, known as “The King of Ragtime,” specialized in what might be described as “scat singing,” which he did with a marvelous looseness and swing. https://www.youtube.com/

May 1916 – Gus Haenschen records in St. Louis for Columbia Personal Records. “Sunset Medley” is an astonishing example of ragtime cum jazz, recorded prior to the ODJB. It can be heard on the CD release “Stomp and Swerve” on Archeophone Records. http://archeophone.com/catalogue/stomp-and-swerve/

Late 1916 – Wilbur Sweatman records “Down Home Rag” for Emerson Records (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzyBnsG5bM4)

February 26, 1917 – ODJB records for the Victor Talking Machine Company

Vaudevillian Gene Greene with his spouse and stage partner, in formal attire (center) and in one of their stage costumes (courtesy Jim Walsh Collection, Recorded Sound Collection, Library of Congress).
• February 28, 1917 – Wilbur Sweatman records his composition “Boogie Rag” as a “trial” for Victor. (Not extant)
• Ca. 3/1917 – Wilbur Sweatman & his Jass Band records “Boogie Rag” for Pathe.
• Late 1918 – First recordings of the Louisiana Five, with Alcide “Yellow” Nunez. These are a fascinating alternative to the ODJB recordings; with no cornet present, Nunez plays lead on the clarinet. Two of the five were actually from Louisiana.
• Late 1918 – The Original New Orleans Jazz Band makes first recordings. This was a band composed largely of New Orleans musicians, imported to play at the Alamo Café in Harlem, New York. Its leader, a New Yorker, was pianist and future comic Jimmy Durante. They played with a loose and vigorous style.
• 8/10/1920 – Mamie Smith records for OKeh with her Jazz Hounds. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5YwFm1gvR0
• 1921 – Precursors to the Original Memphis Five begin long series of recordings. They largely smoothed and modernized the ODJB’s style. “Shake It and Break It” by Ladd’s Black Aces - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZYwcQJhVFAg
• 6/1922 – Kid Ory’s Sunshine Band records for Nordskog/Sunshine. These are considered to be the first jazz recordings by a black New Orleans band. An interesting point is that the band’s clarinetist, Dink Johnson, later recalled that he attempted to imitate the ODJB’s clarinetist, Larry

Now, at about this juncture, young fans and musicians were beginning to discern honestly played jazz from the Earl Fullers, etc. Jazz, as a style of music, was beginning to be accepted as an art.

- 8/19/1922 – Friars Society Orchestra (NORK) makes first recordings for Gennett
- 4/6/1923 – King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band with Louis Armstrong begins recording

Conclusion

When asked the definition of “jazz,” or rather, “jass,” ODJB trombonist Eddie Edwards said “jumble.” Indeed, to many hearing for the first time, in 1916 at Schiller’s Café, it may have sounded like a jumble. Furthermore, the fast-paced events leading up to and following their first recording may have felt like a jumble; as it does in retrospect. But when taking time to sort out their music and compare it side-by-side with their contemporaries and imitators, the jumbled picture grows clearer. While novelty-imbued and raucous, their music was deliberate, rehearsed, and well-executed. To those not musically astute, it would seem a jumble. And, whereas the ODJB did not invent jazz, nor were they the first to introduce it up north, they did create it for the first time ever on a phonograph record, one-hundred years ago. They deserve our appreciation.

Links to other recordings referenced

“That Funny Jas Band from Dixieland” http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/recordings/detail/id/5370
“Everybody’s Jazzin’ It” http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/recordings/detail/id/5639
“Livery Stable Blues” http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/recordings/detail/id/4668
“Dixie Jass Band One-Step” http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/recordings/detail/id/4669
“Bluin’ the Blues” (ODJB) http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/recordings/detail/id/4635
“Li’l Liza Jane” http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/recordings/detail/id/6186
“Bluin’ the Blues” (Sweatman) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvJoCfdSQgM
“Bluin’ the Blues” (Lopez and Hamilton)https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25kqHgTVbds
“Bluin’ the Blues” (Bernard) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJ8ulkHAHhE

Endnotes
1 Letter from Ernest John to Eddie Edwards, March 29, 1917 (Eddie Edwards Collection, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).
4 Letter from Ernest John to Eddie Edwards, May 3, 1917 (Eddie Edwards Collection, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).
6 Jacobs’ Orchestra Monthly, October 1923.
How Did the ODJB Learn to Play “Livery Stable Blues?”

By Vic Hobson

It has long been known that it was by chance that the Original Dixieland Jazz Band (ODJB) became the first musicians to record jazz. Freddie Keppard and the Original Creole Orchestra were offered a recording deal in 1916, but turned it down.¹ This was probably because the money was insufficient to compensate for Keppard’s concern that other bands would steal his stuff.² This was a valid concern. Generations of musicians have learned to play jazz by imitating what they heard on records. Cornetist Jimmy McPartland remembered, “What we used to do was put the record on – one of the Rhythm Kings’, naturally – play a few bars, then all get our notes. We’d have to tune our instruments up to the record machine, to the pitch, and go ahead with a few notes. Then stop! A few more bars of the record, each guy would pick out his notes and boom! we would go on and play it. Two bars, or four bars, or eight – we would get in on each phrase and then all play it.”³ While this was an option for later musicians who wanted to learn to play jazz, it was not an option for the ODJB: there were no previous recordings of jazz to inform them. This raises the question of how the ODJB learned to play jazz. One way to open up this question is to look at how they learned to play “Livery Stable Blues.”

Rhythm Kings’, naturally – play a few bars, then all get our notes. We’d have to tune our instruments up to the record machine, to the pitch, and go ahead with a few notes. Then stop! A few more bars of the record, each guy would pick out his notes and boom! we would go on and play it. Two bars, or four bars, or eight – we would get in on each phrase and then all play it.”³ While this was an option for later musicians who wanted to learn to play jazz, it was not an option for the ODJB: there were no previous recordings of jazz to inform them. This raises the question of how the ODJB learned to play jazz. One way to open up this question is to look at how they learned to play “Livery Stable Blues.”

It has been widely believed that the ODJB learned to play jazz by imitating the black bands in New Orleans.⁴ But, to reproduce the contrapuntal nature of early New Orleans jazz by ear without the aid of recordings would have been quite a feat. It would, perhaps, not be too difficult for a musician to learn the melody of a tune as played by another band, but it would be rather more difficult for the other instruments to individually pick off the countermelodies and obbligatos played by the other instruments and then collectively reassemble the parts without recordings. This problem was not confined to the ODJB. Other bands played contrapuntal jazz at this time. The ability to construct countermelodies and
obligatos that harmonized the tunes they played was, until recently, not well understood. In Creating Jazz Counterpoint: New Orleans, Barbershop Harmony, and the Blues (2013), I argued that New Orleans jazz counterpoint was the product of the application of the principles of barbershop harmony to the instruments of a jazz band. Just a few years ago, this seemed controversial; however, the Barbershop Quartet Society recently acknowledged Lynn Abbott’s early work on the African American origins of barbershop harmony, and musicological research has confirmed his observation that the close harmony of barbershop “was integral to the crystallization of the famous ‘blue note’.” The question is no longer whether barbershop practice influenced the development of New Orleans counterpoint but, rather, in what ways did it influence bands and musicians of all races? In particular, for the purposes of this essay, how did barbershop practice influence the ODJB?

The Writing of “Livery Stable Blues”

When he was young, ODJB cornetist Nick LaRocca worked at the French Opera House in New Orleans, and was attracted to what he called “contra-melodies” in the songs he heard there. He explained, “You listen to ‘Livery Stable Blues’; you’ll see what I mean. Take each instrument alone, and you got three melodies in there.” “Take the trombone apart and you’ll have a melody, take the clarinet, you’ll have a melody, take the cornet, you’ll have a melody, and they’re three distinct melodies working together.” LaRocca described himself as an “ignorant scholar” of music, but despite his limited formal education in the subject he recognized the contrapuntal nature of the music he performed.

The initial controversy about “Livery Stable Blues” had to do with its authorship. The commercial success of the recording led to a copyright dispute. LaRocca and the ODJB published a version with Leo Feist in New York, under the title “Barnyard Blues.” Alcide Nunez and Ray Lopez issued a version with Roger Graham Music Publishing in Chicago, titled “Livery Stable Blues.” Both claimed to have published the original version of the Victor 18255 recording by the ODJB. During the court case, all parties were questioned under oath about their compositional practices. LaRocca’s explanation was, “Well a valve in my cornet got stuck and it made a funny noise. I experimented with the bray or neigh, and finally worked out my livery stable melody.” Trombonist Eddie Edwards seemed to support this as he remembered a conversation about how LaRocca had put a horse whinny into a “blues number.” Clarinetist Larry Shields was asked about how the band learned new tunes when he was working with Tom Brown’s Band in Chicago. He answered, “They played it over,” by which he meant, “The whole band. . . One fellow would come on the job with a new song and he played it off and we followed.”

This in turn raised the question of how the musicians followed if they were to do more than simply double the melody. Pianist Henry Ragas tried to clarify this and only added to the confusion. “I made the accompaniment and he [LaRocca] told me exactly my part.” Understandably confused, the attorney tried a different line of questioning: “Was the composition in question the same number the first time you played it, as the tenth day in your rehearsals?” Ragas responded, “We played it a little better . . . the runs were better.” This led to questioning about how the runs were improved. Ragas told the lawyer that it was LaRocca who had made the improvement to the runs for the clarinet part, the trombone, and the piano, but that LaRocca did not play any of these instruments. This prompted his interrogator to ask, “How could he instruct the piano player or the trombone player if he didn’t play those instruments?” Ragas said, “He just hummed it to us.” This seems to explain what Ragas meant when he said that LaRocca had given him exactly what he wanted Ragas to play – he did this vocally – and then Ragas interpreted this at the piano and, in his words, “made the accompaniment.”

A similar method of developing countermelodies also was used by Nunez and Lopez. Their version of “Livery Stable Blues,” they claimed, was based upon “More Power Blues,” composed by Ray Lopez, and was first played in Tom Brown’s Band when they were in Chicago. Ray Lopez’s son Bert
recalled his father discussing how they played. He said, “Someone would come up with an improvised passage and they would work it into a sort of harmonious counterpoint behind the lead, who would be improvising off the melody.”17 Whoever was responsible for the original idea, the arranging method of both Tom Brown’s Band and the ODJB appears to have been similar: countermelodies would be improvised with reference to the main melody.

Much of the testimony given in court related to defining a blues. Eddie Edwards, who was the most musically literate of the ODJB, was asked to explain what was a “blues number?” He described it as a “Fox-trot with a slow and lazy like yawning with no direct harmony, sort of freaky harmony.”18 This drew attention to a feature of early New Orleans jazz that is not readily apparent today. When the ODJB first recorded, their harmony was heard by contemporaries as strange and discordant. Today it is difficult to hear it that way. Careful listening and transcription along with contemporaneous sheet music

confirms how early blues and jazz harmony deviated from today’s standardized, and often simplified, harmonic formulations. The introduction to “Livery Stable Blues” (example 1) provides a clear example of the complexity of early New Orleans jazz harmony. The first chord of “Livery Stable Blues” is a chord of E-flat. This chord is constructed in the typical way that a barbershop quartet voices a major chord. The lowest note, what would be the bass voice in a barbershop quartet voices a major chord. The next note up (the baritone voice) sings a fifth above the bass. The lower note on the treble stave (the lead voice in barbershop terminology) sings the tonic and the tenor voice sings a third above the lead (G). The subsequent chords are formed because the baritone and tenor voices both ascend a minor third and then descend chromatically back to their original note to cadence back onto the tonic chord in the second measure. This is known as a swipe in barbershop terminology. The opening measures of the

Example 1: Alcide Nunez and Ray Lopez, “Livery Stable Blues” introduction (1917)

Example 2: “Sweet Adeline,” from Barber Shop Ballads (1925)
barbershop favorite “Sweet Adeline” demonstrate how a minor third swipe is used in a barbershop song (example 2).

