

NEW ORLEANS LIFE AND NEW ORLEANS JAZZ

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New Orleans jazz is a musical style that has a special meaning in its native setting. A current saying here is, "What did you bring it for if you're not gonna shake it." This best sums up the function of jazz in this peculiar variant of United States folklife. It was improvised music for dancing and there never was another city for dancing like New Orleans. Where else can you find so many pre-Lenten balls? Where else does one "stomp it on down" at a Sunday school parade or a funeral?

Being a seaport, and a good-time seaport in the South, this city drew people from all parts of the world, and they heard music from all nations coming off the ships when they walked along the poor man's promenade, as the docks were called.

Today New Orleans brass bands play "Maryland, My Maryland" which is based on a German Christmas carol. An old Anglo-Saxon ballad, "The Ram of Derbyshire," became a minstrel song about a man instead of an animal—as "Oh, Didn't He Ramble," it is heard at funerals, par-

ticularly if the leading character was a sport. New Orleans was the ante-bellum center of opera in the United States. Pit musicians trained some jazz men, and the operas themselves gave melodic material for variations. Louis Armstrong inserts a bit of *Rigoletto* into his recording of "New Orleans Stomp" with Johnny Dodd's Black Bottom Stompers. George Lewis employs "The Sextet" from *Lucia di Lammermoor* in the midst of "Nobody Knows the Way I Feel This Morning."

The West African heritage was primarily rhythmic and expressive. West African syncopations are felt when a musician accents weak beats, plays another rhythm over the steady beat which the dancers require, or strikes a tone just before or after it would ordinarily be sounded in strictly Western music. The emotional content of jazz comes largely from the adaptation of West African vocal nuances to instruments. Wide vibrato, harsh timbres and strange intonations abound. Surprising variations on the melody add more emotion

to jazz renditions. With rare exceptions the instruments played were of European ancestry. The banjo and other informal instruments with African antecedents, however, are found in some jazz band rhythm sections.

American contributions include mountain and cowboy songs. "Careless Love" came down from the Great Smokies, and the tune of "The Red River Valley" floated down the river. New lyrics were added to the latter, and it is now a locally popular hymn, "We Shall Walk Through the Streets of the City."

The New Orleans story could go on endlessly, but the most influential thing was the Gallic disposition. A Louisianan of French descent once said, "The Pope, he ain't no Baptist." Such an attitude meant casual fun in the dance halls, honky tonks, and cabarets. Pleasure clubs and fraternal organizations sprung up like mushrooms and hired the hot brass and dance bands. And the mood of the music suited this carefree spirit.

De De Pierce of the Preservation Hall Band.

