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## The 1920s in America

### Jazz

by John L. Clark Jr.

*Jazz came to represent the mood of the period between the end of World War I and the onset of the Great Depression. While the word has assumed a great deal of cultural resonance, it is still primarily a term used to describe a musical style. The roots of jazz can be traced to the last years of the nineteenth century, and although its development continued for a century, the 1920s represented its coming of age as both a popular music style and an art form.*

Although sometimes called the Jazz Age, the 1920s initially identified jazz music in a very limited way, but it evolved into a vastly different entity by the end of the decade. Around 1920, most people would have identified jazz with the boisterous, highly charged syncopations of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band (ODJB). Following its migration from New Orleans to its residency at Reisenweber's restaurant in New York, the group launched a series of popular recordings that brought jazz to the attention of the public. Syncopated music using African American elements had been the driving force in American popular music since the ragtime boom of the 1890s, when musicians such as Scott Joplin, James Europe, and Eubie Blake had been important arbiters of the style.

The dual influences of ragtime and blues typified by composer W. C. Handy during the 1910s caused a stylistic shift in popular music and song. Tin Pan Alley composers such as Irving Berlin and George Gershwin rode the crest of the wave with songs that featured syncopation, blue notes (notes with slightly lower pitches), and what were perceived as celebrations of African American life in a sophisticated musical setting. Other musical elements associated with the new jazz trend included fast tempos, animated stage presentation, and the nontraditional use of instruments (growls, squeals, the use of mutes, and extended techniques) to produce highly vocalized sounds. Social dances such as the Charleston and the Lindy Hop developed in tandem with the new music, and fashion and literature further adapted musical and cultural elements related to speed and the abandonment of inhibition. In fact, the word "jazz" was a lightning rod for social commentators of the time, as conservative society regarded it as a synonym for sexual license.

Duke Ellington was one of the leading figures in jazz music.

(Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images)

Smith, Bessie  
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## Dance Bands

One of the primary developments in dance band music during the period was the introduction of saxophones into ensembles. Art Hickman's Orchestra, based in San Francisco, is generally credited with being the first to incorporate a saxophone section in its arrangements, as early as 1918. By 1920, virtually all full-sized commercial dance bands had at least two saxophones in addition to two trumpets, a trombone, a rhythm section, and occasionally strings and other woodwinds. All the major music publishers produced stock orchestrations for this ensemble and its variants. The modern dance orchestra lineup—featuring three brass sections, three reed sections, and a rhythm section of bass, piano, and percussion—became standard by the middle of the decade.

One of the decade's most popular bands was led by Paul Whiteman. At the beginning of the 1920s, Whiteman established himself in New York and began making recordings and playing high-profile concerts. His 1920 recording of the song "Wang Wang Blues" was a tremendous hit and featured a small group playing in a style similar to the ODJB. By 1929, he was leading a band as large as twenty-five pieces. Whiteman was always careful to include musicians capable of playing jazz in his bands: cornetist Bix Beiderbecke, saxophonist Frankie Trumbauer, and the Dorsey Brothers were just a few of the jazz musicians whom he featured.

African American dance bands were also crucial to the development of jazz style in the early 1920s. In addition to older-styled theater bands led by Eubie Blake and Wilbur Sweatman, younger bandleaders such as Fletcher Henderson in New York and Doc Cook in Chicago began to incorporate more improvisational elements in their arrangements and to attract attention by featuring their soloists.

## **Blues and Technology**

An important part of the development of jazz in the 1920s was the concurrent popularity of the blues. Mamie Smith's recording of the song "Crazy Blues" in 1920 triggered a popular acceptance of African American blues singers, mostly female, leading to the development of what came to be known as classic blues. While the first wave of singers primarily consisted of stage actors singing blues-influenced popular music, several traditional singers were recorded and introduced to the larger public by 1923. Notable among these were Ma Rainey, Clara Smith, and especially Bessie Smith, who was billed as the "Empress of the Blues." Often accompanied by small jazz bands, these performers were highly regarded for their singing. This blues influx was an important ingredient in the developing art of jazz improvisation.

Most blues recordings were aimed at regional African American markets. These "race records" were found mainly in urban African American centers, although they were often carried to more remote locations and sought out by anyone with an interest in the style or individual performers. Jazz was perhaps the first popular music that owed much of its development and popularity to the dissemination of recordings. By the mid-1920s, radio was also playing a part in publicizing bands from many U.S. locations, not just large cities such as New York and Chicago.

## **Gershwin, Armstrong, and Ellington**

Three key developments in jazz history occurred around 1924. First, Whiteman produced a concert at the Aeolian Hall in New York, which was loosely organized around the history of jazz. This concert purported to trace the style's development from its primitive beginnings with the ODJB to its success as high art in the music performed by the Whiteman ensemble. At some point in the development of the concert, Broadway composer George Gershwin was asked to compose a concert work using jazz elements. The resulting composition, *Rhapsody in Blue*, received mixed reviews, but it was perhaps the first large-scale attempt to combine American popular and art music. By proving that these popular elements could be incorporated into a concert work, Gershwin and Whiteman provided a level of legitimacy for jazz among devotees of art music.