There are few transcriptions of African American part-song from the nineteenth century; however, there is strong evidence that this type of harmonic formulation was sung by African Americans in Florida in the 1880s. At that time, the English composer Frederick Delius was living on an orange plantation at Solano Grove, just outside of Jacksonville. Delius recalled: “I would sit on my verandah in the darkness of the evening, and I would hear from afar the singing of the Negroes. It seemed to harmonize wonderfully with the glorious natural surroundings... Although I had grown up with classical

![Example 3: Frederick Delius, “Daybreak,” from the *Florida Suite* (1888)](image)

music, a whole new world now opened up to me.” Delius was inspired to write the *Florida Suite* (example 3), in which he tried to capture the music that he heard.

Although example 3 is in a different key, we find the same tonic-dominant, tonic-diminished (or one of its inversions), and subdominant minor chords that we find in example 2. None of these chords are common in conventional European harmonization; however they are commonplace in barbershop harmony. In his 1911 opera, *Treemonisha*, Scott Joplin used a similar cadence to depict the singing of a group of nineteenth-century black North Texas corn huskers (example 4).

*Treemonisha* is in part autobiographical, in that its heroine, Treemonisha, was, like Joplin, born just after the Civil War and raised in the State of Arkansas, northeast of the town of Texarkana. It is the only opera in existence about the reconstruction era that was written by a black man who actually lived...
through the period. What is more, Joplin told an interviewer three years before it was published that *Treemonisha* would contain “music similar to that sung by the negroes [sic] during slavery days.” It is clear from this that Joplin was attempting to represent the music he had heard around him as a child.

The quintessential barbershop chord is a major or dominant chord on the flatted sixth of the key. In measure three of “Livery Stable Blues” (example 1) there is a chord on the flatted-sixth of the scale of the key, in this instance C-flat. The barbershop chord is typically formed by the lead and bass voice again remaining static as the tenor voice descends by a semitone and the baritone voice ascends by a semitone. The more fundamental barbershop chords result from the smallest change in notes in the tenor and baritone voices. A variation on this harmony which also results from no more than a semitone movement in the tenor and baritone voice is the tonic diminished chord. These are the two most fundamental cadences in barbershop harmony. When they are combined, they give rise to a dominant chord on the flatted-sixth note of the scale (example 5).

The barbershop chord introduces three notes to the harmony that would not usually be found in conventional European practice: the flatted (or blues) third, G-flat; the flatted-sixth, C-flat; and A-natural, the flatted-fifth. This is the kind of “freaky harmony” that Eddie Edwards noted in his definition of the blues.

This “freaky harmony” is not confined to the introduction of “Livery Stable Blues” (example 1); it is also found in the first strain (example 6). The chords were not given in the original sheet music, but once they are written in, Edwards’s observation is confirmed. The opening measures are a series of *freaky chords* that result from barbershop cadences between the tonic and the tonic diminished chord. The first three measures of the opening strain offer a repeated blue note melody (F-sharp, G-natural, and E-flat). The note of F-sharp is the flatted/minor third (or blues third), and the G-natural is the major third. A melody that has both the minor and major third had been referred to as a “blue note melody” for some five years before the recording of “Livery Stable Blues.” Another way of interpreting this blue note melody is as the note choices of the tenor voice in a barbershop cadence. This is the line that the tenor voice sings, or the instrument that takes this role in this cadence, and if the baritone voice also descends a semitone (as in a fundamental barbershop cadence), this gives rise to the diminished chord (example 7).

Judge Carpenter, who presided over the “Livery Stable Blues” copyright dispute, correctly...
recognized that the blues melody was not unique to the ODJB’s recording of “Livery Stable Blues” and decided, “Neither Mr. LaRocca and his associates nor Mr. Nunez and his associates conceived the idea of this melody.” Accordingly, Judge Carpenter placed “Livery Stable Blues” in the public domain.  

Although resolving the question of who wrote the melody was the central issue before the court, in many ways the authorship of the countermelodies and resultant harmony is equally, if not more, interesting. It seems reasonable to conclude that the musicians associated with the ODJB and Tom Brown’s band learned to play their obbligato parts in much the same way that other New Orleans bands did. They applied the principles of barbershop voice leading to their instruments, and it is very likely that Nick LaRocca played a leading role in teaching the members of the band how to do this. The circumstances around the copyright dispute of “Livery Stable Blues” do suggest that LaRocca was more familiar with these practices than the other musicians, but it may be that he was unaware of the barbershop practices behind the lines he sang to the members of his band. LaRocca confirmed that he was aware of black music: “It’s been said that we played many Negro melodies; that is true . . . We had special arrangements on them; we used to get up – we didn’t sing, but we used to holler, sing like we were – try to sing it. In other words, it pleased the public; they liked what we were doing, and they’d ask for the same thing over and we’d play them.”

LaRocca also said that the ODJB played melodies by
African American composers, including “Sister Kate,” “Some of These Days,” and “DARKTOWN STRUTTER’S BALL”: “Sure, we played colored melodies. We also played melodies that were written by white people, but we didn’t sing the white people’s melodies. You’ll ask me why. I don’t know, because . . . they were made different.”

There does appear to be, in these interviews with LaRocca, some acknowledgment of distinctive features in African American song and also some understanding of a relationship between what they sang and how they played.

There is no direct evidence to date that LaRocca ever sang in a barbershop quartet. This raises the question of how he learned to sing these countermelodies. According to interviews he began making up countermelodies when he was a child: “At that time I didn’t know anything—I could show you on the piano how easy it is for me to get a melody, and many people say, ‘How you put them together?’ Well, to me they come just like they come out of the air; all I need is four notes or five notes to start on and a chord construction to follow, and I can make a melody. And that’s not only now; I’ve been doing this since I’ve been nine, ten years old.”

One tune that he remembered from his school days was “The Holy City” (example 8): “In my early training at school, at the closing exercise they had a number they called ‘The Holy City.’ Well I had learned this number and during the – Mr. Socolla was the man who taught us how to go through our little parts in the play – and the whole group was singing it. I was in the back singing, and I was making contra-melody on this tune, and he called me out the front and says I want you to sing this. And I got out there and I had stage fright, and I couldn’t sing a thing, I couldn’t remember what I did, but he thought I did something great that it would sound good if I would come out in the front and do it.”

It seems LaRocca not only had a good ear for creating countermelodies, but was also aware of the resulting harmonies, as he recognized that “The Holy City” has the same basic chord structure as a twelve-bar
blues, but in an eight-bar form. This led him to conclude: “Now that’s, that chord construction is not from Africa. That is, the chord construction shortened is the chord construction of the blues.”

“The Holy City” is quoted in a number of early blues. David Sager wrote in the sleeve notes to _King Oliver, Off the Record: The Complete 1923 Jazz Band Recordings_ that the second strain of “Canal Street Blues” is “a paraphrasing of Stephen Adams’ and Frederick E. Weatherly’s ‘The Holy City,’ an 1892 sacred song hit.” Clarinetist Johnny Dodds also quoted the “Holy City” in his solo on “Chimes Blues,” which is another Oliver composition.

On balance, it seems unlikely that the ODJB could have learned to imitate the complex harmonies of black New Orleans bands simply by copying what they heard them play. In order to reproduce this type of harmony they, or at least LaRocca, would have to have been familiar with the swipes and voice leading of barbershop harmony. By the time LaRocca was learning to play his instrument, barbershop harmony was popular across all race lines. In 1893, the “Utopian Quartet” of Bellevue, Nebraska, consisted of “one Indian, one Negro, and two Caucasians.” There are even reports of Chinese barbers in Hawaii singing barbershop in 1902. This may, in part, explain why it has been so difficult for jazz researchers to state with any degree of certainty the racial origins of jazz. Given that the harmonic principles that underscore the music were the common property of all races in the United States by the time that jazz emerged, it has not been possible to distinguish the music’s racial origins. A deeper understanding of the development of barbershop harmony does hold out the prospect of understanding more clearly those aspects of jazz that were derived from African American practice and those that were not.

In 1922 Carl Engel, chief of the Music Division of the Library of Congress, wrote an article titled “Jazz: A Musical Discussion,” in which he made an interesting observation: “The people – who in the beginning had known but one thing: melody, fastened upon a primitive and weak harmonic structure of ‘Barbershop’ chords – the people, I say, who had stepwise advanced from melody and rhythms to harmony, lastly discovered counterpoint. And the result of this last discovery is jazz. In other words, jazz is rag-time, plus ‘Blues,’ plus orchestral polyphony.”

There are still some dedicated advocates who refuse to accept that the ODJB were not the “creators” of jazz as claimed. I think it safe to conclude that the ODJB were not the first to apply barbershop practices to their instruments. There is clear evidence of the same practices being applied to instruments during the first decade of the twentieth century. There are also those who dismiss the ODJB as plagiarists: simple imitators of African American jazz. This view is also too simplistic. The ODJB were among the people who developed jazz counterpoint by applying barbershop principles to their instruments. In this sense, they did create jazz that was their own. This seems to confirm two things that up to now have been contentious: the ODJB may not have been _original_ but they were _authentic_. If, as the evidence appears to show, they were directly applying barbershop principles in the construction of their obbligatos and countermelodies, they were applying the same principles used by the black bands of New Orleans. In this sense, the ODJB were as _authentic_ as the black bands. On the other hand, as this was the same method used by other New Orleans bands, the ODJB were therefore not _original_. I would argue that, after a century of misunderstanding, the ODJB should be reassessed for their contribution to jazz on their own merit.

Endnotes

4 In his review of H. O Brunn’s *The Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band*, which uncritically accepts the ODJB as the “creators” of jazz, Larry Gara wrote, “Most serious of all, there is no mention of the Negro influence on jazz or on white musicians” (Larry Gara, “Review: *The Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band* by H. O. Brunn,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, vol. 44, no. 1 [Autumn 1960], 75). Richard Waterman argued, “If Brunn had mentioned, even in passing, that LaRocca and his men were highly successful white imitators and popularizers of a Negro musical style that had been long a-building, his book would have shown some element of balance” (Richard A. Waterman, “Review: *The Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band* by H. O. Brunn,” *Western Folklore*, vol. 21, no 2 [April 1962], 122-23).


7 Dominick James “Nick” LaRocca interviewed by Richard B. Allen, June 2, 1958 (Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

8 Dominick James “Nick” LaRocca interviewed by Richard B. Allen, May 21, 1958 (Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

9 Ibid.


11 “At Last! Court Finds Man Who First Jazzed,” *Chicago American*, October 12, 1917, 2, as quoted in Maskell, 39.


13 Lawrence Shields, Interrogatory Transcript, 5-6, October 2, 1917, *Hart et al. v. Graham* (N. D. Ill. 1917), Case File E914; U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division, as quoted in Maskell, 58.


17 Ray Lopez, as told to Dick Holbrook, “Mr. Jazz Himself,” *Storyville* 64 (April-May 1976): 139.


19 The highest note can be excluded from this analysis as this note is doubled in two of the lower voices.


22 Scott Joplin, *Treemonisha* (New York: Scott Joplin, 1911). *Treemonisha* may contain other autobiographical references. The “Preface” states: “‘The opera begins in September, 1884. Treemonisha being eighteen years old, now starts upon her career as a teacher and leader.’ Thus, the action of the opera is set only a few months after Julius Weiss left Texarkana, September, 1884, a date so significant to Joplin that he specified exactly in his Preface, is very possibly the month and year when he himself departed Texarkana, to ‘start upon his career as a teacher and leader’” (Theodore Albrecht, “Julius Weiss: Scott Joplin’s First Piano Teacher,” *College Music Symposium*, vol. 19, no. 2 [Fall, 1979]: 104-5).


24 While occasionally a chord on the flatted sixth can be found in the European cannon as the “German Sixth,” it is not usually found as a dominant chord with the flatted seventh.

25 The “Livery Stable Blues,” by Lopez and Nunez, was printed in two versions: an instrumental version and one with lyrics that were not on the original recording.
26 The 1913 reprint of W. C. Handy’s “The Memphis Blues” was “founded on W. C. Handy’s World Wide “Blue’ Note Melody.” (New York City: Joe Morris Music Co., 1913) copyright Theron C. Bennett.

