

# New Orleans and the History of Jazz [Abridged]

by Loren Schoenberg

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*Louis Armstrong, 1953 (Library of Congress  
Prints and Photographs Division)*

New Orleans is a city built in a location that was by any measure a mistake. North American settlers needed a way to import and export goods via the Mississippi River, so a city was created atop swamps. By virtue of its location and its role in the international economy, New Orleans became home to a population that was as heterogeneous as any. Besides the French and, for a time, Spanish colonial powers, other groups included African Americans (both free and slave), people from the Caribbean and Latin America, and Scandinavians and other Europeans. The United States purchased Louisiana from France in 1803 (for \$15M), and this more than doubled the size of the young country. The Louisiana Territory included parts of Alberta and Saskatchewan, as well as almost a quarter of the modern-day United States. Naturally, New Orleans became one of the country's major cities. Its variegated racial realities played a major role in the spiritual and moral lives of Abraham Lincoln and Walt Whitman, both of whom first witnessed the true cruelties of slavery there. In his series of essays that eventually comprised the classic *The Cotton Kingdom*, Frederick Law Olmsted stated the following about New Orleans in the mid-1850s:

I doubt if there is a city in the world, where the resident population has been so divided in its origin, or where there is such a variety in the tastes, habits, manners, and moral codes of the citizens. Although this injures civic enterprise—which the peculiar situation of the city greatly demands to be directed to means of cleanliness, convenience, comfort, and health—it also gives a greater scope to the working of individual enterprise, taste, genius, and conscience; so that nowhere are the higher qualities of man—as displayed in generosity, hospitality, benevolence, and courage—better developed, or the lower qualities, likening him to a beast, less interfered with, by law or the action of public opinion.<sup>[1]</sup>

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Crescent City, as it was known (due to the curvature of the Mississippi River as it surrounds the city), was alive with music. Music served as a psychological shield against the floods, fires, epidemics, and riots that marked New Orleans history, for it provided an excuse to forget, or a spur to overcome, the problems brought on by both nature and society. The most original form of that music, jazz, has come to be synonymous with New Orleans.

In the nineteenth century, balls or public dances were held in many American cities, and those in New Orleans were legendary—both for their popularity and their interracial audiences. To attract the maximum number of people to the dance floor, the bands of nineteenth-century New Orleans gradually mixed and matched musical styles, sowing the seeds of jazz. No musical genre was more popular than opera, and the arias that could be heard throughout the city day in and day out had a profound impact on the melodic styles of the musicians who created the jazz idiom, most notably the pianist/composer Jelly Roll Morton, reedman Sidney Bechet, and trumpeter/vocalist Louis Armstrong. Their precursors included the Creole composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk who, as far back as the mid-nineteenth century, wrote such works as “The Banjo” and “Bamboula,” which combined African and European idioms in a fresh and daring manner.

But if there is one specific place where the roots of jazz can be traced, it would be in Congo Square, where slaves were allowed to dance and generally express themselves. This is where the cultural mix that remains at the root of American (and subsequently, much of the world’s) popular music began. The slaves’ various forms of expression, rooted in Africa, intermingled with the New World. This outlet for the myriad emotions engendered by racism and slavery (as well as the hard-to-find and hard-won joys of life in such situations) started a stream of music that led to Buddy Bolden.

By all accounts, this barber/cornetist was the first musician whose music could be called jazz. It was the early twentieth century, and Bolden took ragtime, the music of day, and played it in a rough-and-ready style with the vocal and improvisatory feeling of the blues. Ragtime was conceived as a delicate, non-improvisatory style of piano music. Bolden’s transmogrification of it into a harder-edged improvisatory, horn-based form laid the groundwork for jazz bands of the future. His pioneering efforts inspired the next generation of musicians, including cornetist Joe “King” Oliver, who refined the approach into something far more sophisticated. At the root of the mature New Orleans style that Oliver and his band championed was a polyphonic approach to ensemble playing. This means that the horn players (two trumpets, clarinet, and trombone) all played concurrently. To do this without sounding jumbled called for each musician to listen intently to the others while simultaneously creating their own responses. One way to listen to classic New Orleans jazz at its best is to imagine the complexity of the melodies as a representation of its polyglot communities. It’s worth noting that at the very time that Bolden’s band was at its peak, the injustices of *Plessy v. Ferguson* were making themselves manifest in the Crescent City and across the country.

[...]

[In 1917, the Storyville district of New Orleans was closed, and its population of entertainment-related workers had to look to other cities for employment.] This coincided with the general migration northward of southern blacks, and within a few years many of the major players were relocating in Chicago (and more than few in California). This left the gap that the young Louis Armstrong filled (he was born in 1901, just a year too early to be drafted) and within a few years he rose to the top, eventually joining his mentor Oliver in Chicago in late 1922.

Armstrong's travels took him to Chicago and then to New York. Jazz continued to survive in varying degrees in New Orleans as the music spread around the world, and by the 1940s the Crescent City became a Mecca for jazz lovers. There also continued to be a steady stream of first-rate jazz musicians who came from New Orleans and participated in all the current streams of music that were developing in Kansas City, Los Angeles, and New York. A short list would include tenor saxophonist Lester Young, who came to fame with Count Basie's band, Ornette Coleman's drummer Ed Blackwell, and in more recent years, the trumpeter/composer Wynton Marsalis. Of course, in terms of R&B and its offshoots, we only have to mention the names Fats Domino, Harry Connick, Dr. John, Professor Longhair, and Aaron Neville to be reminded of how New Orleans has stayed close to the core of popular music to this day.