Meanwhile, at the Roseland Ballroom, Fletcher Henderson's group was featuring some of the best New York-based African American musicians, including saxophonist Coleman Hawkins. After an unsuccessful attempt several years earlier, Henderson managed to convince Louis Armstrong to

join his band. Armstrong, a cornet player from New Orleans, had been brought to Chicago by his mentor King Oliver in 1922 to play in a small group of African American jazz musicians from New Orleans. Although he was successful in this group, Armstrong was not extensively featured and played for a limited audience. After joining Henderson, he was exposed to an array of contemporary jazz musicians who marveled at his technical command, blues feeling, and effortless rhythmic flexibility, which came to be known as “swing.” Armstrong was a featured soloist on many Henderson recordings during his twelve months with the band, and both white and black players copied his stylistic innovations.

Following his return to Chicago in the fall of 1925, Armstrong inaugurated a series of recordings with small New Orleans-styled groups generically called the Hot Five. These recordings codified Armstrong’s style (as well as his switch to trumpet) and inspired generations of aspiring players, representing another significant development in the history of jazz. Virtuoso performances in songs such as “Potato Head Blues” and “West End Blues” (also featuring pianist Earl Hines) demonstrated Armstrong’s superior musical technique and swing style.

Armstrong’s playing influenced the whole style of dance band arranging, as well as individual musicians. Bandleader and arranger Don Redman is often credited with introducing some of Armstrong’s figures and rhythmic vitality into his arrangements for Henderson, and late-1920s stock arrangers such as Frank Skinner and Archie Bleyer were influenced by Armstrong as well. Improvised solos grew in importance during this time, as can be seen from their inclusion in published arrangements and recordings.

Stride pianist Duke Ellington’s decision to form a band in 1926 marked a third watershed moment in jazz history. His group soon became one of the most distinctive black bands in the country. An extended engagement at the African-themed Cotton Club in 1927 provided Ellington with exposure on radio and recordings. There, he developed his “Jungle Style”—an earthy, growling music style using jazz elements and emphasizing the individual tonalities of his players, especially trumpeter Bubber Miley. During the 1920s, Ellington specialized in creating cameos for his soloists, perfectly tailoring his song structure to the three-minute limit of recording technology. By the end of the decade, Ellington had won acclaim for his innovations in composition, song form, and orchestration.

## **New Generation**

The initial popularity of the jazz style in the late 1910s gave way to the next generation of musicians, who began playing professionally by the early 1920s. These players had been profoundly influenced by the recordings of the ODJB and subsequent groups. Urban locations with large African American communities became incubators of the new musical developments. Because of the opportunities it offered in the manufacturing industry, Chicago had become a destination for many southern blacks, and musicians from places such as New Orleans found a hospitable

entertainment scene there as well. Younger white musicians were able to hear music from talented black players such as Armstrong, Oliver, and pianist Jelly Roll Morton. These musicians advanced the ensemble-based New Orleans style, with greater emphasis on fast tempos and improvised solos, and carried these developments into the dance band world in which they made their living. Musicians such as Benny Goodman and Bud Freeman learned their craft in this way and ultimately made their way to New York later in the decade.

Both black and white musicians around the country found inspiration in performances given by touring bands and regional units, as well as from recordings. Called “territory bands,” these regional dance groups frequently developed variants to the dominant jazz style in Chicago and New York by using different repertoires, improvisational elements, and instrumentation. One of the most influential regional styles came from Kansas City and the area extending down through Oklahoma and Texas. More blues-based and relatively less sophisticated than eastern styles of jazz, the territory bands of this area emphasized ensemble riffs and longer solos, foreshadowing developments to come in the 1930s. Black players such as pianist Count Basie and trumpeter Hot Lips Page, along with white musicians such as trombonist Jack Teagarden, gained much of their early professional experience in these groups.

## Impact

While the word “jazz” is often considered synonymous with improvisational music, it meant both much more and much less in the 1920s. As a cultural entity, jazz represented modes of style, literature, fashion, and morals, as well as music. By the end of the decade, the advances in the music itself and changing cultural focus (hastened by the Great Depression) had considerably reduced the extramusical associations with the word. The music, meanwhile, had developed into a legitimate and recognizable style, with several musicians (notably Armstrong, Gershwin, and Ellington) seen as creative geniuses. The surface elements of the music had been adopted by musicians and composers in other genres, and the contingent development of social dancing led to the Swing era of the 1930s.

## Further Reading

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- 3 Lange, Arthur. *Arranging for the Modern Dance Orchestra*. New York: Robbins Music, 1927. A textbook on the style and music theory behind creating dance band arrangements.

- 4 Osgood, Henry Osborne. *So This Is Jazz*. New York: Little, Brown, & Co., 1926. A period discussion on the elements of jazz.
- 5 Tucker, Mark, ed. *The Duke Ellington Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. A comprehensive look at the world of Ellington, including much information on his first bands.

### Citation Types

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