

CHARLES HERSCH

SUBVERSIVE SOUNDS

RACE AND THE BIRTH OF JAZZ IN NEW ORLEANS



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*Race and the Birth of Jazz in
New Orleans*

CHARLES HERSCH

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*To my sons
Max and Gabriel*

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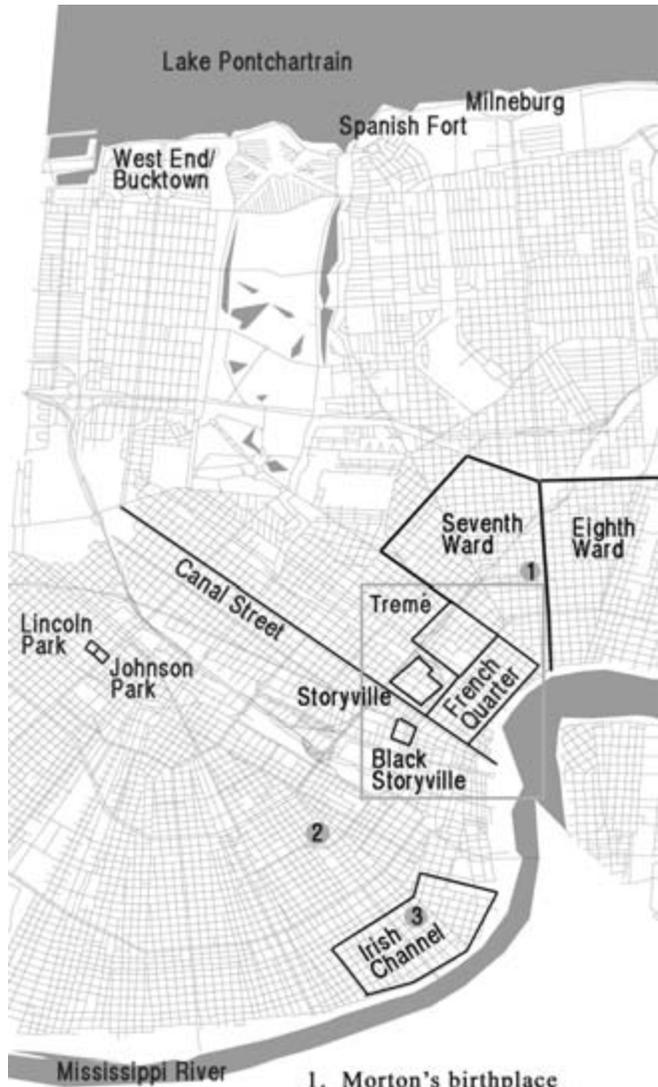
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Mississippi River

1. Morton's birthplace
2. Bolden's childhood home
3. La Rocca's birthplace



1. Congo Square
2. Economy Hall
3. Jeunes Amis Hall
4. The Frenchman's
5. The Big 25
6. The 101 Ranch
7. Funky Butt Hall
8. Armstrong's birthplace
9. Spano's
10. The Red Onion
11. Homer Plessy's shoemaker's shop
12. Artisan Hall

Opening Riff: Jelly Roll Morton's Stars and Stripes

Recalling his youth in early-twentieth-century New Orleans, Ferdinand Lamothe sits down at the piano to play that most American of marches, John Philip Sousa's "The Stars and Stripes Forever."¹ Lamothe is a mixed-race, Afro-French Creole of Color, though he has abandoned his Gallic surname in favor of Morton, he claims "for business reasons."² Like many in the underworld of the red light district—Sheep Bite, Toodlums, Gyp the Blood, Boar Hog, Dirty Dog, Sore Dick, Steel Arm Johnny, Willie the Pleaser, Okey Poke, Chicken Dick, Greasy, Knock-on-the wall, and Black Dude—the sometime pimp Morton has a nickname: Jelly Roll. Adopting such a nickname created a new identity that placed one beyond the role whites had assigned people of color, like Railroad Bill, the "conjure man" who could change his appearance whenever the law was after him. Such "bad men" frequented the "disrespectable" saloons and honky-tonks from which jazz emerged.³

Jelly Roll Morton, playing "Stars and Stripes": Creole by birth, black thanks to Jim Crow, playing a "white" song straight out of Americana. One can only imagine what it meant to Morton at the height of America's love affair with racial segregation to celebrate his country in song. Or was it his country? If he plays the song, is he accepting America's rejection of his claim to citizenship or even his humanity? Should he refuse to play it, insisting, with Frederick Douglass, that "this Fourth [of] July is *yours*, not *mine*"?⁴



Figure 3. Jelly Roll Morton at the piano with his Red Hot Peppers, including Kid Ory on trombone and Johnny St. Cyr on banjo. (Photo courtesy of the William Ransom Hogan Archive, Tulane University.)

