



## The Harlem Renaissance and Jazz

### History



**Duke Ellington**

Most early jazz was played in small dance bands or by solo pianists. Besides ragtime and marches, the repertoire included all kinds of popular dance music and blues. The bands typically played at picnics, weddings, parades, and funerals. Characteristically, the bands played dirges on the way to funerals and lively marches on the way back. Blues and ragtime had arisen independently just a few years before jazz and continued to exist alongside it, influencing the style and forms of jazz and providing important vehicles for jazz improvisation.

### New Orleans Jazz

Shortly after the turn of the 20th century, the earliest fully documented jazz style emerged and centered in New Orleans, Louisiana. In this style the cornet, trumpet, or violin carried the melody, the clarinet played florid countermelodies, and the trombone played rhythmic slides and sounded the root notes of chords or simple harmonies. Below this basic trio the guitar or banjo sounded the chords, along with a piano, if available; a string bass (or tuba for



**King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band with Louis (3<sup>rd</sup> from left) and wife, Lil Hardin at piano.**

marching parades) provided a bass line; and drums supplied the rhythmic accompaniment. In theory, these roles were the same as in other kinds of music—it was the addition of improvisation, along with elements of other black music such as blues and ragtime, that made jazz unique.



A musician named Buddy Bolden appears to have led some bands that influenced early jazz musicians, but this music and its sound have been lost to posterity. Although some jazz influences can be heard on a few early phonograph records, not until 1917 did a jazz band record. This band, a group of white New Orleans musicians called The Original Dixieland Jazz Band, created a sensation overseas and in the United States. Among the band's many successors, two groups emerged in the early 1920s that were particularly celebrated: the New Orleans Rhythm Kings and the Creole Jazz Band, the latter of which was led by cornetist King Oliver, an influential stylist. The series of recordings made by Oliver's band are often considered the most significant jazz recordings by a New Orleans group. Other leading New

Orleans musicians included trumpeters Bunk Johnson and Freddie Keppard, soprano saxophonist and clarinetist Sidney Bechet, drummer Warren "Baby" Dodds, and pianist and composer Jelly Roll Morton. The most influential jazz musician nurtured in New Orleans, however, was King Oliver's second trumpeter, Louis Armstrong.

### **Louis Armstrong**

Armstrong was a dazzling improviser, technically, emotionally, and intellectually. He and his generation changed the format of jazz by bringing the soloist to the forefront, and within his recording groups, the Hot Five and the Hot Seven, he demonstrated that jazz improvisation could go far beyond simply ornamenting the melody—he created new melodies based on the chords of the initial tune. He also set a standard for later jazz singers, not only by the way he altered the words and melodies of songs, but also by improvising without words, like an instrument. This form of vocal improvisation is known as scat singing.





## Chicago and New York City



For jazz, the 1920s was a decade of great experimentation and discovery. Many New Orleans musicians, including Armstrong, migrated to Chicago, Illinois, influencing local musicians and stimulating the evolution of the Chicago style. This style was derived from the

New Orleans style but emphasized soloists, often added saxophone to the instrumentation, and usually produced tenser rhythms and more complicated textures. Instrumentalists working in Chicago or influenced by the Chicago style included trombonist Jack Teagarden, banjoist and guitarist Eddie Condon, drummer Gene Krupa, and clarinetist Benny Goodman. Also active in Chicago was Bix Beiderbecke, whose lyrical approach to the cornet provided an alternative to Armstrong's bravura trumpet style. Many Chicago musicians eventually settled in New York City, another major center for jazz in the 1920s.

### The Jazz Piano

Another vehicle for the development of jazz in the 1920s was piano music. The Harlem section of New York City became the center of a highly technical, hard-driving solo style known as stride piano. The master of this approach in the early 1920s was James P. Johnson, but it was Johnson's protégé Fats Waller—a talented vocalist and entertainer as well—who became by far the most popular performer of this idiom.

A second piano style to develop in the 1920s was boogie-woogie. A form of blues played on the piano, it consists of a short, sharply accented bass pattern played repeatedly by the left hand while the right hand

