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**The Nineteenth-Century Origins of
Jazz**

By Lawrence Gushee

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THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ORIGINS OF JAZZ

LAWRENCE GUSHEE

The question of the origins of jazz has, one might well imagine, received many answers in the seventy-five years since the music burst like a rocket over the American musical landscape. The least palatable perhaps is that offered by reactionary champions of the musical originality of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band (ODJB), for example, Horst Lange. Much of his evidence is easy to dismiss, but one point at least makes us pause and think. He writes:

It was always a riddle for the serious friend of jazz, why the fabulous and legendary New Orleans jazz hadn't already been discovered around 1900 or 1910 in the city itself, since not only was it full of home-grown talent and musical professionals, but also received a constant stream of visitors and tourists. Shouldn't there have been someone, among all these people surely interested in music, who was struck by this novel music, which was later designated "jazz"? (Lange 1991, 28; my translation).

In fact, there's no question that the particular instrumentation, manner of playing, and repertory of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, decisively assisted by the superb recording technique of the Victor Talking Machine Company, were copied by hundreds of young musicians, many of whom never had visited and never would visit New Orleans.

Someone who came close to fitting Lange's music-loving visitor to New Orleans was J. Russell Robinson (1892–1963), a pianist and songwriter who had worked in that city around 1910 and was eventually to become a member of the ODJB. Many years later he recalled his reaction

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LAWRENCE GUSHEE is Professor Emeritus of Music at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His publications include contributions to *Fontes Artis Musicae*, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, and *American Music*. His book *Pioneers of Jazz: the Story of the Creole Band* is due from Oxford University Press in October.

to these recordings: first, it was a new, interesting, and exciting sound, a bit blood-curdling; second, the musicians were recognizable as nonreaders; third, jazz was nothing but ragtime, played by ear (Robinson 1955, 13). Thus the sound, while strikingly novel and surely deserving of the acclaim of Lange, was recognized by an experienced professional as being but one species of the genus, ragtime played by ear by “fakers,” to use the usual term of the day.¹

Even at the time, however, New Orleans colleagues and competitors of the ODJB fully acknowledged the debt all of them owed to African Americans. For example, Walter Kingsley reported the views of clarinetist Alcide “Yellow” Nunez:

In 1916 Brown’s Band from Dixieland came to Chicago direct from New Orleans, and with it came Tutor Spriccio. They knew all the old negro melodies with the variations taught by Spriccio. . . . This bunch from New Orleans played by ear entirely (Kingsley 1918, 867).

Then after a discussion of the “Livery Stable Blues” and the break routines for which Nunez claimed credit: “All this, however, was derived from the New Orleans blacks and John Spriccio” (867).

These statements are offered not only to refute Lange’s revisionism, but as one more illustration—Is one needed?—of the pervasive bias that constantly obscures investigation of the contributions of African Americans. Spriccio has a name, but not the “old negroes” or the “New Orleans blacks.”

As is often the case, things look different from the other side of the color line. It is interesting to go back to what seems to have been the first published attempt by an African-American native of New Orleans to plumb the mystery of the origin of jazz. The year was 1933, the author E. Belfield Spriggins, social editor of the *Louisiana Weekly*. He wrote, under the title “Excavating Local Jazz”:

For quite some years now there has been an unusual amount of discussion concerning the popular form of music commonly called “jazz.” . . . Many years ago jazz tunes in their original forms were heard in the Crescent City. Probably one of the earliest heard was one played by King Bolden’s Band. . . . The rendition of this number became an over night sensation and the reputation of Bolden’s band became a household word with the patrons of the Odd Fellows Hall, Lincoln and Johnson Parks, and several other popular dance halls around the city (Spriggins 1933, 6).

1. Or *routiniers*, to use the somewhat less derogatory and more descriptive French term. The fact that orchestral ragtime was undoubtedly played by ear in many parts of the country accounts for many musicians’ rejection of New Orleans’s claim to originating jazz.

The tune in question was "Funky Butt"—the unexpurgated text of which Spriggins was unwilling to print. More widely known as "Buddy Bolden's Blues," as copyrighted by Jelly Roll Morton, this was a descendant or a cousin of the second strain of the 1904 rag "St. Louis Tickle," which, though designated a rag, is clearly a different species from Scott Joplin's compositions.

Be that as it may, Spriggins makes no unqualified claim for the priority of Buddy Bolden, hedging his remarks with a caution that was to be lost in succeeding years, as in the designation of Bolden as "First Man of Jazz" (Marquis 1978). Still, there seems to be no question that his band made an unforgettable impression, not always to the good, on many of those who heard it around 1905.

Other expert witnesses would come up with different candidates for the position of giant of early jazz. Guitarist Johnny St. Cyr (1890–1966) remembered toward the end of his life that

Every band had their specialties that they played hot, one out of every five or six selections. . . . But the Golden Rule band played everything hot, . . . they were the original hot band that I knew. . . . [Bolden was] not hot, just ordinary, but he had a little hot lick he used. To me he was not as hot as the Golden Rule Band (St. Cyr 1966, 6).

Cross-examination of the witnesses being out of the question, there is ample room for the free play of preconceptions and foregone conclusions in preferring one bit of evidence over another. But there seems to be no reason to doubt that at least by 1905 some bands, whether Bolden's, the Golden Rule, or some other, were playing a music that we might consider an ancestor of jazz. To be sure, St. Cyr was not of an age to testify to bands, events, and sounds much earlier than that.

Stymied by the mortality of our informants, we might well consider another strategy: instead of carrying things backwards as far as we can, perhaps we might begin early in the nineteenth century and advance toward 1900, thus cornering the elusive quarry.

This was the intention of Henry Kmen, a historian whose pioneering work on music and musical life in New Orleans up to 1841 has contributed much to the field. But until I reread his book in preparation for this discussion, the degree to which he thought of his own work as a prelude to the history of jazz had escaped me.

Although he could find comparatively little evidence for music making by African Americans, in his final chapter Kmen was able to cite an impressive list of activities which provided him justification for a startling and provocative concluding paragraph.

Is it not here, . . . in the whole overpowering atmosphere of music in New Orleans that the Negro began to shape the music that would eventually be Jazz? Certainly all these strands were a part of his life, and if to the weaving of them he brought something of his own, it was as an American rather than as an African. Or so it seems to this writer (Kmen 1966, 245; note capital “J”).

