

The Original Dixieland Jazz Band's Place in the Development of Jazz.

by Jack Stewart

For many years I have been trying to understand how jazz music came into existence. During the time I worked at the New Orleans Jazz Museum in the 1960's and 1970's, this question came up endlessly. Related to this was a photograph in the Museum's collection that was taken at the WDSU television studios in the 1950's. There was a jazz band in the background and in the foreground were cornetist Nick LaRocca (1889-1961), formerly of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, and trombonist Tom Brown (1888-1958), formerly of Brown's Band From Dixie Land. (Brown's Band went to Chicago in 1915, and the ODJB predecessor group, Johnny Stein's [John Hountha (1891-1962)] band went in 1916.) LaRocca is smiling, talking, and gesticulating while Brown looks on with an angry scowl on his face. We were told by Don Perry, who was a WDSU cameraman and a New Orleans Jazz Club founding member, that right after the photo was taken, during comments on the origins of jazz by LaRocca, a fist fight broke out between the two aging musicians and had to be broken up by onlookers.

Generally, at the time, people tended to side with Tom Brown on origins issues not only because his band went to Chicago first, but because Nick Larocca's somewhat abrasive manner had given him a reputation as someone that you loved to hate. Also, Brown was still actively playing, in an attractively lazy "slush-pump" style and had built up a loyal, local fan base. However, since LaRocca was on the first jazz records, he had something going for him also.

While I first leaned toward believing Brown's origin claims, I then started looking in depth at all the claims including those of LaRocca, Jelly Roll Morton (1890-1941), Stalebread Lacombe (1885-1946) and those made by others for Buddy Bolden (1877-1931) and Freddie Keppard (1889-1933). Eventually I began to have more regard for Larocca's as I began to see that his claim was actually more modest and more specific. A serendipitous sequence of events that took place over several years led me in this direction.

The first of these occurred in August, 1976, when I mentioned to jazz historian Al Rose that my music teacher Eva Tisdale (1894-1992), who had been a silent movie organist, knew many of the early New Orleans theater musicians and composers. He was researching information on composer Al Verges (1879-1924), and he asked if I would set up a visit with her, which I did in lieu of my music lesson on the next Wednesday night at her house and studio on Woodrow St. Her sister May had been a sweetheart of composer Irwin Leclere (1890-1981) at one time and Mrs. Tisdale knew Al Verges's younger brother, composer and pianist Joe Verges (1882-1964) very well. It turned out that she had not known Al Verges. While we were there she played some ragtime pieces on the piano for us and Al Rose chatted and complimented her on her playing. Right before we were about to leave, he asked her who she first heard play jazz and she replied "the Original Dixieland Jazz Band." At the time, I was somewhat surprised and as we were leaving asked Al what he thought of this. He seemed unsurprised and said that a lot of musicians told him that,

The second event occurred in September, 1978, when I went to visit bandleader and cornetist Johnny Detroit (1892-1986) at his house on Gen. Pershing St. The reason for the visit was to let him hear the final tape for the upcoming New Leviathan Oriental Fox-Trot Orchestra LP and ask him for comments. I also hoped he could help solve some questions concerning composer Robert Hoffman for the biographies which were to be included in the liner notes. (He solved the problem by telling me that Hoffman had been married three times.) At the end of our discussion he told me to turn off the tape recorder and put it aside because he had something he wanted to tell me that he did not want recorded. He also said not to tell anybody because he would have to deny it, since he did not want to be involved in any controversy, especially at his age. However, he said he did want to tell it to me because he knew I was interested in historical matters regarding New Orleans music. I was slightly taken aback by these comments but I was by then very curious.

He then proceeded to tell me that the first band to play jazz was the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, but not until after they had left New Orleans, and that everybody in New Orleans first heard jazz on their records. This was now the second time I heard this from a New Orleans musician, and was now really astonished because it was coming from the famous, legendary Johnny Dedroit rather than from Eva Tisdale my music teacher. (Eva Tisdale was actually more famous and highly regarded than I realized at the time, having played the theater organ at many New Orleans theaters, having taught a young Al Hirt, and no one had anything other than kind remembrances of her.) I asked him what about Tom Brown, what about Buddy Bolden (1877-1931), what about all the other people? He answered that they all played ragtime. I asked him what he meant by ragtime and he said all the popular pieces that the bands played. I asked him what the local interpretation of ragtime sounded like and he said "that it was a nice lilting music if you liked that sort of thing but that it wasn't jazz." This last part is exactly what he said because I wrote it down in my car the minute I left his house. I mentioned it later to Hogan Jazz Archive Curator Dick Allen and asked him what he thought about it, and he said only that I should write it down and save it, which I told him I had already done.