27 “Court Findings” Hart et al. v. Graham, 2, Dominic ‘Nick’ LaRocca Collection (New Orleans: Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University), as quoted in Maskell, 14.

28 LaRocca interviewed by Allen, June 9, 1959.

29 Ibid.

30 Dominic James “Nick” LaRocca interviewed by William R. Hogan and D. Clive Hardy, October 26, 1959 (Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University).

31 LaRocca interviewed by Allen, May 21, 1958.

32 Ibid.

33 David Sager, sleeve notes to King Oliver, Off the Record: The Complete 1923 Jazz Band Recordings, Archeophone Records, 2006, 16.

34 Ibid., 17.


37 Ibid., 133.


39 Edmund Wise, born in 1888 and a friend of Buddy Bolden, told Fred Ramsey in a 1954 interview, “You see, in them days, there used to be quartets and all like that, you know. Well just like all them fellows would be singing, ‘cause he had Cornish was playin’ the trombone [sic] with him, he could sing, well they’d be singing around them bar rooms, well just this was what they was singin’. … Mumford ‘n them, well just what they was singing, Buddy Bolden going to play it. … Well if they’d sing it right, well, he’d learn how to play it right … See, that’s the parts he played it right” (Edmund Wise interviewed by Fred Ramsey, 1954, quoted in Hobson, Creating Jazz Counterpoint, 58).
Introduction

February 26, 2017, marked the 100th anniversary of what is widely accepted as the first jazz recording. The Victor record by the Original Dixieland “Jass” Band, which consisted of the following members: Larry Shields on clarinet, Nick LaRocca on cornet, Eddie Edwards on trombone, Henry Ragas on piano, and Tony Sbarbaro on a trap set, yielded two titles, “Livery Stable Blues” and “Dixie Jass Band One-Step.” These records would give most of the world its first taste of jazz, changing popular music forever through its introduction of new sounds and ideas. Although the ODJB did not create this music, they were one of the first to preserve its sounds. This record helped set into motion the events that led to the explosion of the Jazz Age and the many jazz genres that resulted.

Today, 100 years later, we live in a musically different world. The way we access music, the way we listen to it, the quality of it, its stylistic elements, context, and many other factors all contrast greatly with the way it was presented back in 1917. The Original Cornell Syncopators was founded in the spring of 2016 at Cornell University in order to delve into the rich varieties of styles within jazz’s earliest forms by studying its performance practice and its historical and musical significance. Cornetist Colin Hancock
started the group with the aid of Paul Merrill, the Gussman Director of Jazz Education at Cornell, and Joe Salzano, a veteran Upstate New York reedman and Cornell associate. The first project: acknowledge the centennial of the first jazz record via a study and performance of the 1917 recordings of the Original Dixieland Jass Band.

The Musicians and Their Roles

Cornell has a thriving and diverse community of jazz musicians, so there was little issue in selecting the members of the band based on prior musical knowledge and skills. Clarinetist/saxophonist Hannah Krall from Pennsylvania is a Musicology major and a member of the Cornell Jazz Combos, Early Music Lab, and Wind Ensemble. Trombonist Rishi Verma, an Ithaca native, studies Engineering when he is not playing in the Cornell Big Bands, Pep Band, or Marching Band. Amit Mizrahi of Detroit is a Computer Science major who started as mostly a classical piano player. Drummer Noah Li, of Scarsdale, New York, is an Information Science major, who had experience with punk rock drumming and auxiliary percussion playing in wind ensemble. Colin Hancock of Buda, Texas, is an Urban and Regional Studies Major and a member of the Cornell Big Bands. He took the cornet (and occasional banjo and soprano saxophone) chair as well as the main leadership of the Original Cornell Syncopators.

The first challenge the musicians faced, with the exception of Hancock, was to become familiar with early jazz in its various styles. To begin, the group got together in the spring of 2016, a full year before the centennial concert, and began to listen. First, we made a comprehensive analysis of the variety in the recorded repertoire of the Original Dixieland “Jass” Band, ranging from their first records...
to their English releases, to their OKeh Records from the 1920s, and lastly to their 1930s electrical recordings. At first, it was hard for many of the members to listen to the recordings, due not only to the sonic limitations of the acoustic recording process, but also the lack of historical context to explain why the music had such an impact. To combat these issues, two measures were taken. First, we listened to recordings that preceded the 1917 ODJB sessions, ranging from early syncopated performances like the 1897 gem “I Thought I Was a Winner - Or I Don’t Know, You Ain’t So Warm,” written by Bert Williams and performed by the Columbia Orchestra, to the 1916 recording of “Down Home Rag” by Wilbur Sweatman. The band also listened to records made by people like John Philip Sousa, Enrico Caruso, and the Edison Symphony Orchestra to help gain an understanding of the overall direction the music was headed as well as what the ODJB themselves might have heard.

Slightly less difficult was consulting some early filmography of or related to the band. One little-known fact about the ODJB is that they may have been the first jazz group to have been filmed, as they are allegedly seen performing at Reisenweber’s in the 1917 film “The Good For Nothing” starring Carlyle Blackwell, though the Syncopators could not locate this clip. A silent Pathe film of the group in 1921 titled “Music Hath Charms” shows the group performing in front of animals at the Bronx Zoo. Next, footage of the Original Indiana Five from a 1929 Vitaphone short with sound was consulted; it includes a performance of the ODJB’s own “Clarinet Marmalade.” From 1937, a “March of the Times” newsreel features the first sound footage of the ODJB, including a recreation of the famous “Liverly Stable Blues” session and a stirring performance of “Tiger Rag.” A clip from the 1950s television show “I’ve Got a Secret” features interviews with Sbarbaro and J. Russell Robinson (Ragas’s replacement), as well as a performance with Anthony Parenti and Phil Napoleon replacing Shields and LaRocca respectively. A 1961 performance of “Dixieland One-Step” on the television special “Chicago and All That Jazz” features some great drumming in the style of Sbarbaro by Cliff Leeman. Other performances were consulted, and a complete list is at the end of this article.

Next, the band examined the written literature about the ODJB, which includes transcribed interviews with Tony Sbarbaro and Nick LaRocca, along with other resources from the Hogan Jazz Archive virtual library. As spring rolled into summer, the band got to work on choosing the repertoire; it was decided that the entirety of the 1917 recordings made by the band would be perfect because they truly show us what the band sounded like in its earliest forms, which gives us the earliest glimpses of jazz in its infancy.

In the fall of 2016 the band began to rehearse, and a new set of challenges was faced; namely, how to perform the pieces in such a way that we would not be just reading transcriptions, or as we called them, “Dixie Book” charts. While reading transcriptions is a vital step in understanding the music and thought processes of early jazz musicians, it lacks the necessary element of personal connection to the music. Mundanely reading transcriptions can sound robotic, or even dead, to a listener who expects the spontaneity and excitement of early jazz. Because the “Dixie Book” charts have a structure similar to “Real Book” charts, many jazz musicians will read them as such, with lots of musicians reading the “head,” causing a lack of understanding of the importance of improvisational ensemble playing. In the case of Dixieland charts, the “head” is the melody most commonly played by the cornetist. Because the addition of the clarinet and trombone melody is vital to the creation of polyphony, performances that solely use such charts are inaccurate. This is a key factor of the ODJB’s sound as well as many other genres, but certainly not all, of Early Jazz. To combat these issues, Hancock began to create something the band began to coin as “roadmap charts” - which highlighted important sections of the tunes like the “Dixie Books,” while using the basic arrangements of the recordings. They were by no means exact transcriptions, but rather left room for the musicians to do their own work of understanding what was aurally missing from the records and to incorporate their own creative ideas and expressions while still remaining true to the style of the ODJB.
An integral part of the sound of the ODJB, one which in many ways defines their records, is the presence of Tony Sbarbaro’s full drum kit. Not only was it risky for recording engineers at the time to record drums in their entirety due to the tendency to cause issues with the wax master and recording apparatus, but they also tended to get lost in the acoustical sound “mess;” only recently, with the help of modern equipment, have audio technicians been able to bring more clarity to Sbarbaro’s kit, allowing it to shine through the old discs. Any director’s first thought would be to pick a jazz drummer for this group, yet Noah Li’s diverse experience with percussion was far better suited. His ear for auxiliary percussion sounds allowed him to be more open and creative with the different timbres and rhythms of the more unfamiliar trap drum set that Tony Sbarbaro and other preceding as well as subsequent early jazz drummers used. More interestingly, it could have been easy for a learned jazz drummer to revert to the more swinging style from twenty-some years in the future. While the music of the ODJB does not use “swung” eighth notes, its groove “swings.” Noah, on the other hand, was able to start fresh. Sbarbaro’s playing, like Li’s, was that of a combination of various backgrounds.

In The Story of The Original Dixieland Jazz Band, H. O. Brunn goes in depth, describing Sbarbaro’s trap kit, called such because of the set of “contraptions” that round out the kit. On the snare, Sbarbaro played with what Brunn describes as “a gallopin’ style” that featured “a three-stroke ‘ruff’ with an accented press roll” on the snare, influenced by “New Orleans parade Bands.” Early recordings of the snare are not easy to find, especially played as syncopated as Sbarbaro, though records by Europe’s Society Orchestra, the Versatile Four, and the Eubie Blake Trio were helpful. The hardest challenge was playing the “three-stroke ruff” described by Brunn rather than playing a simple march-like roll. An excellent example of this “ruff” can be heard on the ODJB’s 1917 recording of “Indiana.” During the verse, Sbarbaro’s playing cuts through the ensemble well enough to hear the distinctive phrasing of his beats on the drum and the “ruff”.

Sbarbaro’s kit also consisted of one to two cowbells and a “large-sized woodblock for continuous use during the choruses, when it replaced the snare drum.” Brunn then explains how Sbarbaro would use the snare on verses, and “minstrel style” woodblock on choruses, returning again to the snare drum on the last half of the last chorus: “The ‘minstrel’ woodblock reveals the influence of the minstrel shows, so common in New Orleans at that time.” That the use of woodblocks may have stemmed from minstrelsy was much easier to understand after listening to a few recordings of minstrel type performances. The best example can be found in the 1895 and 1897 recordings of “Kentucky Jubilee Singers” by Issler’s Orchestra and the Columbia Orchestra, respectively. On both recordings, there are examples of the blocks used as a syncopated rhythmic driver as well as a novelty embellishment to mimic the sounds of dancing feet or the “bones,” an instrument with its roots in the music of Western Africa. We then compared this to some later block rhythms used on records like “Smiler Rag” by the Zonophone Concert Band and “Down in Louisiana” by the Edison Concert Band. Given this context, it became easy to see where Sbarbaro got at least a portion of his influences on the blocks.

A twenty-eight-inch street drum was also used to keep the beat either on 2/4 or 4/4, depending on what customers wanted. Santo Pecora describes this mentality quite well: “We used to play two-beat but had to switch to four to keep the customers from walking out. It’s the four-beat that gets ‘em.” A China cymbal, suspended, also existed on the top deck of the trap kit, as well as a Chinese tom-tom, harkening to the influences from the East through the recent wave of Chinese immigrants to the Western part of the country, as well as the then popular notions of Orientalism. The ODJB was not unfamiliar with Orientalism, as shown by their 1917 and 1920 recordings of Gabriel Sebek’s “In the Soudan” (recorded as “Oriental Jazz” in 1917 and “Soudan” in 1920).

Because of this drumming style’s complexity, it is easy to see how Noah may have been a little confused and even intimidated at first. “It was at first very uncomfortable being forced to switch from pure performer to performer-creator in instances where the recordings either had no drums, or it was
difficult to hear what the drummer was doing,” he says. “Playing this style not only gives me a chance to take a more active role in choosing what I play and how I play it, but also demonstrate a level of musical research about a genre that is not necessarily “popular,” but historically important and fun.” Noah also consulted the incredible drummer Hal Smith, one of the few jazz drummers with serious knowhow of early trap drumming styles and expectations. Through correspondence, coaching, and above all practice and patience, Noah was able to form a powerful sound on the drums and use his ear in the same way Sbarbaro may have done, by learning as much about performance practice and equipment as he did about techniques and style. Initially starting on a contemporary kit outfitted with a china cymbal, bell and blocks, the switch was made to a period style kit, complete with a 26-inch bass drum rescued from an Ithaca dumpster by Paul Merrill; a Chinese tom-tom purchased from China by Colin Hancock, and other necessary additions.