From this point of view, every musical activity of the African American in antebellum as well as postbellum New Orleans could be considered part of the prehistory of jazz. This seems to fit David Fischer’s description of the “fallacy of indiscriminate pluralism”:

It appears in causal explanations where the number of causal components is not defined, or their relative weight is not determined or both. . . . [It is] an occupational hazard of academic historians, who are taught to tell comprehensive truths (Fischer 1970, 175–176).

There is also a categorical problem, namely that a variety of social activities involving music are seen as ancestors of a distinctive kind of music, something Kmen seems to recognize: “The method used is that of the social historian. Which is to say, the book is not concerned with the structure and development of the music itself—that is left for the musicologist” (Kmen 1966, viii).

No small challenge, particularly given the inadequacy of notated music in indicating the distinctive features of music of the oral tradition. To be sure, thanks to Dena Epstein (1977) one can consult hundreds of verbal descriptions of antebellum African-American musical practices in the United States generally, most of them from the Southern states. But these are often too vague for us to imaginatively reconstruct the sounds the writer heard; none of the thirty-odd references to New Orleans or Louisiana appear to describe specific practices that might be related to the hot or ratty² ragtime played around 1900.

Likewise for the few instances of local practice reflected in musical notation: the “Creole songs” that Louis Moreau Gottschalk used for some of his piano pieces presumably are a sampling of music he heard in the New Orleans of the 1830s. Charming and historically important, but no more nor less an ancestor of jazz than some of the raggy banjo pieces transcribed or collected by Dan Emmett (Nathan 1962, 340–348).

On the other hand, the rhythms notated in the seven songs in Creole dialect which conclude Allen, Ware, and Garrison’s pioneering ([1867] 1951) collection of slave songs sound to me more pertinent. They seem distinctively West Indian in their various ways of singing five notes in the

2. The slang term “ratty” is commonly used to describe “hot” music or the older ragtime style or a kind of “strutting walk” (see Russell 1978, 7+; Rose 1974, 177; Merriam-Webster 1986, 1871).

time of four. In strong contrast to the rest of the collection, the songs are also all secular, and a case can be made for the "urban" character of three or four of them, despite their having been collected on Good Hope Plantation in St. Charles Parish—or rather because of having been collected there, a half-day's journey or less from the metropolis. Also of great interest is the fact that the first four of the songs, those which, in fact, could be said to have West Indian rhythms, were danced to "a simple dance, a sort of minuet, called the *Coon jai*; the name and the dance are probably both of African origin" (113).

We know, of course, that at the outset and for decades to follow jazz was functionally music for dancing. Nothing was more clear to Henry Kmen than this, and surely it was the reason why he began his work with chapters on dancing. But he conveys virtually no details concerning the participation of African-American musicians in what, after all, would have been the bread and butter of the professional musician.

Kmen terminated his history at 1841, a fact all the more regrettable because of the great shift in social dance style—and its accompanying music—which took place in the 1840s and 1850s all over urban Europe and America, North and South. The change was not only a shift from the quadrille, cotillion, and contradance to the closed couple dances of waltz, polka, and the other new dances to follow in their wake (mazurka, redowa, etc.), but also of social meaning, well described by Jean-Michel Guilcher:

It's true that dancing remained a pleasure. But the nature of the pleasure has changed. Under the Consulate and the Empire, any personal expression, whatever amplitude it may take, was within the social forms inherited from the past. After 1840, the closed couple dance took over. Although other periods had already given much room to the expression of the couple, none allowed it to take on the character it was now to assume. The series of courantes and minuets had expressed at the same time both solidarity and hierarchy. . . . The waltz and the polka made no pretense at expressing anything whatever. Closed in on itself, the couple dances for itself alone, . . . the ball no longer manifested unanimous agreement; it juxtaposed solitudes (Guilcher 1969, 173–174; my translation).

This new configuration of dances was to last until the century's end. Already challenged by the two-step circa 1895, it was definitively replaced by a cluster of new dances around 1910. Of this, more below.

There is clearly much work to be done in continuing the story of music in New Orleans after 1841. My own research into music for dancing begins some twenty years later, with a few tentative forays into the massive city archives held by the New Orleans Public Library. As an example of what can be learned, one might cite a ledger of permits issued in 1864

by the acting military mayor, which included some 150 licenses for balls, private parties, and soirées between January 1 and March 12. Included are the names of the licensees, the locations of the events, whether wines were permitted, the ending time, whether the event was masked or not, and whether it was “colored.” A good many of the balls are so designated, but more important, perhaps, a number of entrepreneurs are African American, still designated “free persons of color” as the Thirteenth Amendment was not to take effect for nearly two more years. These entrepreneurs were A. J. Brooks, Paul Porée, Eugene Joseph, and John Hall; those often sponsoring “colored” balls were Emile Segura, Madame Charles (patroness of the quadron balls), Benjamin Graham, Aaron Allen, Benjamin Colburn, J. J. Bouseau, Josephine Brown, and John Reed. It appears that similar documents have not been saved, except for several after 1900.

We do not need these data to show that New Orleans was a dancing city—a long-established fact—but the fact that African Americans were so much involved in the *business* end is most interesting. Did such entrepreneurship entail substantial employment for African-American musicians? Did it continue following Reconstruction in a city increasingly repressive of its African-American population?

Another kind of documentation to consider is offered by the five extant post-Civil War censuses, 1870 to 1910. One assumes that the majority of African Americans calling themselves musicians were earning most of their money playing dance music.³

Of the 222 musicians, teachers of music, and practitioners of the music trades enumerated in the 1870 census, 44 percent were of German, Austrian, or Swiss birth, 15 percent French, 10 percent Italian; in all, including some smaller groups, a staggering 80 percent were of foreign birth and only 20 percent were born in the United States. Of this small fraction three were black, seven mulatto, and one is listed as white, but is known to be African American. The African-American musicians then, although making a poor showing overall—that is, about 5 percent—make up about a quarter of this native-born contingent.