Before I left Dedroit's house he also told me that he wrote to LaRocca (whom he had known in New Orleans) in New York and asked him if he could send arrangements of some of the ODJB pieces from the records so that he (Dedroit) could play them with his band.

In 1990, the New Leviathan Oriental Fox-Trot Orchestra was invited to play at the Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival, June 7, through June 10, in Sedalia, Missouri. In extending the invitation the festival organizers specifically asked us to program New Orleans rags. While we had recorded a few New Orleans rags and tin pan alley pieces, a whole program of New Orleans rags and other rags for the festival meant a lot of new research, missing part writing, and rehearsals. In the process we found out information on a whole group of composers that immediately pre-dated those on our earlier New Orleans tin pan alley record. They spanned the period from 1895 until 1917. (Currently, the pieces that we played in Sedalia in 1990, plus others are about to be released on a new CD entitled "New Orleans Before Jazz.")

Several months later we were scheduled to do a return performance at the Great Connecticut Traditional Jazz festival in Essex, Connecticut, from August 9, through August 12. At my suggestion, we decided to play our series of sets with each having a different type of music: rags, New Orleans rags, tin pan alley, New Orleans tin pan alley, fox-trots, Oriental fox-trots, and so on. What seemed like a great historical way of grouping pieces for sets turned out to be bad as a performance strategy. We quickly learned that it was better to have a sampling of styles in each set. However, the approach was not without its lasting rewards.

In looking up additional narrative material for each group of music, I delved into my reference library. In Robert S. Gold's A Jazz Lexicon, I stumbled across a definition of the fox-trot that said: "Generic term for jazz (and popular) dance (and its tempo) since c.1917.-- 1926 So This Is Jazz, p. 25. A tune played doubly slow for a "toddle" is no less jazz than when performed at its original fox-trot tempo. -- 1926 Melody Maker, Sep., p. 7. The fox-trot still holds sway everywhere. -- 1929 Jacob's Orchestral Monthly, June, p. 6. Jazz grew up around the fox-trot and is still mainly supported by it. -- Father of the Blues, p.226. They [i.e., the Castles] went abroad and while in mid-ocean sent a wireless to the magazine to change the "Bunny hug" to the "Fox-trot."

A red, flashing light went off in my brain. This definition linked the fox-trot, jazz, and the year 1917. Since I was in the process of fooling with all these different types of music's in our repertoire from 1895 to 1935, it was quite evident that a big change took place in 1917. With very few exceptions, music before 1917 was in 2/4 time; music after was in 4/4 time. Music before 1917 was called ragtime; music after 1917 was called jazz or fox-trot. Fooling with this definition combined with the two prior, un-related experiences suddenly made more sense. This especially made sense since I had just spent months researching over two decades of

published New Orleans music prior to 1917, and other American sheet music and phonograph records from the same time. During those months, I was rapidly coming to the conclusion that jazz to some degree really evolved over a twenty-plus year period rather than having emerged quickly--evolutionary rather than revolutionary. This realization also helped explain the arguments over origins, since over a long time period many things were done by many people and, therefore, there were many justifiable claims based on individual and subjective assessments of what was the most important or defining step. Consequently, I came to the conclusion that all of the claimants could easily and legitimately claim at least one of the many magic moments in the long process.

After we returned from the Connecticut festival I decided to take the research process one step further. With an eighteen piece orchestra and a large music library at hand, I proposed that we experiment briefly. I suggested that we take the trio strain of "That Teasin' Rag" by Joe Jordan, a ragtime piece, and play it in 4/4 as a fox-trot rather than as written as a rag in 2/4. The first voiced reaction was that changing it to 4/4 would not change the sound, but would only change the amount of measures to half the original number. I said that we had to change it to 4/4 by adding two extra beats to each measure, so that the drums, banjo, guitar, and piano, would be hitting four beats and the tuba and string bass could play two or four beats, but if they chose two, they would have to play them shorter.

We played the piece this way and the difference was immediately evident. Banjoist and vocalist George Schmidt screamed out a surprised, "you've solved it." The time change also caused the trombone player to use glissandos where they had not been any before because the original figures were now almost impossible to play. So--we had transformed the trio of "That Teasin' Rag" to the trio of the "Original Dixieland Jazz Band One-Step," by a time signature change!

We played it again and then George suggested we try the same treatment on the original arrangement of "Panama" by Wm. Tyers, which was also in 2/4. Aside from the change to jazz, there were two additional striking things. Bunk Johnson-style "licks" developed in the 1st cornet part in the 1st strain, and the "maxixe"-style section (sometimes mistakenly called the "tango"-style section) lost most, or all, of its "exotic" feel, but was "hotter."