It was a tragedy that brought New Orleans back to the world's attention in the summer of 2005 when Hurricane Katrina not only ripped the city and its environs apart, but also exposed the racial and cultural dysfunctions that still exist in the United States. The city that never should have been there gave the world a tremendous cultural gift, jazz, whose progeny, popular music, was ultimately employed in fundraisers around the world to try to save New Orleans. Students and teachers alike will gain a new understanding of our nation's past by looking into the untold strands of world history that are inextricably bound to the Crescent City.

<sup>[1]</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States*, 2nd ed. (New York: Mason Brothers and London: Sampson Low, Son & Co., 1862), 1: 302.

*The full text can be found on the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History website. The website requires registration for a free subscription. [www.gilderlehrman.org](http://www.gilderlehrman.org)*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What form of music has come to be synonymous with New Orleans?

- A ragtime
- B opera
- C jazz
- D blues

2. The article contrasts ragtime with jazz. What is one difference between these forms of music?

- A Improvisation is more important to ragtime than to jazz.
- B Improvisation is more important to jazz than to ragtime.
- C Jazz is played mainly on the piano, while ragtime is played mainly on the trumpet.
- D Ragtime is usually played by many instruments, while jazz is usually played by one instrument.

3. Jazz was influenced by other music.

What evidence from the text supports this statement?

- A "Music served as a psychological shield against the floods, fires, epidemics, and riots that marked New Orleans history, for it provided an excuse to forget, or a spur to overcome, the problems brought on by both nature and society."
- B "No musical genre was more popular than opera, and the arias that could be heard throughout the city day in and day out had a profound impact on the melodic styles of the musicians who created the jazz idiom..."
- C "One way to listen to classic New Orleans jazz at its best is to imagine the complexity of the melodies as a representation of its polyglot communities."
- D "Jazz continued to survive in varying degrees in New Orleans as the music spread around the world, and by the 1940s the Crescent City became a Mecca for jazz lovers."

4. Reread Frederick Law Olmstead's statement about New Orleans.

"I doubt if there is a city in the world, where the resident population has been so divided in its origin, or where there is such a variety in the tastes, habits, manners, and moral codes of the citizens. Although this injures civic enterprise—which the peculiar situation of the city greatly demands to be directed to means of cleanliness, convenience, comfort, and health—it also gives a greater scope to the working of individual enterprise, taste, genius, and conscience; so that nowhere are the higher qualities of man—as displayed in generosity, hospitality, benevolence, and courage—better developed, or the lower qualities, likening him to a beast, less interfered with, by law or the action of public opinion."

Based on this statement, how can Olmstead's opinion of New Orleans be summarized?

- A** New Orleans is a city whose residents are more generous, noble, hospitable, and benevolent than people anywhere else.
- B** New Orleans is a city whose lack of legal regulation has harmful effects on its residents.
- C** New Orleans is a city where cleanliness, comfort, and health are more difficult to maintain than in most other cities.
- D** New Orleans is a city whose extreme diversity has both positive and negative effects.

5. What is the main idea of this article?

- A** Jazz emerged from the cultural diversity and uniqueness of New Orleans.
- B** New Orleans was founded because North American settlers needed a way to transport goods along the Mississippi River.
- C** Congo Square is a place in New Orleans where slaves were allowed to dance and express themselves.
- D** Lester Young, Ed Blackwell, and Wynton Marsalis are all first-rate jazz musicians who came from New Orleans.

6. Read these sentences from the text.

"By virtue of its location and its role in the international economy, New Orleans became home to a population that was as heterogeneous as any. Besides the French and, for a time, Spanish colonial powers, other groups included African Americans (both free and slave), people from the Caribbean and Latin America, and Scandinavians and other Europeans."

Based on these sentences, what does the word "heterogeneous" mean?

- A** varied or diverse
- B** complicated or difficult to understand
- C** prosperous or wealthy
- D** violent or combative

7. Read this sentence from the text.

"The city that never should have been there gave the world a tremendous cultural gift, jazz, whose progeny, popular music, was ultimately employed in fundraisers around the world to try to save New Orleans."

Which word does the pronoun "whose" refer to?

- A** "city"
- B** "gift"
- C** "jazz"
- D** "music"

8. How does the author suggest listening to classic New Orleans jazz?

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9. Name five different groups of people who made up the population of New Orleans.

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10. How does jazz reflect the city of New Orleans? Support your answer with evidence from the article.

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## Teacher Guide &amp; Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 1520

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- A "city"**
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8. How does the author suggest listening to classic New Orleans jazz?

**Suggested answer:** The author suggests imagining the complexity of the melodies as a representation of New Orleans's polyglot communities.

9. Name five different groups of people who made up the population of New Orleans.

**Suggested answer:** Students may respond by naming any five of the groups of people identified by the text as inhabitants of New Orleans. These include the French, the Spanish, African Americans, people from the Caribbean and Latin America, and Scandinavians and other Europeans.

10. How does jazz reflect the city of New Orleans? Support your answer with evidence from the article.

**Suggested answer:** Answers may vary, as long as they are supported by the text. For example, students may respond that the diversity of New Orleans is reflected in the many influences on jazz and its often polyphonic sound. Just as New Orleans took shape as a city populated by many different groups of people, so jazz emerged from a variety of musical genres, including opera, blues, and ragtime.