Amit Mizrahi also faced a serious challenge in regards to piano playing in the style of the elusive Henry Walter Ragas. If it was not enough of an issue that Ragas passed away in 1919 as a result of the Spanish Flu epidemic, the fact that almost all of the sides he recorded with the ODJB have little to no presence of piano pushes the difficulty of adopting his style to a different level. Brunn describes that Ragas played with a "heavy left hand [that] provided a strong chord foundation for the structure of the music, while his right added another melodic voice to the band. Unlike most jazz pianists today, Ragas did not just play rhythm alone with an occasional embellishment. [He] was a 'Ten-Fingered' pianist whose style contributed body and background strength to the ensemble.” The best recordings of Ragas are undoubtedly “Dixie Jass Band One-Step” when Sbarbaro switches to blocks in the C-Strain; “Bluin' The Blues,” which was in some ways a feature for the young pianist; and “Indiana” on Columbia. On each of these recordings, one must first listen to Sbarbaro and then listen inside the drums to hear the piano. This kind of close listening reveals a strong sense of timing and rhythmic intensity, especially in the left hand where his audible embellishments are most often heard. However, we knew it was going to be hard for Mizrahi to do this, even from just an aurally challenging standpoint. In the words of Jazz drummer and historian Hal Smith, “The pianist has a difficult job. Who can really HEAR what Henry Ragas sounded like?!?”

Mizrahi took the few known aspects of Ragas’s playing into his own piano playing, which stemmed from not just jazz but also his strong classical background. In fact, it was not uncommon to find him ripping bits and pieces of Chopin and Beethoven in the midst of quiet moments during rehearsals. His classical technique was a reason why he picked up the style so quickly. For instance, his experience of playing lots of Chopin is a large part of his success. Chopin’s music, at times, features disjointed left hand figures where a bass note is hit at the beginning of the measure and is accompanied by a repeated chord around middle C. This bass configuration is similar to the style of Ragas, although it is played much slower and more rubato. Slowly but surely, Amit was able to pull much from what he could hear Ragas do and play: “It was a rare chance to directly interact with history instead of passively learning about it,” he said. “I enjoyed the challenge of dissecting a recording, analyzing its parts and interpreting it in new and original ways.”

The horns had a much easier task, due partially to the sheer presence of LaRocca, Edwards, and Shields on the original recordings. For better understanding of Nick LaRocca’s playing, Hancock first examined the Aeolian-Vocalion and Columbia recordings of the band from 1917. Unlike the Victor records, which stress the clarinet and trombone countermelodies, the Vocalion sides placed LaRocca at a distance where his full, driving, and, above all, syncopated style could be heard. His figures on records like “Ostrich Walk” and “Look At ’Em Doin’ It” show a beautiful, well rounded tone, clearly influenced by Herbert L. Clarke of Sousa’s Band. LaRocca also had a knack for hitting the beat just on its earlier side without necessarily rushing, creating an exciting and rhythmically interesting effect similar to what has been called “ragging.” This is very present in the ODJB’s Vocalion recording of “Tiger Rag,” especially
during the C section, where he throws in triplets as well as syncopated or ragged lines that don’t stray too far from the melody, but do so enough to keep the listener interested and maintain a certain level of spontaneity. Also mixed in his melodies are the occasional growls, blue notes, and bell tone-like calls; these may harken back to the time when parade days and vaudeville were in their prime.

Also important in understanding LaRocca’s sound is a knowledge of other white cornetists from the same or similar lineage. For starters, Frank Christian, brother of later ODJB member Emile Christian, made several records in the late 1910s with a group led by pianist and future vaudeville star Jimmy Durante, billing themselves the “Original New Orleans Jazz Band.” In their 1918 and 1919 recordings of “Ja-Da,” Christian plays before-the-beat syncopations similar to LaRocca, and he stays in the middle range of his instrument, although his interval jumps are a little more adventurous. He stays close to the melody, aside from a few blue tones played in the beginning of the last eight bars of the “You’ll Find Old Dixieland in France” introduction. Finally, the 1919 recording of “Slow and Easy” by the Louisiana Five features an unknown cornetist who plays with conviction and confidence, similar to the sound of LaRocca and Christian, right down to the before-the-beat syncopation during the section that is reminiscent of “Ostrich Walk.” Christian, LaRocca, and, presumably Alfred Laine, were all alumni of Papa Jack Laine’s Reliance Band, a band in which many early white New Orleans jazzmen got their chops and first steady professional work. Looking down the road, Paul Mares of the New Orleans Rhythm Kings and Abbie Brunies of the Halfway House Orchestra, who also had similar approaches to their cornet playing, also got their start with Jack Laine. Thus, a well-rounded idea of LaRocca’s playing, as well as his context, could be determined.

Hancock previously studied the music of Buddy Bolden and other associated cornetists and musicians. This made it a little easier to grasp LaRocca’s style, although LaRocca probably played more cleanly than Bolden. The greatest challenge Hancock faced was limiting the amount of embellishments one can add to a melody. After having heard the ODJB songbook played by so many artists for so long, it was difficult to block other influences. Again, many aspects of what we call jazz today were either in their infancy or would not occur until later, so Hancock thought the inspiration had to come from LaRocca and musicians who played before LaRocca.

Hannah Krall had an interesting job taking on the sound of Larry Shields. It is no secret that Shields’s clarinet playing is the most present on almost all of the ODJB’s recordings due to the nature of the sonic range of the instrument being perfectly suited for the acoustic process of making records. However, it would be remiss to say this meant she had the easiest job. Shields played with an incredibly broad and smooth tone, rarely with any moments of strong or sharp articulation. His timing is loose in ensemble passages, where he would, in Krall’s words, “float on top of everyone else.” On the other hand, Shields’s breaks were virtually always in time - never swung - which was unusual, considering the looseness of his ensemble figures. This “switching” can be heard to great advantage in the original, 1917 Aeolian-Vocalion recordings of “Tiger Rag” and “Ostrich Walk,” on which Shields’s breaks are crisp and clear, while his ensemble playing is more laid back and smooth. It can be insinuated that Shields was improvising these strains and their rhythms, although he certainly had a set list of safe “notes” to choose from, as shown by closer examination of the later versions of both tunes, recorded for Victor in 1918 and Columbia in 1920.

As time progressed, Krall also spent less time working from written parts and more time trying to absorb Shields’s sound and approach. Even though it was necessary to understand Shields’ melodic contributions to the ensemble, Krall found that once she learned to imitate his tone, it unlocked many other aspects of his playing. For instance, it became quite apparent that, unlike Krall, Larry Shields was certainly not classically trained and could not read music. She notes that there were many moments in a practice room where she would be practicing one of his lines, only to find it nearly impossible. Slowly, she learned to experiment with unconventional fingerings in order to produce the pitch she wanted,
while making the melodic line more technically feasible.

Lastly, Rishi Verma played the role of trombonist Eddie Edwards, the only member of the band who was a true “reader.” Edwards’s trombone is well recorded on every ODJB title. It is characterized by a powerful, room-filling tone with crisp attack and execution. Edwards, like LaRocca, Shields, and Sbarbaro, got his chops playing with Papa Jack Laine. He also probably heard the work of Arthur Pryor, John Philip Sousa’s principal trombonist for many years. Pryor’s records, recorded by Victor during the first decade of the 1900s, as well as Sousa’s, would have been sold across the country, including in New Orleans. It is easy to imagine the young Edwards enjoying early band ragtime recordings like George Botsford’s “Grizzly Bear” or Pryor’s own “Razzazza Mazzazza” (later reworked into “Lassus Trombone,” and eventually “Ory’s Creole Trombone”), then taking a crack at them himself in one of Laine’s bands.\(^{18}\)

While Edwards filled his playing with smears, glissandi, and rhythmic figures that we associate with later “Dixieland” tailgate trombone, he played a more crucial role as a bass or baritone voice counterpart to Ragas’s lead. Although it would be easy to say that this kind of trombone player essentially played the same part as the modern-day bass player, we found it to be a little more complex. As Verma discovered, “I play as part of the rhythm section, giving bass notes and keeping time. The 1917 Aeolian-Vocalion recording of ‘Oriental Jazz’ for example has a unique driving beat coming from the tom and trombone that creates the backbone of the piece.”\(^{19}\) Another example from the same session is “Look At Em’ Doin It.”\(^{20}\) Edwards forms a hybrid between the bass and the third melodic voice. He is not restricted to only playing the root of the chord and can play other chord tones in order to become a part of the melodic trio. He also varies the rhythm between long bass tones with falls and runs that are difficult, yet exciting to hear. They add to the sound, especially due to the differences in timbre between the three melodic instruments.

The Coaches

Slowly, the band members began to develop an ear for the recordings. Gaining an understanding of the tonality and characteristic sonority of the acoustic process allowed them to listen past the record to the performance. The band got some important coaching along the way. Joe Salzano and Paul Merrill, valued members of both the Cornell jazz program and the greater Upstate New York jazz community, were crucial in helping the band get started. Paul Merrill is a fantastic trumpet player. He and Hancock met to discuss the Syncopators on a snowy Sunday afternoon in February 2016. As they listened to a few of Hancock’s 78 rpm records, including a copy of “Livery Stable Blues,” Hancock broached the possibility of providing students with the necessary support and space to take on projects that would highlight jazz’s earliest forms, kicking things off with a project celebrating the centennial anniversary of the first jazz recording. Merrill was intrigued by the idea, and the two got to work recruiting musicians. The perfect coach for the group turned out to be local Ithaca reedman and Cornell affiliate Joe Salzano. Salzano’s influence cannot be overstated. He helped each member of the band assume the role of his or her counterpart in the ODJB. He got Hancock to play with more clarity and syncopation; Krall to develop more attack and power; Verma to play with more slide and less “blat;” and the rhythm section to work as a team.

Help also came from veteran players and jazz experts Dan Levinson, David Sager, and Hal Smith. Dan Levinson has worked with a plethora of famous artists including Wynton Marsalis, Mel Torme, and Vince Giordano. He is one of the foremost authorities on early jazz and ragtime performance. His Roof Garden Jass Band was one of the first to recreate the style of the ODJB and other less well remembered groups like Johnny Dunn’s Jazz Hounds, the Frisco Jass Band, and Earl Fuller’s Famous Jazz Band. Hancock met Levinson in Los Angeles in 2015, and a friendship was formed between the two. For this project, Levinson provided some useful pieces of advice on how to play more as a unit in the manner of the
ODJB. For instance, Levinson spoke on the challenges today’s music students face when trying to adopt a style from a century ago: “If you’re going to give musicians the freedom to improvise their own parts, the ideas need to be in the style of the original players and the music. It’s very hard to force oneself to disregard a century of evolution, once those post-ODJB sounds are in your ears. You have to completely immerse yourself in the music, to the exclusion of all else - and no modern-day jazz student is in a position to do that!”21

David Sager, who has served as a mentor to Hancock since the inauguration of the Buddy Bolden Cylinder Project in 2014, is a respected jazz historian, reference assistant in the Library of Congress’ Recorded Sound Research Center and curator of the Library’s National Jukebox, not to mention a mean Rag-a-Jazz trombonist (he was, after all, an original member of Dan Levinson’s Roof Garden band). He began helping the Cornell Syncopators in the spring of 2016, giving some great advice on how to round out their sound. For example, when the group sent him a recording of an early attempt at “Livery Stable Blues,” in which the polyphony of the horns was quite lacking in balance and Li’s bass drum was a tad overpowering, Sager responded, “I would recommend a smoother and less bombastic style. Compare the ODJB with one of the Earl Fuller’s Famous Jazz Band recordings and you’ll see what I mean.”22 With this easy-to-follow instruction, the band listened to “Jazz De Luxe” and “Slippery Hank” by Fuller’s band, followed by “Livery Stable Blues” and “Dixie ‘Jass’ Band One-Step” by the ODJB.23 We immediately heard the differences in sound that otherwise would not have been nearly as apparent. Not only was this a great way to better understand the ODJB, but it also helped ignite that process of thinking of Early Jazz as a whole, which helped us mature as Early Jazz musicians.