An interesting corroboration of my conclusions took place a year later on October 23, 1991 when I was doing research on the Mexican influences on New Orleans music for an article in the [Jazz Archivist](#). At the time I tried to talk to anyone who knew anything or anybody from the "Mexican Band" visits to New Orleans. I called retired drummer and music store operator Harold Peterson (1900-1993)--son of George Peterson, one of the best early drummers and teachers--because there was a picture of him (Harold) playing in violinist and bandleader Charlie Fishbein's Orchestra at the La Vida Night Club--a group which included pianist Buzzy Williams, banjoist "Stalebread" Lacoumbe, and saxophonist Florencio Ramos(1861-1931), who had played in the largest Mexican Band. Ramos remained in New Orleans, and became a naturalized citizen. I had heard Mr. Peterson years before at a Pete Fountain testimonial banquet and he talked on forever and ever about he and Pete in his music store on North Broad St. where the headquarters for the Zulu Social Aid & Pleasure Club is now located. I was upset when at first he seemed wary of my call but he warmed up after I gave him a few personal references and he told me a fair amount of information on Ramos including calling him Felix, a strange corruption of Florencio.

After finishing on this topic he told me he wanted to tell me how jazz came about, and I was almost dreading a long-winded tome. But what he said was concise and orderly and I scribbled down notes:

1. He said first there was ragtime, and that ragtime went way back and even his mother played ragtime on the piano.
2. Then he said second that there were the prize fights and that this was one of the few places that you could play the ragtime music and that they were more than happy for you to play it there.

3. He then said that of course black people had a lot to do with it and there were some good black bands - the Barbarin's had a good band and Manuel Perez had a good band.
4. And finally he said there was the Dixieland Band--ragtime with a beat.

I mentioned this conversation to Dick Allen, who was helping me with the Mexican Band history and he once again said to write it down, and I told him I had. Peterson's comments especially intrigued and impressed me because they were surprising coming from him, and his because his comments on the ODJB were presented with other things which he considered to be co-factors in the development of jazz. I was even more impressed because based on my general New Orleans music history research, he got the other three factors so right. As a result of his comments and everything that came before them I began to wonder why all this was not more well-known and why the ODJB's claims were not taken a little more seriously.

At about the same time I re-read H. O. Brunn's, The Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, LSU Press, 1960. On pages 31 and 32 Brunn tries somewhat confusedly to explain how the ODJB changed their music in Chicago to make it different from their music--and their contemporaries' music--back home in New Orleans.

During the months of daily practice and nightly performance in Chicago, an important evolution took place. The artists finally mastered their medium. More sure of themselves, they speeded up the tempo to satisfy the frenzied spirit of the dancers. LaRocca's cornet devised a new driving style; the clarinet began its first awkward attempts at 'noodling' around the melody; Edwards' trombone accented the beat with deep, powerful tones and overlapped LaRocca's phrasing with a new type of counter melody--a style partly resembling the old military bands of New Orleans.

After some additional descriptive comments, he ends another paragraph with, "It was a fast, traveling, two-beat style." However, realizing that this is not adequate to describe the much-touted change, he adds a long footnote:

The question of whether the rhythm of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band was two-beat or four-beat is deceptively simple on the surface. Actually, even the original members themselves cannot agree. LaRocca and Sbarbaro are sure that it is two-beat, because of its parade origins; Edwards insists that it is four. The author is inclined to go along with Edwards and has always believed that the Dixieland Band's fast one-steps had a four-beat "feel."

He further muddles the issue by then quoting Don Fowler's, J. S. Moynahan's, and New Orleans trombonist and bandleader Santo Pecora's comments. The problem with the analysis is that both jazz and the fox-trot evolved. One can see this progression even in the ODJB recordings, starting with "I've Lost My Heart In Dixieland" in 1919 and ending with "Tiger Rag" in 1923. The tempo slowed down and the time changed to cut-time, or 2/2, thereby forever confusing the two-beat, four-beat argument, since 2/4 and 2/2 are both two-beat but very different kinds of two-beat.

Since the book was inconclusive on the subject I went to the LaRocca Collection at the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University and started sorting throughout the hundreds and hundreds of letters and clippings falling out of scores of scrap books and folders. In it I found two things of interest. The first was a clipping from Billboard magazine that was quoted in Brunn's book which I will deal with shortly. The second was a copy of Johnny Dedroit's letter to Nick LaRocca in New York, dated Dec. 6, 1918, asking him for an arrangement of "Bluin' the Blues. The Dedroit letter convinced me that Johnny Dedroit had a pretty good memory regarding things in the distant past, and thus gave some more credence to his comments about the ODJB and jazz.