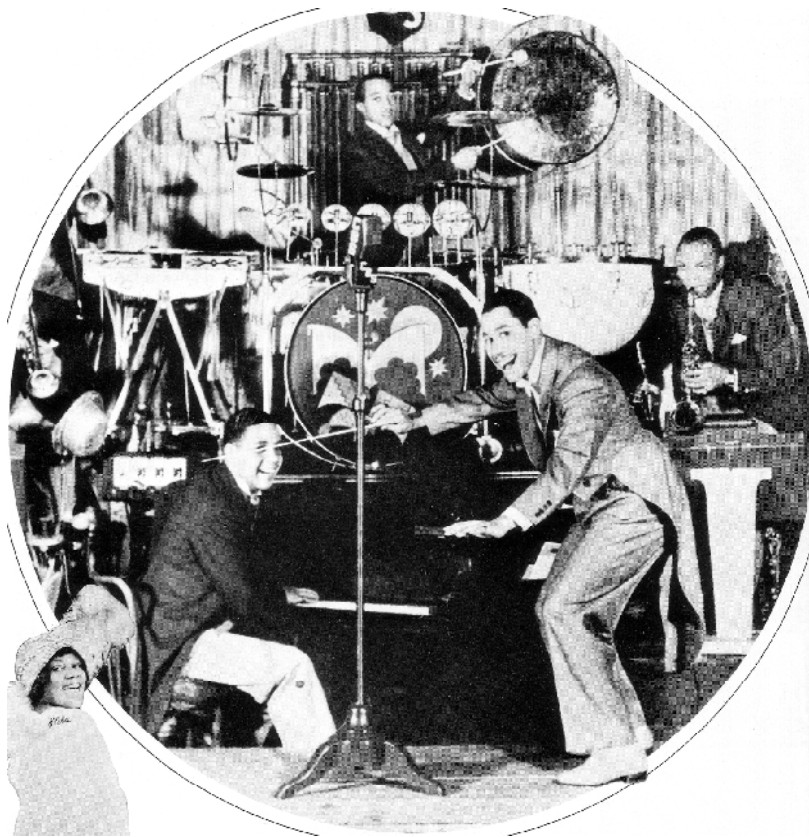


**James P. Johnson**

plays freely, using a variety of rhythms. Boogie-woogie became especially popular in the 1930s and 1940s. Leading boogie-woogie pianists included Meade Lux Lewis, Albert Ammons, Pete Johnson, and Pine Top Smith.

The most brilliant pianist of the 1920s, comparable to Armstrong in sheer innovation and present on some of his most influential recordings, was Earl “Fatha” Hines, a Chicago-nurtured virtuoso considered to possess a wild, unpredictable imagination. His style, combined with the smoother approach of Waller, influenced most pianists of the next generation—notably Teddy Wilson, who was featured with Goodman’s band in the 1930s, and Art Tatum, who performed mostly as a soloist and was regarded with awe for his virtuosity and sophisticated harmonic sense.

### **The Big-Band Era**



Also during the 1920s, large groups of jazz musicians began to play together, after the model of society dance bands. These were the so-called big bands, which became so popular in the 1930s and early 1940s that the period was known as the swing era. One major development in the emergence of the swing era was a rhythmic change that smoothed the two-beat rhythms of some early bands into a more flowing four beats to the bar. Musicians also developed the use of short melodic patterns, called riffs, in call-and-

response patterns. To facilitate this procedure, orchestras were divided into instrumental sections, each with its own riffs, and opportunities were provided for musicians to play solos.

The development of the big band as a jazz medium was strongly influenced by the achievements of Duke Ellington and Fletcher Henderson. Henderson’s arranger, Don Redman, and later Henderson himself, introduced written jazz scores that were widely admired for their effort to capture the quality of improvisation that characterized the music of smaller ensembles. To achieve this improvisation, Redman and Henderson were



aided by gifted soloists such as tenor saxophonist Coleman Hawkins and by Armstrong, who played in Henderson's band during 1924 and 1925.

Ellington led a band at the Cotton Club in New York City during the late 1920s. Continuing to direct his orchestra until his death in 1974, he composed colorful experimental concert pieces ranging in length, from the three-minute "Ko-Ko" (1940) to the hourlong *Black, Brown, and Beige* (1943), as well as songs such as "Solitude" and "Sophisticated Lady." More complex than Henderson's music, Ellington's music made his orchestra a cohesive ensemble, with solos written for the unique qualities of specific instruments and players. Other black bands that were popular among musicians and audiences were led by Jimmie Lunceford, Chick Webb, and Cab Calloway.

A different style of big-band jazz was developed in Kansas City, Missouri, during the mid-1930s and was epitomized by the band of Count Basie. Originally assembled in Kansas City, Basie's band reflected that region's emphasis on improvisation, keeping the prepared passages relatively short and simple. The wind instruments in his band exchanged ensemble riffs in a free, strongly rhythmical interplay, with pauses to accommodate instrumental solos. Basie's tenor saxophonist Lester Young, in particular, played with a rhythmic freedom rarely apparent in the improvisations of soloists from other bands. Young's delicate tone and long, flowing melodies, laced with an occasional avant-garde honk or gurgle, opened up a whole new approach, just as Armstrong's trumpet and cornet playing had done in the 1920s.