Hal Smith, in addition to being an incredible Hot Jazz drummer with an incredible resume is an invaluable resource because he actually got to see several players from the same generation as the ODJB, including Kid Ory, Johnny St. Cyr, and Chink Martin. Smith was instrumental in convincing Hancock to go to the Jazz Department at Cornell with the idea of founding the group in the first place. In terms of tackling the ODJB sound, he was especially helpful to Li, recommending audio and film clips and sharing his knowledge of early jazz drumming techniques and equipment preferences. At the end of 2016, Hal described Li’s improvements as, “really understanding the style perfectly AND [keeping] the momentum going, even when playing that “toddling” rhythm on the block and bell. I admire!”24

In addition to aiding the group’s understanding of the ODJB’s sound, these proficient and established jazz veterans were also crucial in teaching the Syncopators about Early Jazz. Aspiring jazz musicians tend to learn through the assistance of older players. Key examples include Louis Armstrong with King Oliver and, of course, LaRocca, Shields, Edwards, and Sbarbaro with Papa Jack Laine. This kind of on-the-job mentorship continues in modern jazz history. From the stories told by Salzano during rehearsal to the enthusiasm that Smith shared via email, the band learned through the interaction and guidance of other musicians. It is one thing to take lessons, but to have information passed down from one generation of jazz musicians to the next was an experience the band could not get in a classroom. Branching out by playing in public and not in the confines of the “Ivory Tower” provided the band with many mentors, who could not have helped without the Syncopators’ determination to be more involved within the Early Jazz scene.

The Performance

Months of preparation, rehearsing, and gigging around Ithaca finally culminated on February 26, 2017, when, on the 100th Anniversary of the waxing of the first jazz record, the Syncopators held a performance in the historic 1888 Barnes Hall on Cornell’s campus, celebrating the music of the ODJB in the form of a historical dramatization. Hancock put advertising posters up all around Ithaca. A wonderful program was prepared by Loralyn Light. Jazz fans came from as far away as Pennsylvania and New Jersey,
including *Syncopated Times* writers Andy Senior and Bill Hoffman, who wrote a concert review in their April edition.

The show began with a brief narrative of the band read by Joe Salzano, followed by the first act of the show, “A Night at Reisenweber’s.” Reisenweber’s Cafe was run by John Reisenweber on 58th Street and 8th Avenue. Originally a Tavern, after inheriting it from his family, he tore the preexisting structure down and replaced it with a ballroom and the twelve dining rooms. It hosted the ODJB’s first engagement in New York. In “A Night at Reisenweber’s,” the Syncopators, along with the Crazeology Dance Troupe led by Anneke Van Renesse, played five of the numbers that the band recorded in 1917, opening with “Tiger Rag,” followed by “Ostrich Walk,” “Look At Em’ Doin’ It,” “Oriental Jazz,” and “At The Jass Band Ball.” The audience was particularly drawn to the faster one-step tempo numbers, although they proved to be a challenge for the dancers. The act ended with Merrill imitating Charles Sooy of Columbia Records, who approached the band at Reisenweber’s and invited them to make a test record.

After an intermission, the second act began with the band at the Columbia Studios in the Woolworth Building in Manhattan. Merrill counted down from a faux recording studio booth (complete with recording horn). The band opened with “Darktown Strutters’ Ball,” followed by a steaming hot version of “Indiana.” However, as the story goes, the band was rejected by Columbia - a sad moment in music history, made slightly more lighthearted in this performance. All was not lost however; the band was approached by Victor (future Syncopator sax man Troy Anderson delivered the ‘telegraph’); they went to the Victor Studio, which ironically was distinguished by a sign being flipped on the booth along with Merrill sporting a fake moustache (in keeping with the ODJB’s vaudevillian heritage). The “recording” of “Livery Stable Blues” and “Dixie Jass Band One-Step” commenced with cheers from the audience after each number. An encore was requested at the end, much to the dismay of the horn players’ chops. Many professors asked the band about the overall format of the concert. The first and
second act equaled about 20 minutes apiece; some felt an intermission was not needed. Because of the fast tempos and high energy moments, this music requires a great deal of energy and stamina, and credit is certainly due to the ODJB for their ability to play this repertoire night after night. By the end of the show, the Syncopators were overall pleased by the concert’s turnout and the audience’s enthusiasm. It is wonderful that even after 100 years this music remains fresh to both new and veteran listeners.

Looking Ahead

The Syncopators learned that the aspect of Early Jazz that is most appealing is also the one that is modernly absent from its advertisement: its energy. As the band became more and more familiar with the charts, the music of the ODJB began to take on so much more meaning than what was on the old records. Indeed, the music went from imitation to real, living art. Performances were no longer mimicking the original, but rather a performance with their own ideas and imperfections implemented as such.

The moment when this truly came to life occurred when the band recorded onto wax cylinders a few weeks before their February show. While the band listened to themselves come out of the scratchy grooves, they realized exactly how much of their sound was lost due to the sonic limitations of the acoustic recordings. As a result, the band learned the extent to which early jazz records are not clear representations of performance. This understanding provided them with a deeper connection to the
ODJB: a humbling moment full of empathy.

The Original Cornell Syncopators are currently exploring Early Jazz chronologically. This past spring, the personnel was augmented by reed player Troy Anderson of Rochester, tuba player Sarah Cohn-Manik of Ithaca, banjo player Robert Van Renesse of Ithaca, and trumpet player/violinist Niki Love of Seattle. The new members carry the same amount of diversity in backgrounds, enthusiasm, and passion for the music, and similar sentiments about the challenges of the style, as the original members. Regarding early jazz violin styles, Love stated, “I come from a completely different musical culture on the fiddle and so it’s been a learning experience trying to find the right vernacular in ornamentation and style. Coming from a Celtic tradition makes the syncopatedness and bounciness of early jazz very familiar but it forces me to really define what makes a lick Celtic vs jazzy.” When speaking on making the switch from more contemporary forms of jazz to earlier forms, Troy Anderson said, “While it has been challenging to adjust to a style of jazz that I had previously been given little opportunity to play, this group has made extraordinary strides in recent months and I am excited to see the direction they take in the future.” Cohn-Manick, a veteran of the Cornell Big Red Band, spoke on her switch to Jazz Tuba, stated, “I’ve gotten a lot more comfortable with jazz and the tuba as part of the rhythm section.” Professor Van Renesse spoke directly to the group’s mission when he said, “As a jazz banjoist, I’m a huge fan of old jazz recordings, but it’s rare to find people of any age who want to play this exciting music... while I’m old enough to be their father, they have made me feel very welcome in the group.” The band’s spring repertoire included pieces by Bennie Moten’s Kansas City Orchestra, the Halfway House Orchestra, the Wolverine Orchestra, Charlie Creath, Fats Waller, and the New Orleans Rhythm Kings. As the band moves into the fall of 2017, the music of Henderson, Ellington, the Missourians, and Charlie Johnson among others is next on the list, as well as an upcoming show at the San Diego Jazz Festival.

Epilogue

It is no surprise that when even the most learned contemporary jazz musicians and historians give the ODJB an in-depth listen, they experience a mixed bag of reactions. Do they understand the group’s importance? Absolutely. Do they enjoy listening to the music? It is certainly a possibility. But truly deciphering it proves a challenge, hurdled as much by the era’s poor recording technology and misinformed literature. Additionally, much of the music by the band that is accessible, especially their sides for Victor, do not give an accurate representation of how the band actually sounded when playing live for dancers; this sound, which attracted the attention from the media, got them into the studio in the first place. Though some jazz musicians and listeners alike have dismissive thoughts about early jazz, with its muted records or even some lackluster modern interpretations of it, these truly do not serve it justice. In exploring jazz before 1940, the members of the Original Cornell Syncopators, many of whom never explored early jazz before, are learning that there is so much more than what is in the grooves of a shellac disc or the faded recollections of pioneers. In turn, the band hopes to spread awareness and enthusiasm to the next generation in a way that upholds the original motivations and styles of the artists.

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**Discography**

Columbia Orchestra. “I Thought I Was a Winner - Or I Don’t Know You Ain’t So Warm.” Columbia, 1897.
Earl Fuller’s Famous Jazz Band. “Jazz de Luxe.” Emerson 952, 1918.
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**Filmography**

America’s Music - Chicago and All That Jazz. NBC, 1961, Television.
Performance.

**Endnotes**

2. Columbia Orchestra, “I Thought I Was a Winner - Or I Don’t Know You Ain’t So Warm”, Columbia, 1897; Wilbur Sweatman, “Down Home Rag”, Emerson 7161, 1916. This is one of the earliest examples of improvisational syncopated clarinet playing.
3. Nick LaRocca was a huge fan of Sousa’s music.
4. [http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/has/loc.mbrs.sfdb.5745/default.html](http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/has/loc.mbrs.sfdb.5745/default.html)
5. [https://books.google.com/books?id=8FwyY-6lveQC&pg=PA1&dq=good+for+nothing+original+dixiel](https://books.google.com/books?id=8FwyY-6lveQC&pg=PA1&dq=good+for+nothing+original+dixiel)
7 Ibid.
10 Brunn, *The Story*, 32.
11 Noah Li, email message to Colin Hancock, June 19, 2017.
13 Hal Smith, email message to Colin Hancock, June 28, 2016.
14 Amit Mizrahi, email message to Colin Hancock, June 16, 2017.
15 Original New Orleans Jazz Band, “Ja Da,” OKeh 1155, 1918; Gennett 4508: 1919.
16 Louisiana Five, “Slow and Easy”, Columbia 2949: A, 1919 (This could be a reworking of the old New Orleans warhorse “Don’t Go’way Nobody”). Brian Rust, *Jazz Records* lists the cornetist as either Doc Behrendson or Alfred Laine.
21 Dan Levinson, e-mail message to Colin Hancock, September 15, 2016.
22 David Sager, email message to Colin Hancock, September 15, 2016. Earl Fuller’s Famous Jazz Band was a notorious New York “knock-off” of the ODJB, which Victor hastily recorded in 1917 following the “Livery Stable Blues”/“Dixie Jass Band One-Step” lawsuit and subsequent signing of the ODJB to Vocalion.
23 Earl Fuller’s Famous Jazz Band, “Jazz de Luxe”, Emerson 952, 1918; Earl Fuller’s Famous Jazz Band, “Slippery Hank”, Victor 18321: A, 1917. The cuts are similar in tempi, which helped the band learn from them.
24 Hal Smith, e-mail message to Colin Hancock, November 18, 2016.
26 Video of this performance available on Youtube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XxF_sYYORM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XxF_sYYORM).
27 The Original Memphis Five’s arrangement of “I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate” was hastily chosen.
28 A video on this session and the concert entitled “100 Years of Recorded Jazz” is available on Youtube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQmq7W9fabw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQmq7W9fabw).
Clockwise from top left: Lee Caplan and Michael Li from Rutgers University; film makers Henry Griffin and Cyprienne Oliver from the University of New Orleans; Curator Bruce Boyd Raeburn and Tulane graduate student Jonathon Rizenor; bassist Jason Weaver; researcher Henry C. Lacey, WWOZ programer Sally Young, and (in the background), Nora Daniels, Denise Frazier, and staffer Alaina Hebert; musician/educator/writer Paul Combs; biographer Marthell Adams with her new book, *Legacy of a Creole Treasure*. 
Clockwise from top left: Becky, Kelby, Tristan, and Crispin Lihme, relatives of jazz scholar Karl Koenig; writer/researcher Jason Berry; artist/educator/therapist Kamili Nilata; pianist Elsbeth Smith; researcher Sherman Houston from Louisiana State University at Shreveport; researcher Amy Nikolai; renaissance man Alphe Williams.
IN THE ARCHIVE