I next read through the massive Nick LaRocca oral history interview at the Hogan Archive. On page 50-51

when asked by Dick Allen what the other New Orleans bands played LaRocca says: "Well, they all played ragtime." Allen for clarification asks in 1910?; 1918? LaRocca then gives his answer:

Well, now the bands, they played regular popular tunes. And I never heard any numbers that was improvised or worked on. If they played a chorus of different tunes they may have add lil'bit flourishes to `em with their own. I don't say they didn't do that; but they were playing ragtime. I played ragtime. The rhythm wasn't changed until I hit Chicago. Now this [is] gonna to be a strange thing, and this is why they say the miracle couldn't happen. It was a dance team called [thinks awhile]--wait a minute--the Castles. And the Castles was bringing out a new dance like a straight dance--like a walk. Now ragtime music would fit it, but I noticed the general public, it was hard for them with the methods of the music we were playing--that jumping music--so I decided to play in march time, slow down, making a fox trot out of it, fast, making a fast march. Instead of the four beats [that] was customary they were playing around New Orleans, we made two beats and a syncopated beat. That's what give it the driving qualities. Now the music and that came up from New Orleans they still were playing ragtime. Many of them followed us up to Chicago.

He also says on page 62:

I forgot to tell you we played shows in Chicago, with a fellow named Johnny Fogarty while we were at the Casino Gardens. You'll find that in the Tulane files, too. That was the first introduction of jazz into theatres.

Johnnie Fogarty's Dancing Review was the act that was mentioned in the Billboard article in the book and in the scrapbooks. Fogarty was the leader of a dance team from New York that traveled around the country giving exhibition programs of the latest dance steps and the troupe's picture was featured on the cover of sheet music editions of the latest popular dance pieces.

Therefore, to summarize the process time wise, according to LaRocca the band changed the rhythm, or time signature, to more easily accommodate the dancers who were doing a new dancing style. LaRocca says they changed from four beats to two beats, whereas actually the reverse is what happened. They did this at either Schiller's or the Casino Garden, or both, then accompanied Fogarty's troupe at the McVicker's Theater. Reading the advertisements and reviews from the time at the McVicker's in late August and early September, 1916, the dance troupe during the week of performances advanced from 3rd billed to the premier act between Sunday and Tuesday, and "The Jass Band" as they were then called, got rave reviews, both individually as musicians and as accompanists for the dancers.

After digesting this over time, I decided to weigh in on the subject and got H. O. Brunn's telephone number from the Hogan Jazz Archive, and called him at home. He told me how he had unsuccessfully in his opinion bounced the question off of many musicians over the years, and I told him of my theory and experiment. He listened and then said that he thought that I had figured it out. I understand that he is now going to present some variation of this conclusion in his revised edition.

There is also some other corroborating evidence:

1. On pages 2 and 3 of his March 27, 1957, interview, Paul Barbarin (1901-1969) says he first heard 4/4 in New Orleans played by "Red Happy" [Bolton] with Oliver and Ory in Economy Hall. The best interpretation of the time this event must have taken place, according to Hogann Jazz Archive curator Bruce Raeburn, was in 1917.

2. On page 95 of Bill Russell's New Orleans Style, Ed Garland (1885-1980) says: "When I started playing we played most always two beats to the measure but later on we started to double up and play four."

3. In Dan Meyer's Slap That Bass! internet article, which he has written, revised, presented, and is still updating, he points out three comments worth noting. Multi-instrumentalist and string bass player Arnold Loyocano (1889-1962) says that when he left New Orleans in 1915, to go north with Tom Brown, no one was playing the slap-bass style. Eddie Dawson (1884-1972) recalled doing it some time before Storyville closed in July, 1917. When Joseph "Babe" Phillips (c.1879-1960) arrived in New Orleans in 1918 everyone was playing it. While you could have slapped a bass in ragtime it would not have made much sense because the slapping and picking is used to drive the beat.

4. Most pieces of music published in New Orleans before 1917 were in 2/4; most pieces published in 1917 or thereafter were published in 4/4. Many pieces of music published in New Orleans in 1915, or 1916, in 2/4 time were re-published in 1917, in 4/4 time. "New Orleans Hop Scop Blues," by George W. Thomas and "Don't Leave Me Daddy," by Joe Verges are two of these.

5. On Jazzology Book CD 3 which accompanies Richard H. Knowles's Fallen Heroes, on track 7, Bunk Johnson in talking about funerals says all the music was played in 2/4, he also says this elsewhere.