The passage of one decade from 1870 to 1880 made a great difference. There is a substantial overall increase in the number of musicians, but also a drastic shift in favor of the native-born. The total of all foreign-born musicians is at this point a mere 45 percent, now overtaken by the 55 percent born on North American soil. (It is interesting that only 4 percent of the 55 percent were *not* from the South.) Much of this change is account-

3. There is, to be sure, a difficulty involved in using census data as evidence for the practice of music. Some of those who are enumerated as musicians may have frequently practiced another trade, depending on the season of the year and the state of the economy.

ed for by the fact that somewhere between fifty and sixty individual musicians or music teachers were African American, a number that remains more or less constant for the next twenty years, although the overall total of musicians increases by 25 percent.⁴

The 1910 census marked a dramatic change from those of 1890 and 1900. While the overall total of male musicians and music teachers increased by a striking 33 percent, the number of African Americans doubled, thus forming 30 percent of the total. Perhaps the ragtime craze was good for the African-American musician.

The story of musical opportunity told by the census—or rather, the story it allows us to tell—is amply confirmed by the complaint of a New Orleans correspondent to the trade magazine *Metronome* at the end of 1888: “We have here some twenty to twenty-five bands averaging twelve men apiece. The colored race monopolize the procession music to a great extent as they are not regular workers at any trade, as are most of the white players, no musical merit in any of these.” It would be easy to assume that the writer meant this derogatory remark to apply to the “colored” bands, but it is possible that he means it to apply to the twenty to twenty-five bands, as he goes on to say: “We have only one really fine military band, that is the one at West End” (*Metronome* December 1888, 14).

It is, to be sure, only too common for African Americans to be treated as a stereotyped group by the nineteenth-century press. While we are beginning to remedy this by painstaking sifting of city directories, census returns, license registers, and other primary source materials, such names are, as it were, “faceless” and otherwise unremarkable.

Someone who is far from faceless is Basile Barés (1845–1902), band-leader to New Orleans society of the 1870s and perhaps later. Disappointingly, his nearly thirty dance compositions lack—to my ears—any of those novel and vigorous rhythms beginning to show up in music published in Cuba or Brazil. No pre-rag, no proto-habanera; just excellently crafted dance music or *morceaux de salon*.

There is no necessity, of course, that such exotic traits appear only or principally in works by African Americans. It was not the free persons of color who embodied “characteristic” rhythms in their antebellum works

4. The overall total of musicians and music teachers increased by leaps and bounds between 1880 and 1910: this was largely due to the increase in the number of female music teachers, very few of whom were known as professional musicians. For the complete list of African-American musicians in the 1880 census as well as a provisional comparative table of decennial census numbers, see Gushee (1991, 61–62). The publication of this essay was unauthorized; additional research conducted between the original submission and eventual publication could have corrected or augmented much of the biographical data presented, as well as the census statistics presented.

for the piano, but Louis Moreau Gottschalk. One also fails to find “characteristic” traits in the early works of the African-American Lawrence Dubuclet (1866–1909) who, in a manner of speaking, takes the torch from Barés, still writing waltzes, polkas, and mazurkas in the 1880s, then adapting to changing fashion and writing cakewalks, marches, and two-steps in the 1890s,⁵ and finally moving to Chicago after 1900 to pursue a more cosmopolitan career than was feasible in his native city.

What are we looking for, after all, in written music? Think for a moment of the several ways in which the new idiom of blues made tentative appearances in popular song and piano music for at least fifteen years before the minor blues explosion of 1912. Blues traits, however, stick out like the proverbial sore thumb in certain idiosyncratic harmonic progressions, phrase structures, and melodic turns. For that matter, the syncopations that characterize cakewalks and rags are equally obvious. Here too, there is a long period of preparation in which what we might call “proto-ragtime” syncopation pops up, often together with pentatonic melody, both of them no doubt going back to the minstrel shows of 1840—and of course before that in oral tradition. But jazz lacks such easily transcribable and readily recognized distinctive features. We surely need to keep looking; it would be a great help if we had an authoritative bibliography of New Orleans music imprints before 1900.⁶

Surely, to ask Lange’s question again with a change of venue, if there had been some kind of striking African-American music in New Orleans in these postbellum years, some visitor would have attempted a description in a diary, a letter home, a travel book, or some other means that would make up for the lack of traces in published music. One immediately thinks of the extraordinary Greek-born Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904), who during his stint as a reporter in Cincinnati in the late 1870s wrote exceptionally detailed descriptions of roustabout songs and dancing in Ryan’s dance-house, a riverfront dive (Hearn 1924, 161–164).

5. I compare his probable first composition, the self-published waltz “Bettina” of 1886 (dedicated “to my professor signor Giovanni Luciani”), followed by his op. 2 of the same year, “Les yeux doux” (also self-published), with his op. 7, the “World’s Fair March” of 1893, and the march and two-step “The Belle of the Carnival” (1897).

6. We ought not limit ourselves to published music, per se. G. F. Patton’s exhaustive *A Practical Guide to the Arrangement of Band Music* (1875) can surely be seen as reflecting the best New Orleans practice, as the author acknowledges the professional assistance of New Orleanians Robert Meyer, John Eckert, and Charles Bothe. Also, Patton cites as an example of an interpolated passage in another key, the “Washington Artillery Polka,” “a well known Polka Quickstep played by all the New Orleans bands” (Patton 1875, 29). Patton further devotes some forty pages to the various genres of dance music, if we needed any convincing that brass bands counted playing for dances among their manifold functions; and the comprehensive discussion of the functions of the second cornet part might almost have been written with Louis Armstrong in mind. There are no references, however, to African Americans.

Hearn moved to New Orleans in 1877, where he remained for some ten years. One could hardly ask for a better observer: Hearn, a European, was enthralled by folklore and sympathetic to people of color; not only that, his dear friend was the critic and musicologist Henry Krehbiel, who published the first book on African-American folksong in 1913. In response to his friend, who was even then fascinated with the folk music of black Americans, Hearn wrote a number of letters reporting what he heard in New Orleans.

One observation in particular has been widely cited. Hearn wrote in a letter of 1881: "Did you ever hear negroes play the piano by ear? There are several curiosities here, Creole negroes. Sometimes we pay them a bottle of wine to come here and play for us. They use the piano exactly like a banjo. It is good banjo-playing, but no piano-playing" (quoted in Bisland 1906, 232).⁷

And then there is what must be the most evasive will o' the wisp to investigators of the prehistory of jazz. Walter Kingsley (1876–1929), a press agent for the Palace Theatre in New York City, was quick to discuss the jazz phenomenon which had taken the metropolis by storm, contributing an article to the *New York Sun*, August 5, 1917, headlined "Whence Comes Jass? Facts from the Great Authority on the Subject." His fateful words were:

In his studies of the creole patois and idiom in New Orleans Lafcadio Hearn reported that the word "jaz," meaning to speed things up, to make excitement, was common among the blacks of the South and had been adopted by the Creoles as a term to be applied to music of a rudimentary syncopated type.