Clockwise from top left: Tulane Music Department graduate Kyle DeCoste, now at Columbia University; jazz pilgrims Matthew Berger, Joseph Weiss, and Timothy Mai; musicians Seva Venet and Mitchell Player; WYES’s Peggy Scott Laborde and the curator; researcher Polly Palfi; writer/educator Marva Carter from Georgia State University; friend of the Jazz Archive Keli Rylance from Kansas State University.
IN THE ARCHIVE

Clockwise from top left: Penazer Evans holding a 1956 Ralston Crawford photograph taken at St. Philip Church of God in Christ, in which he can be seen in the congregation; the curator with Kathy Martello, who let us have a look at Nick LaRocca’s first wife’s scrapbook; musician Rashaad Collins; the curator plays “Livery Stable Blues” on the wind-up Victrola for a Girl Scout troupe from Lusher School; Gary Edwards Jr. and Gary Edwards Sr. deliver the Eddie Edwards Collection; Brian Piper from the New Orleans Museum of Art; New Orleans researcher Warren Jones.
IN THE ARCHIVE

Clockwise from top left: international visitors from the New Orleans Citizen Diplacay Council posing with the curator; Jane Mufamadi from Freedom Park, Pretoria, South Africa; artist Dave Muller; Capt. Trivius Caldwell, Instructor of English at the United States Military Academy, West Point (far right), with a class of cadets; family researcher Stella R. Wright; writer/researcher Peter Gerler; drummer Mayumi Shara.
Clockwise from top left: New Orleans historian Judy Geddes; Creole Fiesta Society researchers Linda Bordenave Woods, Russell Vappie, Denise Galbreath Perez, and Jean Benjamin-Vappie; writer/researcher Bob Cataliotti; family researchers Robbie and Charles F. Robinson; designers Thea and Nina Spring; writer/researcher Macon Fry; the Mossman family, Kathy, Brenna, and John, deliver the Bill Mossman Collection of Recorded Sound.
“Bessie Smith and Her Band”
The March 2, 1927, Session

By Wayne D. Shirley

Editor’s note: This is the third installment of Wayne D. Shirley’s ongoing “Bessie Smith” column. The previous installments can be accessed on our library site.

Early writers on Bessie Smith, citing what had been told them in interviews, sometimes said that her earthier numbers were forced on her by “her white producers.” Working on her recorded repertory song-by-song, I became convinced that she herself was responsible for choosing most of what she sang; in this column, though, I’d like to look at a session which was fairly clearly designed, at least in its general repertory, by Bessie’s primary producer Frank Walker.¹ The session, which took place in New York City on March 2, 1927, consisted of four popular songs from various eras, ranging from turn-of-the-century to up-to-date. The three older numbers were (and are still) well-known, while the newest of them, less than a year old, had already racked up at least nine recordings. None of the songs was a Blues (either blues-by-title or twelve-bar); all are verse-and-chorus popular songs.² Here are the four, listed by date of publication:

“A Hot Time in the Old Town” (1896)
“Alexander’s Ragtime Band” (1911)
“After You’ve Gone” (1918)
“Muddy Water (A Mississippi Moan)” (1926).

The recordings were released as being by “Bessie Smith and Her Band.” “Her Band” – for this session and no other – consisted of Fletcher Henderson, pianist (and doubtless organizer/leader); Joe Smith, cornet; Jimmy Harrison, trombone; Coleman Hawkins and Buster Bailey, clarinets; and Charlie Dixon, banjo. All of these except Jimmy Harrison are names familiar to people who read lists-of-accompanists in discographies; all except Coleman Hawkins and Jimmy Harrison appear frequently on Bessie Smith’s records;³ all but Jimmie Harrison were veterans of
Bessie Smith’s sessions of May 1925 which produced “Cake-Walking Babies from Home” and “The Yellow Dog Blues.”

Jimmy Harrison was a regular—though not invariable—member of the Fletcher Henderson band in 1927-1928.

Bailey and the then twenty-two year old Hawkins (his epoch-making recording of “Body and Soul” was made twelve years later) play together only on “Muddy Water.” Otherwise they split assignments, with Bailey on “After You’ve Gone” and “Hot Time” (as we’ll occasionally abbreviate the longest of our titles) and Hawkins on “Alexander’s Ragtime Band.” (Bailey is more comfortable with the Dixielandish instrumental chorus of “Hot Time” than Hawkins is with the instrumental chorus of “Alexander.”)

This session produced four of Bessie Smith’s most memorable recordings. Part of this is the result of the repertory just as repertory – hearing what Bessie does with vaudeville numbers like “Hot Time” and “Alexander” suggest what she would have sounded like on the black-vaudeville stage – but all four are particularly worth repeated listening. I listed the four songs above in the order of their creation; I’ll consider below the recordings in the order in which they were recorded.

“After You’ve Gone,” words and music by Henry Creamer and Turner Layton, was published in 1918. Creamer and Layton were also the authors of “Way Down Yonder in New Orleans” and “Dear Old Southland,” the latter a ruthless secularization of the melodies of “Deep River” and “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.” Bessie Smith had recorded their “Whoa, Tillie, Take Your Time” in 1923; she would record “Sweet Mistreater” and “Lock and Key,” both of them written by Creamer and James P. Johnson, a month after our session. (Creamer and Johnson were also responsible for that standard of standards “If I Could Be with You One Hour Tonight.”)

“After You’ve Gone” had been a major hit in 1918-1919, with the 1918 Marion Harris recording being a particularly strong seller. It was undergoing somewhat of a revival in 1927: both Red Nichols and Evelyn Thompson had recorded it that January, and Ruth Etting recorded it the day before Bessie Smith’s session. (Sophie Tucker would finally record this Sophie-Tuckerish song later that year.) Bessie Smith’s session starts out with “Her Band” doing a standard intro: four bars of end-of-tune, then two bars of vamp-till-ready (the only vamp-till-ready in this session) leading into the singer’s

Page 3 (second page of music) for “After You’ve Gone,” showing the original final two lines (“Oh! Babe...”) of the lyrics (courtesy Charles Templeton Sheet Music Collection, Mississippi State University).
first entry. In intro and vamp the band is fairly raucous, as though this will be a good-timey sendup of an old-time tune; but Bessie Smith pulls them up instantly with the intense, focused tone of her voice. From then on they’re subservient to her singing. Even the brief instrumental windup continues the serious tone of her performance.

“Aber You’ve Gone” is a first-person song; the song of a woman talking to the man who has just said he’s leaving her. The verse sets the scene –

Now listen, honey, while I say
How can you tell me that you’re going away? --

And shows her feelings:
How can you leave me? Can’t you see my tears?

The chorus, introduced (end of verse) by “Now listen while I say,” is her message to her man:

...After you’ve gone, there’s no denying
You’ll feel blue, you’ll feel sad;
You’ll miss the dearest pal you ever had...

It ends with her prophesy:

Some day when you grow lonely,
Your heart will break like mine and you’ll want me only,
After you’ve gone, after you’ve gone away.

Bessie's intense tone can, I suppose, be heard as converting this song into abstract music, like a great instrumentalist blowing a series of choruses on a standard (I will confess that I hear her “Careless Love Blues” – Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, Charlie Green, Fletcher Henderson – as such an abstraction, and enjoy it mightily as such); but to me it represents rather a passionate delivery of the lyrics of the song, meaning every word. This is true in particular for the second chorus, where she rides defiant over the elaborate stop-time-based accompaniment of Her Band.

That ending prophesy does not, in fact, represent the original end to the song. As first published in 1918 the ending went back to the sadness of the verse:

Oh! Babe, think what you’re doing;
You know my love for you will drive me to ruin
After you’ve gone….

The early recordings of “After You’ve Gone,” including the extremely influential 1918 recording by Marion Harris, of course have these words - in all choruses if there is more than one. By 1927 the “Some day...” text has definitely taken over as the main ending-text for the song, though some recordings, including those of Ruth Etting and Sophie Tucker, use the “Oh! Babe” text for second chorus. Bessie Smith will have none of the “Oh! Babe” lyrics; they disappear, as far as I’ve been able to find out, after 1927. “After You’ve Gone” itself remains a standard of standards, beloved of jazz singers and close-harmony groups alike; timeless, indestructible. For me at least Bessie Smith’s reading of the song is transcendent, the particular flower of the four great recordings which make up her March 2, 1927, session.

“Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” words and music by Irving Berlin (with a nod to Stephen Foster just before the final cadence), published in 1911, is the best-known of the four songs which make up the March 2 session. Bessie and Her Band run through verse and three choruses, the second chorus a Dixielandish chorus for Her Band alone. If “After You’ve Gone” was a song of confrontation, “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” invites the listener:

Oh ma honey, oh ma honey,
You better hurry and let’s go down there

Bessie’s tone is still intense, but it’s now also relaxed: this is enthusiasm, not confrontation. Carefree and swinging, pronouncing the bandleader’s name “Alexander,” it’s a joy from start to its rather abrupt finish: that generous helping of three choruses left no time for an instrumental windup after the singer’s last notes.

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“Her Band,” thanks to Fletcher Henderson, ably seconds Bessie. One of these secondings might seem to be negative: there is no representation of the “bugle call as you’ve never heard before” during her first chorus. This line is a trap for arrangers/performers: it can destroy the forward movement of the song. (In the second vocal chorus the lines about the bugle are simply not sung; Bessie Smith speaks an enthusiastic [if slightly music-appreciationish] “Listen to the bugle call!” and Joe Smith answers with a delightfully bugle-ish/raggy cornet solo which keeps things going. This can be done because the lines about the bugle have been done straight in the first chorus.)

Trombonist Jimmy Harrison, the least well-known member of Her Band, is particularly useful in “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” especially for his two-note responses to the singer’s four-note phrases (“Come on and hear”; “Come on along”; “Up to the man”). Less elaborate than the response of a call-and-response, similar in both verses, they perhaps represent the person who has “come along” with Bessie. At any rate, they’re valuable, all the more for being straightforward and unobtrusive. And, finally, there’s Her Band’s own chorus. It’s a Dixieland chorus, not a ragtime chorus – as “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” itself is not a Joplin-rag but a Tin Pan Alley rag – but with Joe Smith’s inspiring cornet lead it’s irresistible. Jimmy Harrison gives impeccable bass support.

Some miscellanea on Bessie’s “Alexander”:

Not a criticism but worth noting: Bessie Smith does not quite reproduce Irving Berlin’s homage to Stephen Foster, “the Swanee River played in ragtime.” Avoiding this literal quotation is not a defect in Bessie’s performance but something to be happy about. – happy for Irving Berlin – since it shows that the strength of his song doesn’t rely on its twist at its end – and happy for Bessie Smith, who is willing to sacrifice the quote to sing what she needs to sing.

We ran into Bessie’s change of words when we quoted the beginning of the song. There’s no surprise in this: she often changed the wording of songs in her repertory. What is surprising here is that her changes here are to more standard-English phrases than what’s in the original – “let’s go down there” from “let’s meander” and “the best band in the land” from “the bestest band what am.” I have a suspicion that Bessie Smith disliked having dialect forced on her: perhaps her avoidance of “bestest band what am” is an example of this. Or perhaps “best band in the land” is just how she had sung it in vaudeville.

One change she does not make is in “sounds so natural [’natchel’] that you want to go to war.”
From the late 1960s on, this has often been changed to “Sounds so natural that you want to hear some more,” initially because of anti-war feeling, later because it’s how people have always heard it sung. Anyhow, Bessie Smith, singing in the period after The War to End All Wars, has no trouble with the original words.12

The three “old tunes” in this session are still part of the consciousness of those interested in American popular song. The up-to-date song in the session, “Muddy Water,” is now known only as a Bessie Smith recording, and, for Bing Crosby completists, as “Bing’s first solo record” (vocalist in a Paul Whiteman recording; single chorus without verse). “Muddy Water” - music by Peter DeRose (“Deep Purple”) and Harry Richman, words by Jo Trent - was published late in 1926. It had started out strong, with at least nine other recordings made before Bessie Smith’s, including performances by Ben Bernie, Don Voorhees, and the Harry Richman who gets co-composer credit; the Paul Whiteman/Bing Crosby recording was made March 7, five days after Bessie’s. But in April and May came the great 1927 Mississippi flood, which killed enthusiasm for songs about the wonders of the Mississippi Delta: Bessie
Smith and Whiteman/Crosby were the last significant 1927 recordings of “Muddy Water.” (In 1936 the Jimmie Lunceford band made an important recording of the tune; almost entirely instrumental, up-tempo [as the 1927 jazz-band recordings tended to be as well], with an offhand, rather dismissive – “this is old-time stuff” – vocal chorus by male trio at the end.)