Morton takes a different path. Rather than either refusing to play the song or playing it in a reverent, patriotic style, Morton “signifies” upon it, transforms it using African-based musical devices. Morton was a master at signifying, satirical and otherwise, singing countless lewd variations of popular songs.⁵ His most obvious transformation of “Stars and Stripes” is rhythmic. Morton syncopates the melody, moving the emphasis to the offbeats (2 and 4), and shifts the time signature from 2/4 to 4/4. His alterations loosen and lighten the tune, converting stately march music into something more African and yet more American. Sousa could not fully break away from the European models; it takes the Creole Morton to truly reclaim the music for the New World.

Morton also transforms the piece melodically through “call and response,” the most dialogic of African American musical devices. In the first chorus of “The Stars and Stripes Forever,” Morton plays jazzy responses to the written melody in the empty spaces, and in the second he adds another voice to the conversation by playing a descending bass line to accompany his “responses” to the melody. Rather than substituting a monolithic, African-based response to Sousa, Morton with these complex layers creates a dialogue that refuses to foreclose continued interaction among the strains that make up America. In short, Morton

sets up a multilayered musical conversation with his country, taking a traditional American march and turning it into jazz. Transforming the piece for people of color, Morton inserts them into mainstream American culture and simultaneously changes that culture. Morton's "Stars and Stripes" thus exemplifies jazz's Africanization of American music, a process that had begun with ragtime and, with rock and hip-hop, continues to this day.

Introduction

In New Orleans, on a summer's day in 1892, a shoemaker boarded a "white" railroad car and was arrested. Four years later, the United States Supreme Court took up the case of this man, Homer Plessy, described in the opinion of the Court as "a citizen of the United States and a resident of the state of Louisiana, of mixed descent, in proportion of seven-eighths Caucasian and one-eighth African blood [such] that the mixture of colored blood was not discernible in him."¹ In a landmark decision, the Court ruled against Plessy, placing a constitutional seal of approval on a series of Jim Crow laws meant to preserve the purity of the white race.

Plessy confronted racial purity spatially, as it were, by placing his "colored" body in a "white" space, threatening it with impurity. More fundamentally, he challenged racial purity through his very identity: though Plessy is remembered as a "black" man fighting for civil rights, he was in fact a Creole of Color, of French and African descent. He argued that since a conductor would not be able to tell that he was black, the classification into black and white train cars was unworkable. In making this argument, he called into question the binary division between the races that is still taken for granted by many today, challenging uniformity with multiplicity, purity with impurity.

New Orleans in the 1890s also saw the birth of a new music, designated "ratty" or, later, "jazz," that was also viewed as a threat to racial purity. Early attacks on jazz centered on its association with African Americans and claimed the music would produce national impurity and degeneration. As early as 1890, the *New Orleans Mascot* criticized a "nigger

band" in the tenderloin district for encouraging racial boundary crossings: "Here male and female, black and yellow, and even white, meet on terms of equality and abandon themselves to the extreme limit of obscenity and lasciviousness." Other "undesirable" ethnic and immigrant groups involved in jazz were thought to similarly taint the music, making it dangerous to "real" Americans. In a 1918 essay, Daniel Gregory Mason argued that ragtime could never really represent America because many of its composers, like Irving Berlin, were Jewish.² (He was clearly speaking of popular derivations of ragtime rather than the music of Scott Joplin and his associates.)

Jazz's opponents heard racial and ethnic mixing in the music itself, European harmonies sullied by African rhythmic and tonal devices. An 1894 *New Orleans Daily Picayune* editorial, comparing the new music to classical works, said that "it is to be regretted that something which is in itself pure and beautiful, and which is capable of inspiring the profoundest sentiments and inciting to the noblest acts, has ever been associated with that which is frivolace [sic], demoralizing and degrading. The union is wholly forced and unnatural." In short, the integrity of American culture was dependent upon ethnic purity, and keeping America ethnically pure meant protecting music from impure influences. Mason argued that just as expressions like "I reckon" pervert the English language, ragtime threatens the integrity of music. In a kind of displacement of racial issues onto musical ones, another author associated jazz with "primitive people and savages" like Chinese and Arabs and with bad grammar, contending that jazz violinists' use of the glissando muddied the cleanliness of standard pitch.³ Jazz was musical miscegenation.

In this book I argue that jazz did in fact subvert racial segregation, musically enacting and abetting Plessy's assault on white purity. At a time when racial boundaries in America were rigidifying, jazz arose out of and encouraged racial boundary crossings by creating racially mixed spaces and racially impure music, both of which altered the racial identities of musicians and listeners.

Jazz subverted sexual purity as well, for according to the *Mascot's* editorial when jazz causes the races to mix, they "abandon themselves . . . to obscenity and lasciviousness." To its critics, jazz represented an attack on traditional moral values. Newspapers and "reformers" charged that in place of hard work and sexual restraint, jazz encouraged promiscuity and hedonism. For opponents of the music, jazz embodied what Bakhtin calls the carnivalesque, the transgressing of bodily boundaries, an elevating of "lower" (literally and morally) bodily functions over "higher" ones.⁴ The music had such associations for some enthusiasts as well,