You can imagine how many hours have been spent by how many people, plowing through the voluminous published writings of Hearn in an attempt to nail down this earth-shattering remark—with nothing to show for it, alas. Although it seems that the remark might be found in Hearn's (1885) dictionary of creole proverbs, "*Gombo Zhèbes*," it is not there.⁸ It is possible, however, that Hearn conveyed such information to Krehbiel in a letter, or even in conversation, the few times that he was in New York. And it is possible that Kingsley knew Krehbiel.⁹

7. Surely these "curiosities," whom Hearn had taken the trouble to ask to leave their normal place of business for the purpose of demonstrating their art, had names.

8. Hearn states in his introduction that he was "wholly indebted" to Professor William Henry, principal of the Jefferson Academy of New Orleans, for the Louisiana proverbs included, as well as a number of explanatory notes and examples of the local patois.

9. It is unfortunate that Krehbiel's books and papers, in principle preserved after his death in 1923, seem to have been dispersed. Some are at the New York Public Library; but no such statement by Hearn has yet been found in those documents that are available. In

But one of the lessons we have finally learned from jazz history is that New Orleans musicians did not know that their music was called “jazz” until they went north. Certainly many of them said so; here and there, however, in the interviews collected by Russell and Allen, now held in the William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University, the contrary is stated. For example, Eddie Dawson—a professional musician from about 1905 on—asserts that the term was first used in bands around the time he began and was only applied to music (Dawson 1959).¹⁰ Similarly, Tom Albert, a violinist born in 1877, maintained that “in the real old days they called it jazz and ragtime. . . . There wasn’t any real difference between ragtime bands and the jazz bands. . . . Jazz was [the term] used mostly though” (Albert 1959, reel 2 digest, p. 6).

To return to Hearn after this substantial digression, one might hope that someone with such broad and unfettered tastes as his, and with such a musically knowledgeable and curious friend as Krehbiel, would tell us something about how African-American musicians played dance music in New Orleans in the 1880s. In the first place, Hearn seems not to have been much of a partygoer. Second, and far more consequential, he was not, I think, fond of Creole music that he perceived as strongly Europeanized. For example, in a letter written to Krehbiel just before he left Martinique after a first brief trip in 1887, Hearn states:

My inquiries about the marimba and other instruments have produced no result except the discovery that our negroes play the guitar, the flute, the flageolet, the cornet-à-piston. Some play very well; all the orchestras and bands are coloured. But the civilized instrument has killed the native manufacture of aboriginalities. The only hope would be in the small islands, or where slavery still exists, as in Cuba (quoted in Bisland 1906, 411).

Still, we can not rule out the possibility that African or West Indian rhythms were largely absent from the New Orleans dance music of the 1880s. One remark, from an 1887 letter to Krehbiel, seems to support this: “My friend Matas has returned. He tells me delightful things about Spanish music, and plays for me. He also tells me much concerning Cuban and Mexican music. He says these have been very strongly affected by African influence—full of *contretemps*” (quoted in Bisland 1906, 380). What an opportunity for Hearn to add, “just like I’ve heard here in New Orleans”! Or for that matter, such a comment might have come from

addition, despite the many books and essays that have been devoted to Hearn and his voluminous correspondence, some letters are still unpublished and others have reached print in censored form.

10. Manuel Marietta, also present at the interview and a professional who began at about the same time as Dawson, averred that older bands from uptown were called “ragtime” bands and were later called “Dixieland” bands.

Rudolph Matas (1860–1957), himself a New Orleans native. No such confirmation occurs, however, despite the fad for Mexican music, which was at the time in full swing after having been triggered by the appearance of various groups of Mexican musicians at the Cotton Exposition of 1884–1885 (Stewart 1991). Alas, when Hearn wrote his essays—well over 100,000 words—about his eighteen-month stay in Martinique, he made but one solitary reference to New Orleans, that having to do with architecture (Hearn 1890, 36).

Nevertheless, there is an inherent plausibility to the notion that New Orleans was receptive to all kinds of “Latin” music, perhaps because of geographical proximity as much as traditional ethnic preferences. The New Orleans composer W. T. Francis, visiting New York City in 1889 and commenting on the differing musical tastes in the United States, had this to say:

It does not seem to be a matter of states or divisions of the land, but rather of particular localities. New York, Boston, Chicago, New Orleans, Brooklyn, Philadelphia and Baltimore are the best music centers of the east; San Francisco and Denver in the west. . . . Among the cities named, there is a great difference in their preferences regarding the style of music they will patronize. The two most widely differing cities in this regard are Boston and New Orleans. In the former, everything runs to classical music. . . . In New Orleans, the most popular music is that which is marked by melody. As a result, every new song and dance which appears in Paris, Madrid, Florence, Vienna, or Berlin appears in [New Orleans] anywhere from six months to two years before it is heard in [Boston]. Another interesting result is that you can listen in New Orleans to the melodic music of the Spanish nations. . . . It would seem as if the love of melody decreases as you come north from the gulf of Mexico and reaches its smallest development when it encounters the northern tier of the states of the union.

Francis here suggests two favorite themes in discussions of the nineteenth century origins of jazz. I will call one the “French Opera hypothesis” and the other the “Spanish tinge hypothesis,” both of them accounting for a love of lyrical expressiveness in music, but the second specifically accounting for the presence in New Orleans of Caribbean or Mexican rhythms.

This is not all Francis had to say in the New York interview. He goes on to state a seductive theory that can account for much of what has taken place in the development of American vernacular music since 1890, not just New Orleans music or jazz:

The rewards of music are far larger in the north than in the south. In the latter, they are regarded as a necessity and paid for, as most necessities are, in small amounts of money. In the north they are classed with luxuries, and are

paid for in accordance. Business principles alone will, therefore, soon compel the production of southern music in the north, if merely for the sake of testing its commercial value. When once heard, I am certain that the northern public will want it a second time ("New Orleans Taste in Music" 1890).

To be sure, this is no theory of origin. But at least it is conceivable that there never would have been such a thing as jazz without the economic force that brought it to the ears of the wider American public.

