



A New and Different National Park



A painting of a 1905 photograph of the Imperial Orchestra

Photographs from the Al Rose Collection, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University

Most historical parks in the national park system are created to commemorate a battle, a place, or a person that played an important role in our nation's history. In 1994, Congress authorized a new and different park in New Orleans as a national tribute to the uniquely American invention - jazz. The park's purpose is to preserve information and resources associated with the origins and development of jazz in the city widely recognized as its birthplace.

Early Musical Influences



E.W. Kemble's depiction of dances in Congo Square, based on descriptions from George Washington Cable. From Century Magazine, April 1886.

New Orleans, founded in 1718 as the center of the French Louisiana colony, increased significantly in ethnic diversity in the decades following the 1803 Louisiana Purchase. The existing culture comprised of mostly American Indians, French, Spanish and West African people was joined by a new wave of German, Italian, Haitian, and Asian-Pacific immigrants, English-speaking Americans and enslaved Africans from the U.S. and other parts of the Caribbean. This rich mix resulted in considerable cultural exchange, creating a unique environment for the development of jazz.

A well-known example of an early influence to the origins of jazz is the African dance and drumming tradition. As early as the 1780's, African Americans gathered on Sundays in the open area just outside the city walls near the site of Fort St. Ferdinand. Now known as Congo Square, this area was used by American Indians, slaves, and free people of color to market goods, socialize and partici-

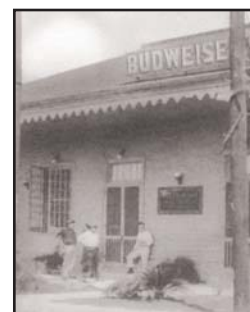
pate in drumming, music-making, sporting, and dance activities. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Congo Square holds special symbolic importance to Native Americans and African-Americans because of the role the site played in New Orleans' musical and social heritage.

New Orleans prominence as America's first early center for opera, caused both its melodious lyricism and repetitive rhythmic figures to also exert a powerful influence on the development of the music. In addition, various folk cultures contributed their syncopations to this emerging art form. The latter of these influences culminated in American Ragtime one of the main precursors of jazz. Throughout the ragtime era, New Orleans people were interpreting and composing "rags" in a way indigenous to New Orleans. All over the United States, brass bands began supplementing the standard march repertoire with ragtime pieces.

The New Orleans Music Scene

At the turn of the century New Orleans was a thriving music center. Legitimate theater, vaudeville, music publishing houses and instrument stores employed musicians in the central business district, while other establishments flourished in and around the "red light" district near Canal and Rampart streets. On the shores of Lake Pontchartrain, bands competed for audiences at amusement parks and resorts. Street parades were common in the neighborhoods, while community social halls and corner saloons held dances almost nightly. Many of these street parades were sponsored by benevolent societies which various ethnic groups organized to provide the benefits that insurance companies later supplied. Once insurance companies fulfilled these needs, New Orleanians still wanted to take to the streets with their parties. They did this by forming social aid and pleasure clubs or marching clubs which continue the parading tradition to this day.

In the early 1900's, the building at 401 S. Rampart, was an important gathering place for African-American musicians. The building housed the famous Eagle Saloon on the first floor, and the Odd Fellows Masonic Ballroom on the 3rd floor.



Throughout the late teens, 20's, and early 30's, the Halfway House at City Park Avenue and the New Basin Canal was a famous dance hall featuring musicians such as Abbie Brunies, Charlie Cordilla, and Joe Loyacano.

The Music Spreads

New Orleans music began to spread to other cities as early as the 1850s. Musicians who joined riverboat bands, vaudeville, minstrel and other show tours, helped begin a tradition of exporting New Orleans music that continues today.

Many early New Orleans groups left the city to tour the country. Jelly Roll Morton, an innovative piano stylist and composer, began his odyssey outside of New Orleans as early as 1907. The Original Creole Orchestra organized by Bill Johnson, including cornetist Freddie Keppard, was an important group that left New Orleans and toured the Orpheum Theater circuit with gigs in Chicago and New York, as did trombonist Tom Brown and his Band From Dixieland. Nick LaRocca and other members of the

Original Dixieland Jazz Band headed to Chicago in 1916, and then to New York in 1917 where they cut the first commercial jazz recording for Victor. Suddenly New Orleans jazz was a national craze.

Perhaps the most notable departure from New Orleans was in 1922, when King Oliver summoned Louis Armstrong to Chicago. Armstrong's brilliant playing with King Oliver's band helped to popularize the polyphonic ensemble style of New Orleans. He also elevated the jazz solo to unprecedented artistic levels. Technical improvement and popularity of phonograph records helped spread his instrumental and vocal innovations, making him internationally famous.

The Music Continues

New Orleans musicians and their styles continued to influence jazz internationally as it went through a rapid series of stylistic changes. Swing, a jazz derivative, became the unchallenged popular music of America during the 1930s and 40s. Later innovations, such as bebop in the 1940s and avant-garde in the 1960s, departed further from the New Orleans jazz tradition.

As with many art forms, the essence lies in live performance. Technological developments after 1900 made it possible to preserve and transmit music to audiences far removed from the per-

former. Player pianos, phonograph recordings, radio, and film brought the sights and sounds of jazz musicians to audiences of millions. Clubs, cabarets, and ballrooms enlarged the audience and allowed audience-performer interactions.

Although the small band New Orleans style fell out of fashion, many jazz enthusiasts turned back to New Orleans music to hear and record local musicians that were still actively playing traditional jazz. Many artists reached a new level of recognition in the 1980s. Today, the United States Government recognizes jazz as an American art form.

Recent Legislation

United States Congress Resolution 57 of 1987 designated jazz as "a rare and valuable national American treasure." The United States Senate added, "to which we should devote our attention, support and resources to make certain it is preserved, understood and promulgated."

In 1990, Public Law 101-499 authorized and directed the Secretary of the Interior, in consultation with the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution to conduct a study of the suitability and feasibility of preserving and interpreting the origins of jazz in New Orleans.

On October 31, 1994, the findings of that study resulted in the U.S. Congress passing Public Law 103-433, which created New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park. The purpose of the

park is to: "preserve the origins, early history, development and progression of jazz; provide visitors with opportunities to experience the sights, sounds and places where jazz evolved; implement innovative ways of establishing jazz educational partnerships; assist in the preservation, education, and interpretation of jazz as it has evolved in New Orleans; and to provide technical assistance to organizations involved in jazz, and its history."



Visitors enjoy a live performance at the park's French Quarter Visitors center.

Planning For The Future

Visitors to New Orleans will soon have an opportunity to see, hear, and feel the story of jazz at the park's new home, a unique jazz complex comprised of four structures connected by a system of lagoons and green space in the heart of New Orleans.

The new facility, located in Armstrong Park, involves the restoration and renovation of four buildings that will house the park's exhibits, performance and education venue, resource center, and administrative headquarters.

The present Visitors Center is located at 916 N. Peters Street, in the city's French Quarter. Exhibits, live performances, and public programs are offered at this location. All events are free and open to the public.

For additional park information, please write: Superintendent, New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, 419 Rue Decatur, New Orleans, Louisiana 70130, telephone (504) 589-4806, by e-mail to: JAZZ_Superintendent@nps.gov, or visit our web-site at www.nps.gov/jazz.