“Muddy Water” is the quintessential performance of Bessie Smith as Diva: a single arc of great singing, from the nostalgic-anticipatory scene-painting of the start –

Dixie moonlight, Swanee shore –
to the triumphant ending –

My heart cries out for muddy water!
The music is a single verse and chorus of the song – no repeat-of-chorus, no second chorus, no instrumental interlude. The momentum of the performance is helped by the fact that the verse of “Muddy Water” flows into the chorus without the kind of formal break we are used to in popular songs of the period: if you’re coming to this song new – as most of us are – you’re unlikely to hear the joint.13

The effect is also helped by Fletcher Henderson’s brilliant arranging. The two clarinets – Henderson must have brought the second clarinet into the session for just this song – do a duet, mainly in thirds, tracing the harmonies; 14 Jimmie Harrison’s trombone underlines with its smears the start of new phrases; Henderson’s own piano keeps quietly an account of the full harmony. Joe Smith’s cornet plays only the intro, the instrumental windup, and one magnificent bluesy cry after the singer’s first long phrase. The banjo does not play in “Muddy Water;” its sound is too raffish for this serious song. Even without Charlie Dixon’s banjo, the sound of Her Band is sufficiently low-down to fit in with a song which sings of the “low-down blues.”15

“Muddy Water” is the climax of the series of longing-for-the-South numbers recorded by Bessie Smith. This series started with “Gulf Coast Blues” in her first session to contain an actually released record, and includes such numbers as “Far Away Blues” (with Clara Smith!), “Moonshine Blues,” “Louisiana Low-Down Blues,” “Dixie Flyer Blues,” “Florida Bound Blues,” and, yes, “New Gulf Coast Blues.” This is not the place, and I am not the person, to consider the real attitude of that eminent Philadelphian Bessie Smith to the Gulf Coast; but longing for the South had been an important trope in American popular song since at least Stephen Foster, and the topic was a staple of Tin Pan Alley until just about the time of “Muddy Water.” There’s no Bessie Smith record after “Muddy Water” which is purely a longing-for-the-South song, though she’s quite happy saying good things about particular spots (“New Orleans Hop Scop Blues”; “Hot Springs Blues”).16

Two notes on words. First, on “Just God’s own shelter / Down on the Delta,” the most obscure line of the March 2 session. It’s not obscure in the sense of hard-to-make-out – it comes through loud and clear17 – but what does it mean? Is “God’s own shelter” the sky? Or the palm-trees? Either one is pretty meager as shelter against a good all-out thunderstorm. The explanation is simple: the line, in the early version of the song as represented by its first, unpublished copyright deposit, reads “Me and my fella / Down on the Delta.” Something had to be changed if it was to be singable by male singers – the usual singers of incidental vocal solos in jazz-orchestra recordings – and so “Just God’s own shelter,” whatever it might mean, was plugged in as a substitute.18

Second note on words: Bessie Smith’s March 2 session, designed to try out various new repertories, includes no “blues” – neither “blues” in the twelve-bar sense nor blues-by-title. So it’s a particular pleasure to hear, in “Muddy Water,” the lines

Muddy water in my shoes,
Reelin’ and rockin’ to them low-down blues.
The published sheet music gives that second line as merely

Rockin’ to those low down blues;

various recorded singers devised various elaborations of this basic line. Bessie Smith found her “Reelin’ and rockin’” in Ma Rainey’s 1923 “Moonshine Blues,” which Bessie had covered in April 1924.19
Like “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” “There’ll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight” invites the listener to join the singer at a festive event – Come along, get ready, wear your brand-brand new gown, For there’s going to be a meeting in this good, good old town.

This time the singer seems to have a male persona: in the second verse he hugs and kisses a Miss Henrietta Beazer (who is “all dressed in red”). This is no trouble for Bessie Smith, who has sung in male persona before (“Keeps on a-Raining” is a good example). What would be perplexing if we cared to worry about it is whom the singer is talking to: in the first verse it seems it’s to his girlfriend/wife (“Get your brand-brand new gown”), in the second it’s to a set of his male friends:

There’ll be girls for everybody in this good, good old town:

There’s Miss Gonzola Davis and Miss Gondula Brown…. But it’s an old song and Bessie sings it as it’s been sung (though Miss Davis and Miss Brown are “Consola” and “Gondolia” respectively in the printed music).

“A Hot Time in the Old Town” – words by Joe Hayden, music by the otherwise obscure Theodore Metz, was published in 1896, when Bessie Smith was two years old. Like the other songs on Bessie’s March 2 session it consists in its published form of two “verses” and a “chorus.” This is the only one of the four in which we hear the second verse; in the others we hear the first verse followed by the chorus (“Muddy Water”) or a series of choruses – the standard formula for the presentation of a “modern” popular song in the 1920s. But turn-of-the-century songs were traditionally sung differently – first verse and chorus, second verse and chorus, and so on through as many verses as you cared to sing. “Hot Time” even incorporates this structure into its lyrics –

When the verse am through in the chorus we’ll all join in:

There’ll be a hot time in (the) old town tonight!

There is one oddity in the verse-and-chorus structure of “Hot Time,” an oddity I wouldn’t bother with in this column if it weren’t for what I’ll be talking about in the paragraph following this one. Normally verse and chorus have different melodies; each verse has a separate set of words, while there is usually the same set of words for each chorus. (Most exceptions to this same-words-for-the-chorus are comic songs: new chorus, new set of jokes.) “Hot Time” works somewhat differently: there’s a first section (four lines of text; a different set of words for each time through the song), a second section, also four lines, with a different melody and with a separate, new set of words for each time through,
each ending with the extra words “Oh, Baby” leading to the third section, which has the same melody as the second section but which has the same words both times. Musically this is verse / chorus / chorus; textually it’s first half of verse / second half of verse / chorus. When I transcribed the words of Bessie Smith’s “Hot Time,” before I’d looked at the printed music, I labeled the first section as “verse” and the second-and-third-together as “chorus”; when I did look at the published music I found that it calls only the final section, which has the same words each time through and is signaled by that preliminary “Oh baby”, as Chorus. I hope this will make the next paragraph, which (unlike this one) has some bearing on what the listener will actually hear on Bessie Smith’s record, more intelligible.

Spontaneous-sounding, good-time-at-end-of-session performance as it is, “Hot Time” actually has a carefully planned alternating key structure which must have been worked out ahead of time. It is, in fact, the only Bessie Smith record which involves changes of key.²⁵ The key changes really help keep this great old-timer going at full speed, and yet they don’t sound like a modernization of this song which lives off its old-timeyness. Here, with apologies, is how it works:

• Brief instrumental intro and the first four lines of Verse 1 are in F major; single-chord modulation to E flat major;²⁶
• Second four lines of the verse and all the chorus – basically the part of “Hot Time” which has the tune of the chorus – in E flat; quick modulation back to F for
• instrumental “Chorus” – hard not to think of it as twice-through-the-chorus rather than as second-half-of-verse-plus-chorus, anyway instrumental version of all of the second tune – followed by
• First four lines of second verse, still in F; again, one-chord modulation to E flat for
• Second four lines of verse plus chorus, through to end of song.

How wonderfully this final shift of keys brings out Miss Henrietta Beazer’s reaction to being “hugged and kissed” by the singer:

“Please, oh please, oh do not let me fall...”
(Miss Beazer is the only Bessie Smith character to be worried about her virginity.)

One aspect of “Hot Time” may be a surprise to those who know only the chorus proper: the fact that the “hot time” is, at least in its first verse, associated with religion. The “meeting in this good, good old town” is in fact a church or camp-ground meeting, and the first time we hear the second half of the
verse – the tune which will end up being the tune of the chorus – the words are:

- When you hear that the preaching has begin
- Bend down low for to drive away your sin:
- When you get religion you want to shout and sing;
- There’ll be a hot time....

Religion goes out the window with the first chorus, when hearing “that the preaching have begin” is replaced by

- When you hear them bells go ding-a-ling...

In the second verse any suggestion of religion is replaced by those “girls for everybody.” But the second verse/chorus of “Hot Time” is actually no more suggestive than the first: its slogan is, rather,

- When the verse am through in the chorus we’ll all join in.

A happy end to a great session.

What were the consequences of this session, which tried out new-to-Bessie Smith repertory? The immediate consequence – probably arranged when the March 2 session was arranged – was a session the next day, in which Bessie Smith was accompanied by a trio – “Her Blue Boys” – consisting of Fletcher Henderson and Joe Smith from her March 2 session plus her (and Henderson’s) regular trombonist Charlie Green. This session, which produced “Trombone Cholly,” “Send Me to the ’Lectric Chair,” “Them’s Graveyard Words,” and “Hot Springs Blues” (Bessie Smith’s singing commercial to the Arkansas spa), proved that a six-man accompaniment was certainly not necessary for a successful recording. Her next session, on April 1, was accompanied only by James P. Johnson; it produced “Sweet Mistreater” and “Lock and Key,” demonstrating that Bessie plus piano was enough. (It helped if the piano was James P. Johnson, but this was by no means necessary.)

The results of the March 2 session, as delightful as they seem to us now, did not convince Columbia that Bessie plus a group big enough to be called “Her Band” was a profitable enterprise; of her remaining sessions for Columbia only four have more than three instruments accompanying her. No later session had as many instruments as the six that accompanied “Muddy Water” in our session. (The one later session with five instruments [May 15, 1929] was another landmark session, resulting in “I Got What It Takes (But It Breaks My Heart To Give It Away)” and “Nobody Knows You When You’re Down and Out”, the polar opposites – raunchy/ultra-serious – which represent the philosophical extremes of Bessie’s repertory.)

Nor did the repertories explored in our session appear in Bessie Smith’s later recordings. The two earlier songs which do show up are “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” (1918) and George W. Thomas’s wonderfully eccentric “New Orleans Hop Scop Blues” (1923). It’s fun to think of songs she might have recorded (what would she have done with “Ballin’ the Jack?”) but what recordings that she did record would we sacrifice for them?