We may eventually find another musician, not necessarily or perhaps not even preferably an American, who describes specific musical practices which we can reasonably see as like or leading to jazz. In 1917 the Music Teachers' National Association held its thirty-ninth annual meeting in New Orleans. Among the speakers was Walter Goldstein, a music teacher at Newcomb College who was born in New York in 1882 and graduated from Tulane in 1903. His contribution was entitled "The Natural Harmonic and Rhythmic Sense of the Negro." It had been Goldstein's intention to illustrate some of his points with "the singing of a quartet of Negroes. . . . [B]ut the unreliability of our dark brother in the matter of keeping an appointment has made this impossible." Accordingly, he had recourse to Victor record 16448 by the Fisk University Quartet (Goldstein 1918, 38–39). The author's opening words are poignant:

It is only a desire to "do my bit," rather than any special fitness for the task, that has led me to accept the appointment to make an investigation into the harmonic and rhythmic talent of the Negro as I find him here in his natural environment. . . . It is not very easy, as I have learned in the last two months, to get very near to the primitive Negro, in a large city like this, but the attempt has been something of a lark, and I have run the gamut all the way from being the unexpected orator at a Sunday service of the most aristocratic Negro congregation in the city, to being ordered off the public docks as a German spy with incendiary motives (29).

He did get around a bit—for example, to the biweekly sacrament service of the Gretna Colored Baptist Church as well as to St. James AME Church—and had a few interesting things to say, particularly in describing ragtime—but not a whisper about jazz. The situation of being surrounded by a vibrant new music and not hearing it is in hindsight almost inconceivable to us; on reflection, though, it is just one more testimony to the power of received categories to mold our perceptions, unless, of course, the usual run of dance music was not anything special, and the unusual—that is, hot ragtime and blues with a local accent—rather rare. Perhaps this is another instance of what we could call the "Lange problem."

Bringing ragtime into the picture may seem to offer clarification to the beginnings of jazz, inasmuch as we know when ragtime began. But actually we know nothing of the sort; all we know is when ragtime sheet music in its various forms began being published in Chicago and New York and, consequently, everywhere in the country, not to speak of Western Europe. But just as the origins of jazz become fuzzy once we begin looking for jazz *before* jazz, so it is with ragtime. A couple of explanations offered by knowledgeable African-American musicians close to the events may illustrate the complexities of the question.

First, Will Foster, writing in the *Indianapolis Freeman* in 1911 under the pseudonym of Juli Jones Jr., contributed a fascinating article on the "great colored song writers":

The success of the Mobile buck found its way to the river cities on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, when steamboats held sway in this country. . . . Sometime along in the early eighties a triple combination of song, walk and dance by the name of "Coon Jine, Baby, Coon Jine," sprang up among the roustabouts on the many boats and spread like wildfire. The song and dance found its way into the levee resorts, where all prosperous houses had old hand-me-down square pianos with a half dozen broken keys; yet these instruments were considered jewels in those days, as it only required a few keys to play the "Coon Jine." This is where the original ragtime started from—the quick action of the right-hand fingers playing the "Coon Jine" (Jones 1911).

While this kind of single-origin theory is obviously inadequate to explain a multifaceted phenomenon like ragtime in general, it nonetheless singles out a particular dance song with a complex history that may, in fact involve New Orleans (see, e.g., Krehbiel 1962, 116, 121, 138). One imagines that Heam's "Creole Negroes" who played the piano like the banjo had "Coon Jine" in their repertory.

Another witness to his time, the eminent composer Will Marion Cook (1869–1944), contributed a brief overview, "Negro Music," to the *New York Age* seven years later. He singled out the period 1875–1888 as one of stagnation because the Negro had been taught too well by whites that he was inferior. "About 1888 [1898 is what was printed] marked the starting and quick growth of the so-called 'rag-time.' As far back as 1875 Negroes in questionable resorts along the Mississippi had commenced to evolve this musical figure, but at the World's Fair in Chicago, 'ragtime' got a running start and swept the Americas, next Europe, and today the craze has not diminished" (Cook 1918).¹¹

11. Much of the content of the *New York Age* article had already been printed in Cary B. Lewis's column in the *Chicago Defender* of May 1, 1915. The latter source gives 1888 instead of 1898, clearly erroneous in view of the other dates mentioned.

Actually, Cook had expounded his views on the matter some twenty years earlier, with a rather different slant. His article was intended as a refutation of the proposition that Negro music, as exemplified by such "ephemeral clap-trap compositions as 'The New Bully,' 'A Hot Time in the Old Town,' 'All Coons Look Alike to Me,' was degenerate, when compared with the soul-stirring slave melodies." He says:

One special characteristic of these songs is the much advertised "rag" accompaniment, the origin and character of which will be discussed later on in this article. . . . This kind of movement, which was unknown until about fifteen years ago, grew out of the visits of Negro sailors to Asiatic ports, and particularly to those of Turkey, when the odd rhythms of the *dance du ventre* soon forced itself upon them; and in trying to reproduce this they have worked out the "rag."

During the World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago, the "Midway Plaisance" was well filled with places of amusement where the peculiar music of the "muscle dance" was continually heard, and it is worthy of note that after that time the popularity of the "rag" grew with astonishing rapidity and became general among Negro pianists (Cook 1898).¹²

One wonders whether this bit of history was cooked up by the author or taken from another source. To us it seems fanciful; perhaps it was the obtrusiveness of the drum rhythms traditionally accompanying belly dancing that caught Cook's ear.¹³

Neither Foster nor Cook mentions New Orleans, except by implication, the city being the southern terminus of what might be called levee low-life culture.¹⁴ We must look further for early evidence specifically linking New Orleans to ragtime or proto-ragtime. Although they are not extensively trained musicians like Francis and Goldstein, nor articulate in the

12. The article was evidently reprinted from *The Prospect*, an Afro-American monthly of sixty-four pages, published in New York City, the first and perhaps last issue of which appeared in April 1898. No copy is extant; more's the pity, as the original article appears to have had musical examples that are missing in the Springfield newspaper.