**Count Basie**



Other trendsetters of the late 1930s were trumpeter Roy Eldridge, electric guitarist Charlie Christian, drummer Kenny Clarke, and vibraphonist Lionel Hampton. Jazz singing in the 1930s became increasingly flexible and stylized. Ivie Anderson, Mildred Bailey, Ella Fitzgerald, and, above all, Billie Holiday were among the leading singers. Europeans also became more active in jazz during this time. Belgian guitarist Django Reinhardt, whose brilliant recordings were available in the United States, for example, influenced Christian.

## **Jazz**

Jazz is a type of music first developed by African Americans around the first decade of the 20th century

that has an identifiable history and distinct stylistic evolution. Jazz grew up alongside the blues and popular music, and all these genres overlap in many ways. However, critics generally agree about whether artists fall squarely in one camp or another.

Since its beginnings jazz has branched out into so many styles that no single description fits all of them accurately. A few generalizations can be made, however, bearing in mind that for all of them, exceptions can be cited.

Performers of jazz improvise within the conventions of their chosen style. Typically, the improvisation is accompanied by the repeated chord progression of a popular song or an original composition. Instrumentalists emulate black vocal styles, including the use of *glissandi* (sliding movements that smoothly change the pitch), nuances of pitch (including blue notes, the “bent” notes that are played or sung slightly lower than the major scale), and tonal effects such as growls and wails.

In striving to develop a personal sound, or *tone color* (an idiosyncratic sense of rhythm and form and an individual style of execution), performers create rhythms characterized by constant *syncopation* (the placing of accents in unexpected places, usually on the weaker beat) and by swing. Swing can be defined as a sensation of momentum in which a melody is alternately heard together with, then slightly at variance with, the regular beat. Written scores, if present, are often used merely as guides, providing structure within which improvisation occurs. The typical instrumentation begins with a rhythm section consisting of piano, string bass, drums, and optional guitar, to which may be added any number of wind instruments. In big bands the wind instruments are grouped into three sections: saxophones, trombones, and trumpets.

Although exceptions occur in some styles, most jazz is based on the principle that an infinite number of melodies can fit the chord progressions of any song. The musician improvises new melodies that fit the chord progression, which is repeated again and again as each soloist is featured, for as many choruses as desired.



**B. B. King, although considered a blues performer, he uses these jazz stylings.**



Jazz is rooted in the mingled musical traditions of African Americans. These include traits surviving from West African music; black folk music forms developed in the Americas; European popular and light classical music of the 18th and 19th centuries; and later popular music forms influenced by black music or produced by black composers. Among the surviving African traits are vocal styles that include great freedom of vocal color; a tradition of improvisation; call-and-response patterns; and rhythmic complexity, both in the syncopation of individual melodic lines and in the conflicting

rhythms played by different members of an ensemble. Black folk music forms include field hollers, rowing chants, lullabies, and later, spirituals and blues.

European music contributed specific styles and forms: hymns, marches, waltzes, quadrilles, and other dance music, as well as light theatrical music and Italian operatic music. European music also introduced theoretical elements, in particular, harmony, both as a vocabulary of chords and as a concept related to musical form. (Much of the European influence was absorbed through private lessons in European music, even when the black musicians so trained could only find work in seedy entertainment districts and on Mississippi riverboats.)

Black-influenced elements of popular music that contributed to jazz include: the banjo music of the minstrel shows (derived from the banjo music of slaves), the syncopated rhythmic patterns of African-influenced Latin American music (heard in southern U.S. cities), the barrelhouse piano styles of tavern musicians in the Midwest, and the marches played by black brass bands in the late 19th century.

Near the end of the 19th century, another influential genre emerged. This was ragtime, a composed music that combined many elements, including syncopated rhythms (from banjo music and other black sources) and the harmonic contrasts and formal patterns of European marches. After 1910 bandleader W. C. Handy took another influential form, the blues, and broke its strict oral tradition by publishing his original blues songs. (Favored by jazz musicians, Handy's songs found one of their greatest interpreters in the 1920s in blues singer Bessie Smith, who recorded many of them.)



**Bessie Smith**

The merging of these multiple influences into jazz is difficult to reconstruct because it occurred before the existence of recording, which has provided valuable documentation. Of course, individual musicians had varying backgrounds and few people were directly exposed to all of these influences. For example, most jazz artists were and are city dwellers and might have only known rural black forms indirectly.