And for us? Bessie Smith’s recorded performances are individual works, not to be grouped ruthlessly into suites which should be heard together. In the era of LPs/CDs, when collections of Bessie Smith (or Clara Smith, or Ida Cox, or Louis Armstrong...) were usually arranged chronologically, we often got a fortuitous grouping-by-session if we put on a disc and listened through; but the performances were always single works, to be listened to individually at will and mixed with other recordings as we wished – as the original 78 RPM records had been. The four sides Bessie and Her Band cut on March 2, 1927, aren’t a “suite” to be listened to as a unit; you can listen to “After You’ve Gone” next to “Back Water Blues” (or to Nina Simone’s “After You’ve Gone,” or to Django Reinhardt/Stephane Grappelli’s – or to anything that suits your mood). But looking at a session as a unit does give us a chance to look at the performer at a particular moment; and the March 2 session does bring us Bessie Smith at her best, and partly in repertory she wouldn’t otherwise have recorded. And this session does give us a chance to hear how Bessie might have sounded in black-vaudeville repertory – complete with Miss Henrietta Beazer in her all-red dress.
Endnotes

1 Bessie Smith herself, I suspect, would have had a say in the final selection; perhaps Fletcher Henderson, who would be responsible for the instrumental accompaniment, would have been consulted as well.
2 All four, in their published sheet-music, have two verses – that is, two different texts to the same music. Only in the turn-of-the-century song do we hear the second verse in Bessie Smith’s performance.
3 The sessions which produced “Cake-Walking Babies from Home” and “The Yellow Dog Blues” are the only other sessions Hawkins played in. This was Harrison’s only session with Bessie Smith.
4 In the 1925 session the accompanying ensemble was billed as “Henderson’s Hot Six.” Charlie Green was trombone, Cyrus St. Clair was tuba.
5 Listings on other songs make it fairly clear that Creamer was basically lyricist while Layton was composer; I list this as it is in the credit in Julius Mattfeld’s Variety Music Cavalcade (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1952).
6 I will quote lyrics as Bessie sings them rather than as they’re printed in sheet music unless otherwise noted.
7 I’m speaking of words; the music is the same. Later-published copies – including those which still have the stunning cover of the first edition – have only the words of the prophesy.
8 In the 1929 Louis Armstrong recording, Armstrong seems to start singing the “Oh! Babe” words in his offhand vocal chorus; then he stops singing for the remainder of the song.
9 The published music for the second line reads (and most performances sing) “Better hurry and let’s meander,” which gives a good rhyme for “Alexander.” I confess I miss it, not so much for the rhyme as for the casualness it suggests.
10 To reproduce Foster’s tune, on that final word “ragtime” the note she sings on the first syllable would be short, followed by a higher note on the second syllable.
11 I deal with this briefly in my first column for The Jazz Archivist, vol. 28 (2015), 51-53.
12 Or, in “Poor Man Blues,” with the lines “Poor man fight all the battles, poor man would fight again today / He would do anything you ask him in the name of the U.S.A.” (She is credited with the authorship of “Poor Man Blues.”)
13 The chorus, as marked in the sheet-music and as sung on those dance-band records in which the chorus only is sung, begins with the first occurrence of the words “Muddy Water.”
14 Alternating between a two-note falling motive and a three-note up-and-then-back figure, the latter taking over more and more as the record goes on.
15 I am not absolutely sure that the banjo is not an unobtrusive part of the instrumental ending.
16 Or, for that matter, saying scary things about Southern places – if you identify the Black Mountain of “Black Mountain Blues” (where “a child will slap your face”) as being particularly southern.
17 And it’s the reading of the published sheet music.
18 Billy Hillpot, with Jack Pettis and His Band, does sing “Me and my fella.” (Try YouTube – “Muddy Water Jack Pettis” is best way to enter.)
19 In “Moonshine Blues” – both Ma Rainey’s and Bessie Smith’s recordings – it’s “Reelin’ and a-rockin.’”
20 She’s “Miss Johanna Beasley” in the published music, but she’s immortal as “Miss Henrietta Beazer” – spelling of “Beazer” indefinite.
22 It is hard to imagine anyone going back for the very strange second verse of “Alexander’s Ragtime Band.”
23 Bessie’s omission of the “the” before “old town” is not a suggestion that she’s thinking of the “old town” section of a particular city (“old town” Philadelphia, say); it’s a playful informality.
24 In both the song-as-published and Bessie Smith’s record.
26 “Major” will be understood over “F” and “E flat” from here on.
27 Was Green unavailable for the March 2 session? Or did Henderson want Jimmie Harrison for his ability to “smear” both loudly when called for and with a fair amount of subtlety when needed?
28 The latter probably suggested by Clarence Williams, who was pianist for the two 1923 recordings as well as the Bessie Smith recording.
29 In the CD era we could, of course, listen in “shuffle” mode.
A Sneak Preview of the Eddie Edwards Collection
This recently-received collection, a legacy of the great ODJB tombo
nist Eddie Edwards, is still in process. Its availability will afford an extraordinary overview of Edwards’s decades-long career.

Top left: This is probably the Jerusalem Temple Band, of which Eddie Edwards was a member for several years before the rise of the ODJB. Edwards is probably the third bandsman from the right. 1915 is suggested as the date of the photo. The Worth’s Drug Store sign on the far right side of the photo suggests it was taken in the 600 block of St. Charles Avenue.

Bottom left: In 1918, with the ODJB’s career in full swing, Eddie Edwards was drafted. This letter of recommendation from veteran Jerusalem Temple Bandmaster Charles W. Stumpf was apparently part of a campaign to pull Edwards into the Army Band. Edwards’s correspondence files are a highlight of this collection.

Bottom right: Eddie Edwards in the Army, 1919.
Top right: Edwards often took snapshots of the marquees of the venues he appeared in. This one shows the Cafe La Marne, on the boardwalk at Coney Island, in the summer of 1921.

Below left: Advertising card for a concert and dance at Busoni’s Danceland, Coney Island, for the benefit of Russian Famine Orphans, 1923. The reverse side of the card gives the same information in Yiddish.

Bottom: Selections played by the Eddie Edwards Dance Orchestra aboard the SS Hendrick Hudson, 1931.
The Casino Gardens, corner of Clark and Kenzie streets in Chicago, published a four-page “Souvenir Menu” in connection with its “Informal Opening,” dated Thursday, November 23, 1916. One page was devoted to the musical menu:
Curator’s Commentary

As you may have guessed by now, this will be my last Curator’s Commentary. This journey has been satisfying beyond belief, due largely to the support and expertise of the men and women who have staffed the Hogan Jazz Archive, especially Alma Williams Freeman, Lynn Abbott, and Alaina Hebert, and of the cavalcade of scholars who have used our resources. The past year has been busy in terms of enhancements to the collection, including the arrival of the Eddie Edwards collection donated by his grandson Gary in February, which turned into an event commemorating the centennial of the release of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band’s “Livery Stable Blues”/”Dixie Jass Band One-step” recording with three generations of Edwards family members in attendance. The Edwards collection allows for comparison with Nick LaRocca’s papers, and the discrepancies between these collections are often notable, offering sometimes conflicting versions of the band’s history. Historians eat that stuff up! In August the Archive also took possession of Louis Prima’s collection, with the exception of some audio-visual material that is being triaged and digitized at Safe Sound in Philadelphia. Renovation of the former Rare Books Display Room in Jones Hall into the Louis Prima Room is proceeding on schedule, including the installation of two gorgeous oversized photographic portraits of Prima representing different aspects of his persona, donated by the Gia Maione Prima Foundation. The inauguration of the Louis Prima Room will occur on October 27, coinciding with the installation of Alaina Hebert’s tri-centennial exhibit, “Building a Tradition: the Multifaceted Legacy of Women in New Orleans Music,” in the Second Floor Gallery in Jones Hall. Alaina’s interest in this topic extends coverage to encompass not only the women who made the music but also those who raised sons and grandsons to the trade. At the end of August, the extensive recorded sound collection of Bill Mossman was delivered by his son John, with the surprise inclusion of elements from Merrill Hammond’s collection. Although we often decline large phono disc donations because of the likelihood of duplication, this donation promises to fill many gaps and offers unique test pressings that have high research value.

I didn’t get to greet John Mossman because I was in Amsterdam attending the “Rhythm Changes: Re-Sounding Jazz” conference and a pre-conference workshop on European jazz archives. “Rhythm Changes” has long been my favorite international jazz studies event (this was my fourth of the five held thus far), not only because it allows me to reconnect with old friends but perhaps even more because it provides an opportunity to witness the incredibly talented young scholars who are now populating the field. This conference, in particular, was a showcase for the work we do at the Hogan Jazz Archive. I chaired one session which included Mathilde Zagala, a Fulbright scholar who spent six months at the
Archive studying “trois sur quatre”/”secondary ragtime” motifs in New Orleans 19th century sheet music, pursuant to her doctoral study, which was completed at the Université Paris Sorbonne in December 2016. This was her introduction to the jazz studies community and the reception to her analysis by Darius Brubeck and others in attendance was overwhelmingly positive and constructive. I admit to taking a certain pride in her accomplishment. English musicologist Vic Hobson was also on the session, talking about barbershop harmony and the construction of the ODJB’s “Dixie Jass Band One-Step”— Vic has made numerous trips to the Archive since 2006 and will visit again in January as a Bärnheim scholar. Kings College musicologist Andy Fry and I shared a session: he spent a month at the Archive in July gathering material on the Dukes of Dixieland, the Audio Fidelity label, and the advent of “high fidelity” stereo technology, which somehow became conjoined with the Assunto Brother’s re-versioning of traditional New Orleans jazz, replete with Confederate caps and flags, as the vehicle for marketing the new technology. Let’s just say that Andy knew what to do with this complicated intersection of sanitized historical memory and techno fetish. My paper was titled “LaRocca’s Rage: Caucasian Guilt and Assertiveness as a Jazz Studies Dialectic,” intended as a counterpoise to Michele Cinque’s film, Sicily Jass: the World’s First Man in Jazz, which was shown at the conference. The film was a call for compassion regarding LaRocca’s demons and had the added benefit (from my perspective) of showcasing elements of the LaRocca collection, especially the myriad of scrapbooks, housed at the Hogan Jazz Archive. Like I said, we were very well represented at “Rhythm Changes.”

Earlier in August at the Satchmo Summerfest, I assisted Björn Bärnheim with presenting part two of his research on Louis Armstrong’s return visits to New Orleans, this time taking the story from his experience as King Zulu in 1949 through the 1960s with a special emphasis on his consistent attempts to advance civil rights for African Americans by subverting racial restrictions on performance and
repudiating Louisiana’s “anti-mixing” laws, a trend that was evident well before 1957 when he publicly challenged President Eisenhower over the tragedy surrounding attempts to integrate schools in Little Rock, Arkansas. Attending the Satchmo Summerfest were two Bärnheim Research Fellows: Nikolas Sparks, who has been studying Storyville, street culture, and urban networks, and Maxine Gordon, who presented a wonderful paper on Velma Middleton at SSF. Maxine later returned in September to begin research on Zulu. Performance Studies doctoral candidate Sascha Just made trips as a research fellow in December 2016 and May 2017 and conducted an extensive interview with pianist and educator Ellis Marsalis. These research fellowships are proving to be very popular, and Björn’s dream of advancing the scholarship by assisting young researchers who wish to use the Archive’s resources is definitely coming true.

This is a dream we share, and the satisfaction I have experienced in attracting talented scholars and educators to the Archive, in developing digital resources online (especially the Music Rising oral history initiative), and in establishing a regular revenue flow to address preservation and conservation issues is my best reward for nearly forty years of service at the Howard-Tilton Memorial Library and the Hogan Jazz Archive. It has been a very good run indeed, and above all, an exercise in the power of collaboration. A recent case in point would be the participation of the Archive’s staff in the National Endowment for the Humanities teacher workshops administered by Rebecca Snedeker and Denise Frazier of Tulane’s New Orleans Center for the Gulf South and supervised by Sonya Robinson and Bruce “Sunpie” Barnes in June and July 2017. Two groups of thirty-five elementary and secondary school teachers—one group local, the other recruited nationally—worked with Alaina Hebert, Lynn Abbott, and me to explore and develop topics related to civil rights and New Orleans jazz using the full range of audio-visual resources available at the Archive: sheet music, film, recorded sound, photography, and oral history. Each teacher received individual attention. The “hands on” nature of the interaction was reminiscent of the ways in which neighborhood networks raise young musicians into the craft communally, in this case taking inspiration from Bruce Barnes and Rachel Breunlin’s book, Talk That Music Talk (2014), which everyone read. If you want to influence young people and instill a sense of intellectual curiosity in them, working with their teachers is the way to go. After the workshops were over, we continued to fine-tune projects with the teachers, and who knows? We may see some of them as Bärnheim Fellows in the years to come.

Bruce Boyd Raeburn
This remarkable shard is part of the Walter Eysselinck Collection, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University. It shows New Orleans trumpet legend Charlie Love seated in the bandwagon of the Florida Blossom Minstrels, in what may have been their final season on the road. When Love was interviewed by Richard B. Allen on June 20, 1958, he recalled: “I got a letter from Buck Nelson on the Florida Blossom Minstrel Show. And in ’31 I worked over there... they sent for me to be the leader of the band over there.” He went on to say that he took Earl Humphrey with him and that they were still with the show when it stranded in Salisbury, North Carolina, late that summer. Correspondence from the Florida Blossoms in the July 25, 1931, edition of the Chicago Defender said they were “doing good business through North Carolina... In the band, under the direction of Charles Love, are: Reeds - Elmer Wheller [sic] and Joe Washington. Brass - Charles Love, Amos Strickland, Audro Hooks, Earl Humphrie [sic], J. C. Davis and Buck Nelson. Drums - Foots Robinson and Jock Thompson.” This was the final communication from the Florida Blossoms.