13. That Cook was not the only musician to be struck by such a connection is shown in the piano medley "Pasquila" by W. J. Voges. (It is easily available in Baron 1980). While somewhat tame by the standards for rhythmic complexity established by Joplin and others from 1898 onward, it nonetheless is noteworthy for the insistence and variety of its cake-walk rhythms and for the inscriptions over the several sections: "Hot Stuff," "Good Thing, Push It Along." The strain entitled "Koochie-Koochie Dance" is indeed a version of the ubiquitous melody and makes prominent use of ♪♪♪ syncopation (in ¾ meter)

14. Interesting in this regard is the 1906 song "Don't Go Way Nobody," often mentioned as part of the repertory of Buddy Bolden's band. The crudely drawn cover depicts a levee scene in the background, in accordance with Percy Cahill's lyrics: "I've worked out on the levee front,/Right in the boiling sun;/I've worked on every steamboat too,/That ever dare to run./Worked at the docks, from morn 'till night,/And burnt out lots of men;/When the whistle blew to knock off,/The boss would yell out then: Don't go way nobody, don't nobody leave."

manner of Hearn, one might well think that the “old-timers” interviewed principally by Bill Russell and Dick Allen for the Hogan Jazz Archives would tell us a lot about the hot or ratty ragtime of their youth. Certainly the interviewers asked a lot of the right questions: What kind of band did you play in when you began? What were some of the tunes you played early on? When did you first hear the blues? and so on. The biggest limitation in using this testimony as evidence for the beginning of jazz is that, by the time the project was funded and under way, very few musicians born around 1880 or before, those whose professional careers had begun before the turn of the century, were available to bear witness to the early days.

Be that as it may, certain particulars are heard over and over again: the oldest interviewees quite frequently first played in or were impressed by three- or four-piece string bands—such as violin, guitar, and string bass, or mandolin, guitar, and bass—with or without one wind instrument. Accordingly, their first instrument was often mandolin or guitar. Drums started to be used in larger dance orchestras only around 1900. Pianos entered the picture as orchestra instruments even later. The oldest interviewees were accustomed to playing polkas, mazurkas, schottisches, lancers, and varieties (these last two set dances were subspecies of the quadrille). The first blues came in around 1905, with, for example, “Make Me a Pallet on the Floor.” Finally, there was a notable generation gap between the older musicians, who would not tolerate playing by ear or deviating from the notes as written, and the young turks of 1900. To the older, conservative generation belonged such musicians as cornetist George Moret, who was remembered with praise by Louis Armstrong, and the two fraternal clarinetists, Luis Tio and Lorenzo Tio Sr.¹⁵

There remains little doubt that important changes in instrumentation and repertory took place around 1900, give or take some number of years. This conclusion is amply supported by changes in clarinet performing style between, say, Alphonse Picou, born in 1879, and “Big Eye” Louis Delille Nelson, born sometime between 1880 and 1885. Or between that of George Baquet, born in 1881, and his younger brother Achille, born in 1885. Remarkably, all four men left recordings that surely speak louder than any verbal statements. For research purposes, the interviewers found Picou difficult to reach and an “unproductive” source; Big Eye was long on anecdotes, but short on information; George Baquet, potentially an exceptionally rich source of data and musical insight, had died in 1949;

15. The greatest lack in the collection is of interviews from older white musicians, as well as from musicians who have little or no identification with jazz. On some points, indeed, the latter might be helpful witnesses, being less inclined to take ragtime, blues, and jazz for granted.

and his brother, approached in Los Angeles in the late 1930s, rebuffed his would-be interviewer.¹⁶

Given the weak representation of survivors from the turn of the century in the Tulane archive, it becomes very important to locate and interpret any earlier interviews if we are to have any hope of gaining insight into music before 1900. Particularly important are those by Russell conducted outside of the Tulane project and still untapped in any systematic way, as well as those conducted by the Belgian poet Robert Goffin. Perhaps there are others we may find if we search concertedly.

In some ways the most intriguing and frustrating of all of these earlier testimonies is a brief interview with trombonist George Filhe that was conducted for *They All Played Ragtime* (Janis and Blesh 1971). The relevant extracts are as follows:

It was a style just natural to them, and whenever I can remember, it was jazz.

* * * * *

Percy Wenrich came to N.O. (between 1908 and 1909). We played it straight and the 2nd time we'd improvise. He came running up the steps: "That was my intentions and my ideas but I could not get them out!"

* * * * *

In 1892—played [solo cornet] with Cousto & Desdunes, Cousto solo cornet, O'Neill cornet, Desdunes, violin & baritone. Played jazz, would always swing the music, that was their novelty. Solo B cornet came in then and replaced the old rotary valve E-flat cornet. They played quadrilles, schottisches, straight. Onward Brass Band. Younger musicians about 1892 began to "swing." Older men used lots of Mexican music (Filhe 1949).¹⁷

Filhe was born in 1872, a youngster compared to Sylvester Coustaut, born in 1863, but a near contemporary of Dan Desdunes, born about 1870. What did he mean by "swing" and "older musicians," and how literally should we take the date 1892? In any event, what is really interesting here is the identification of a drastic shift, from Mexican music to a new kind that, by contrast, swung. To be sure, this is both good news and bad news for those who think that some kind of "Spanish tinge" was essential in producing the New Orleans manner of playing ragtime. It is also

16. One should no doubt add Alcide Nunez (1884–1934) to this list, although his early death meant that he was never interviewed (unless one wants to count the Kingsley [1918] article that seems clearly based on an interview). Remarkably, for the clarinet, biography, recordings, and musical compositions (all four individuals mentioned have some to their credit) form a continuity against which change in musical style clearly stands out.

17. O'Neill is perhaps the father of the rather obscure violinist O'Neill Levasseur, mentioned from time to time in the Tulane interviews but also in the 1910 census as a white "musician—dancing hall" at 1558 Bienville Street.

extremely interesting to learn of Percy Wenrich's reaction. Wenrich, an excellent and very successful ragtime composer from Missouri, can be taken as another witness from the outside, testifying to the existence of a distinctive New Orleans way of playing ragtime before 1910.

Another early interview that speaks of an abrupt change comes from the highly respected and often cited cornetist, Manuel Perez, to whom Robert Goffin spoke (in French) probably in 1944, or possibly on the occasion of an earlier visit in 1941. This interview, published in French in 1946, has been unduly neglected, first because it has never been translated and second because of the creative embroidery to which Goffin was prone. Caution is clearly required.