6. In an article by Myra Menville in the Second Line, Spring, 1977, pp. 3-13 entitled "Wiggs Self-Explained," teacher, cornetist, bandleader, and New Orleans Jazz Club founder Johnny Wiggs (1899-1977) comments on hearing King Oliver playing blues at the dances at the Tulane Gym in 1916, and how wonderful the music was. He then goes on to say: "In 1917 the ODJB recorded their first records on Victor. This was too much for the Invincibles and we yearned to play real jazz."

7. Prior to 1917, New Orleans was not a mecca for fox-trots. A few articles appeared in the newspapers in 1915 about demonstrations of the popular new dance in the Grunewald Cave. In 1916, you could get a free booklet showing how to dance the fox-trot and other new dance if you purchased a new Victrola, but there seems to have been no fox-trot craze like there was for the earlier animal dances.

8. In the American Mercury August, 1924, pp. 465-467, in a great summarizing article titled "Jazz," Virgil Thompson wrote:

Jazz, in brief, is a compound of (a) the fox-trot rhythm, a four-four measure (alle breve) with a double accent, and (b) a syncopated melody over this rhythm. Neither alone will make jazz. The monotonous fox-trot rhythm, by itself, will either put you to sleep or drive you mad. And a highly syncopated line like the second subject of the Franck symphony in D minor or the principal theme of Beethoven's third "Lenora" overture is merely syncopated until you add it to the heavy bump-bump of the fox-trot beat. The combination is jazz. Try it on your piano. Apply it to any tune you know. In case you are not satisfied with the result, play the right hand a little before the left. He then goes on to talk about the development of the fox-trot, various dance musics, and jazz.

For more of the historical development of the fox-trot the best account is in the Complete Book Of Ballroom Dancing by Richard M. Stephenson & Joseph Iaccarino, Doubleday, 1980, pages 32-36, which outlines its creation by Harry Fox, born Arthur Carringford (1882-1959). His association with Yansci Dolly of the famous Dolly Sisters of eastern European lineage may explain the straightforward driving 4/4 rhythm, most likely borrowed from klezmer music.

Reactions To My Conclusions

I have been presenting this idea in conversations with individuals and in lectures to groups for fifteen years. It has been met with hostility by 49%, lack of understanding by 49%, interest by 1%, and agreement by 1%. Comments have included the following:

1. Hostility to LaRocca and/or the ODJB
2. Hostility to any white contribution to jazz origins
3. Seems like a tempest in a teapot--who cares
4. Ragtime and jazz are pretty much the same
5. Jazz is the blues.
6. Of course you'd think that because you play fox-trots.
7. Being billed as "Original..." is automatically suspect.
8. It had to be more than that (just changing the time)
9. That isn't what happened because jazz is 2/4 and ragtime is 4/4
10. If that's the case then where did the fox-trot come from?

The question then remains: What is one to make of all this?

It is often said that everyone has their own opinions and/or their own agendas. This is especially true about jazz, and even more true about jazz origins. However, the lineage of events described above makes an exceedingly strong circumstantial evidence case for what the ODJB did. What cannot be proven is that there were no other steps being taken in the same direction, at about the same time. There are several "close-but-no-cigar" compositions published between 1915 and 1917 including "Camel Walk" by Joe Verges, "Original Jelly Roll Blues" by Jelly Roll Morton, "When I Die Bring Me To My Ma," by J. Russel Robinson, and "Long, Long Time Before You See My Face Again," by Jimmie Cox.

Each of these has many of the characteristics of jazz but not the complete criteria, which itself is hard to establish. One could also arrive at jazz by playing early syncopated blues with a strong driving 4/4 beat, although I do not think that this is what was done--the blues seems to have been played slow and low-down; fast jazz-inspired blues appear to be a later development. Other groups could have done exactly what the ODJB did; Keppard could have independently combined New Orleans ragtime and the fox-trot in New York. Trombonist Dave Sager recently found an early fox-trot recording by an Ohio band that sounds very much like jazz. I have found several fox-trots played by a Hawaiian string band that sound close also. Then as mentioned before, there are the other claimants for originator/inventor.

There are many magic moments in the development of jazz, some after the ODJB, some before. Some think that ragtime is jazz. Others think that the blues is jazz. Still others think that jazz originated with the Louis Armstrong-Earl Hines recordings in the late-middle 1920's, and that everything before that is "funny-hat" music. With this divergence of opinion and definition, and other parallel developments at the time, nothing will ever be settled. However, we can come to some conclusions about the steps that the ODJB took in the process and how they were pivotal for the time.

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