In any event Perez was born in 1881 on Urquhart Street in the Seventh Ward. Just as he was beginning to learn trumpet, at age twelve, there was a

syncopated evolution. Vocal groups composed of young creoles, or even of whites, such as those of the spasmband, retained the rhythmic aspect of all the badly digested music. . . . At this time, his teacher, a certain Constant ["Coustaut"] who lived on St. Philip Street had nothing but contempt and mockery for the "fakers" who went around from street to street. Two musicians were popular among the creoles and had a great influence on the young generation: Lorenzo Tio and Doublet. Perez remembers that after 1895, even though they usually played polkas and schottisches, they [i.e., Tio and Doublet] let themselves be tempted by the infatuation of the audiences and went along with the new music. They constituted the link . . . between popular music and ragtime (Goffin 1946, 69–70).

There's a lot more in this interview, but I have singled out this passage because of Perez's emphatic focus on the brief period 1893–1895 and on two specific musicians of the older school, Lorenzo Tio and Doublet.

Both Lorenzo Tio Sr. and Charles Doublet were born in 1867 and were in fact cousins through the Hazeur family (Kinzer 1993). They appear to have begun operating under the name of Big Four String Band in 1887, although they soon were being advertised as "Tio & Doublet's Orchestra or String Band." Their last known advertisement comes from February 23, 1895, among the precious fragments of the *Crusader* so meticulously reassembled and dated by Lester Sullivan and held in Special Collections, Xavier University. On that Saturday night just before Mardi Gras, they played for a grand masquerade ball at Francs-Amis Hall on North Robertson Street.

It was gratifying to learn of the survival of some documents of the Société des Jeunes Amis, a benevolent society similar to the Francs-Amis, particularly in that the membership consisted significantly of persons descended from the old caste of free people of color. In the report of the

finance committee for 1890, there is a payment of \$30.00, dated September 8, 1890, to Fabregas for music, then a similar payment three months later of \$28.00. It seems likely that "Fabregas" is the Frequito Fabregas, enumerated in the 1880 census as a nineteen-year-old white musician born in Louisiana of Spanish parents.

It is at least worth suggesting that the *Jeunes Amis* were thus demonstrating their taste in music, of a sort which, according to Filhe (1949), was soon to be replaced. There is no way to know, of course, whether Fabregas and his musicians—the orchestra must have been relatively large to judge from the payment—played Latin music. It is also worth noting that among their membership of over two hundred, the society included a number of eminent musicians, most notably William Nickerson and Daniel Desdunes (*Société des Jeunes Amis* Collection, Box 25-6).

Of course, what we would like to have, for the *Jeunes Amis* or for any organization giving a dance, are programs or dance cards listing the types of dances or perhaps even the specific pieces. In fact, any New Orleans-centered collection of such ephemera would be welcome, whatever the source. My steps in this direction have just begun, but some of the results are worth reporting. A typical, if rather grand, sequence of dances is that from the program of the Pickwick Club's ball, February 25, 1889: overture, waltz, polka, mazurka, lancers, waltz, polka, schottische, varieties, and so on for thirty dances, concluding with, predictably, "Home Sweet Home." This is not that different from the Installation and Hop given at Turner's Hall on December 8, 1894, by the Ramblers Club, which offered grand march, waltz, polka, mazurka, varieties, waltz, polka, schottische, lancers, and so forth.

At this point it should be recalled that the most important social dance innovation of the 1890s was the two-step. In the limited number of New Orleans dance programs I have seen there is a near series (1896, 1897, 1899) from the Carnival balls of the Twelfth Night Revelers. In 1896, we find a not unusual succession of waltz, lanciers, waltz, polka, waltz, and in seventh position a *deux temps*, at this time another name for the two-step. In the remainder of the program of thirty dances, there are two more *deux temps*, along with two other innovations, the glide and the York. The 1897 ball begins with a royal march and a lancers, whereupon an unbroken alternation of waltz and two-step takes over. Gone are the polkas, mazurkas, varieties, galops, and raquets of yesteryear. This alternating pattern is quite standard for the first years of the twentieth century until probably around 1912, at which point the newly fashioned one-step would begin to overtake the two-step.¹⁸

18. One relatively late program, that of the "New Orleanser Quartett Club" at Odd

What I have not been able to find yet are any programs from African-American organizations. Finally, whatever we learn about these more formal events with printed dance cards may well be quite misleading with respect to rougher venues with unstructured or differently structured programs. It is nonetheless interesting to see that the date mentioned by Manuel Perez as the year in which Tio and Doublet allowed themselves to be enticed away from the polka and schottische is bracketed by the 1894 and 1896 programs above.

The two-step, although it was often associated at the outset with $\frac{3}{4}$ time, as in Sousa's march "The Washington Post," had become by the end of the decade the dance to which ragtime was played. To judge from the few programs I have seen, the adoption of the two-step in the Crescent City was a couple of years late, but perhaps that is to be expected. So far as rougher, rattier dancing is concerned, there is not a great deal of evidence. That kind of dancing surely existed, and it was fairly common for the old-timers of the Tulane interviews to talk about a drastic change in the character of the music and the dancing after midnight, when the more sedate folk went home to bed. But there do exist at least a couple of intriguing references, both of which give much food for thought and hints for further investigation.

The first of these is a type of news story frequently encountered all over the country during the reform years before World War I. It comes from the somewhat scruffy *New Orleans Item* of January 15, 1908, headlined "The Moral Wave Strikes New Orleans Dancing Schools":

No More Turkey Trot, a Dance Which Was Developed Into Its Highest State of Efficiency at Milneburg and Bucktown.

Signs Up "No Turkey Trotting Allowed"; "No Applause is Necessary"; "No Dancing With Hat in Hand"; "No Ungentlemanly Conduct Will Be Tolerated." At Washington Artillery Hall last evening, hundreds of couples arrived to do the turkey trot.

Brookhoven's band played "Walk Right In and Walk Right Out Again."¹⁹

This is really rather startling, since every source claims that the turkey trot was a product of San Francisco's Barbary Coast dance halls and that it made the trip East only at the beginning of 1911.

Fellows' Hall on March 9, 1909, gives two-step, polka, and mazurka nearly equal representation. It warns us to be on the lookout for variations depending on ethnicity and social level.

19. Jack Stewart was kind enough to send me this article, which had been collected by Russell Levy in his line-by-line reading of the *Item* some years ago; I had in fact seen, copied, and forgotten it about ten years ago, at a time when the last thing on my mind was the turkey trot.

Indeed it was at that time that *Variety's* New Orleans correspondent—then and for a number of years to come, O. M. Samuels—sent in an item that, if at all accurate, turns the spotlight again on 1895 or 1896, albeit not in conjunction with the two-step.²⁰ Samuels wrote:

Now that a siege of erotic dances has started in New York, it may be as well to place New Orleans on record as the home of "the Grizzly Bear," "Turkey Trot," "Texas Tommy," and "Todolo" dances. San Francisco has been receiving the questionable honor.

Fifteen years ago, at Customhouse and Franklin streets, in the heart of New Orleans' "Tenderloin," these dances were first given, at an old negro dance hall. The accompanying music was played by a colored band, which has never been duplicated. The band often repeated the same selection, but never played it the same way twice.

Dances popular in the lower strata of New Orleans society just now are the "Te-na-na," and "Bucktown Slow Drag." They, too, may find their way to the stage—authorities permitting (Samuels 1911).

The corner of Customhouse and Franklin is certainly a noteworthy address in the New Orleans dance hall directory. Between 1900 and 1915, three of its four corners were occupied, respectively, by Shoto's Honky Tonk, the 101 Ranch, and the Pig Ankle tonk; this is according to the highly knowledgeable (if sometimes erroneous) map drawn for the *Esquire Jazz Book* (Miller 1945).

It is interesting that the downtown river corner of the intersection is occupied on the map by a joint called both the "101 Ranch" and "28." The former is the more recent of the two appellations; I assume that "28" was the old street number—analogueous to the Big 25, also on Franklin Street but a bit closer to Canal Street. It is asserted that "28" was a haunt of Buddy Bolden's band (Rose and Souchon 1967, 220), and there is a couple of typically picturesque paragraphs in Bill Russell's essay in *Jazzmen* (Ramsey and Smith 1939, 34).

Samuels's stylistic observation is more than interesting, since so much of the earliest jazz on phonograph records is so little improvised. It gains credibility to the extent that it is quite unmotivated by the main point of a brief item, that is, that New Orleans had priority over San Francisco so far as the modern "erotic" dances are concerned.

These two references to the turkey trot clarify the lyrics to Ernest

20. My thanks to Bruce Vermazen who, knowing of my passionate interest in the turkey trot, called the article to my attention. Oscar Monte Samuels was born in 1885 and died in 1945 after a long career as building contractor and house-wrecker. His obituary (*New Orleans Times Picayune*, March 12, 1945, 2) states that he was recognized as an authority on the theater.



Hogan's famous song of 1895, "La Pas Ma La," which mentions, in addition to the title dance, the Bumbisha, the Saint Louis Pass, the Chicago Salute, and finally, "to the world's fair and do the Turkey Trot."²¹

Samuels broke another lance for the honor of New Orleans five years later, when jazz was on its way to becoming a national mania. In so doing, he gave support to the notion that the music called "jazz" could not be exchanged for all New Orleans ragtime, but was a new phase of it. His dispatch appeared under the "Cabaret" rubric in the November 3, 1916, issue of *Variety*:

Chicago's claim to originating "Jazz Bands" and "Balling the Jack" are as groundless, according to VARIETY's New Orleans correspondent, as "Frisco"'s assumption to be the locale for the first "Todolo" and "Turkey Trot" dances. Little negro tots were "Ballin' the Jack" in New Orleans over ten years ago, and negro roustabouts were "Turkey Trotting" and doing the "Todolo" in New Orleans as far back as 1890, he says. "Jazz Bands" have been popular there for over two years, and Chicago cabaret owners brought entertainers from that city to introduce the idea. New Orleans' "Brown Skin" dance is also to be instituted in the Windy City shortly, is the claim (Samuels 1916).

And so we are back where we started, both to the Original Dixieland Jazz Band and to the roustabouts who made the New Orleans levee one of the wonders of nineteenth-century America. Except that there is the perplexing remark, "over two years," which would take us back so far as jazz is concerned to early 1914, a date that may correspond to stylish New Orleans's somewhat tardy embrace of a turkey trot (and similar dances) that had managed to rise above their humble origins in Bucktown or in the unnamed dance hall at Customhouse and Franklin.

I have suggested that the *onmium-gatherum* approach of the esteemed Henry Kmen and others in his footsteps is too indiscriminate. I have suggested that, while it is obvious that what the country came to know as jazz in 1917 came out of ragtime dance music as it was played in New

21. Hogan's piece was preceded in print by Irving Jones's "Possumala Dance or My Honey" (1894), which has quite different lyrics and melody. It does in fact, bear a startling likeness to some of Ben Harney's songs, which were soon to become extremely popular. There is one point of perhaps far-fetched resemblance. Whereas Irving Jones's song repeats the rhythm  in the voice part no fewer than eleven times in succession, Hogan's piece has in virtually every measure of the accompaniment, verse and chorus alike, the rhythm . There are other pieces in the orbit of Hogan's and Jones's work, e.g., New Orleans composer Sidney Perrin's "The Jennie Cooler Dance" (1898); Paul Rubens's "Rag Time Pasmala (Characteristique Two Step)" (1898); Theo H. Northrup's "Louisiana Rag Two-Step (Pas Ma La)," with the additional title-page inscription "Description of Louisiana Niggers Dancing (The Pas Ma La Rag)" (1897). No doubt there are others.

Orleans in the first years of the century, it was the abandonment of the nexus of social dances first imported from Paris in the 1840s—the polka, mazurka, schottische, quadrille, and their relatives—in the course of the 1890s (although older dancers undoubtedly still kept on asking for them even twenty years later) that was the *sine qua non* for later developments. What replaced them was a simple walking and sliding dance—the two-step—ideally suited for ragtime, but also some new sexy dances, not yet quite fit for public consumption, of which the turkey trot and its sundry relatives and variations were eventually to emerge between 1911 and 1914 to define a new era of social dance, for which jazz was the accompaniment of choice.

Such a view leaves out any consideration of the astonishing expressiveness with which New Orleans African-American musicians (and the European-American musicians they inspired) imbued their run-of-the-mill dance music. In this, indeed, the local predilection for melody, as defined by W. T. Francis above, could well have played a role. But surely in the city of *Plessy v Ferguson* there was a need somehow to speak out, in whatever way one could—even in an arena, such as social dance music, that is by definition ephemeral and frivolous but by historical circumstance endowed with imagination and eloquence.

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 Mayor's Office. Permits issued by acting military mayor.
- Société des Jeunes Amis Collection. University of New Orleans, Earl K. Long Library,
 Special Collections Department. Box 25-1-25-10.