



Jazz in America

Where Did Jazz Come From?

- I. Where Did Jazz Come From?
 - A. New Orleans via Africa and Europe – Jazz was born in New Orleans a little over a 100 years ago (early 20th century), but its roots can be found in the musical traditions of both Africa and Europe (and elsewhere); in fact, it has been said that jazz is a union of African and European music.
 1. From African music, jazz got its:
 - a. rhythms (syncopation and polyrhythms, i.e., rhythms being played on top of different rhythms) and “feel”
 - b. “blues” quality
 - c. sensibility of playing an instrument in your own expressive way, making it an “extension” of your own human voice
 2. From European music (classical music), jazz got its:
 - a. harmony, that is, the chords that accompany the tunes (the chords played on the piano); jazz harmony is similar to classical music’s harmony
 - b. instruments – most of the instruments used in jazz originated in Europe (saxophone, trumpet, piano, etc.)
 3. Musical improvisation came from both African and European musical traditions.*
 - B. Why New Orleans? – New Orleans was the perfect city for the African and European musical elements listed above to come together, because New Orleans:
 1. was a port city (with people arriving from all parts of the world)
 2. a meeting place for people of different ethnic groups
 3. had (and still has) a nightlife in which musicians had the opportunity to play together, learn from each other, and blend the African and European musical elements
 - C. African American Experience – Jazz was born out of and evolved through the African American experience in the United States.
 1. Jazz evolved from slave songs and spirituals (religious African American folk songs).
 2. Jazz’s originators and important innovators were primarily African Americans.
 - D. Trumpet icon **Louis Armstrong** is widely considered the most important jazz originator and first truly great jazz soloist (improviser).
 - E. Jazz Is Always Evolving
 1. Jazz is always incorporating what came before with what’s coming next.
 2. Some like to say that the best jazz musicians have one foot in the past and the other in the future.
 - F. Jazz All Over the World
 1. Today, jazz is played and listened to by people of all ages, cultures, and ethnicities.
 2. Today, jazz includes musical elements and styles from all over the world.
 3. Jazz has gone from being America’s music to being the world’s music.

II. Ragtime

- A. Piano Style – Ragtime is primarily a solo piano style and was the immediate precursor of jazz.
 1. It originated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
 2. It consists of each hand doing something different:
 - a. The left hand plays a steady, almost march-like succession of alternating bass notes and chords in a steady “oom-pah, oom-pah, oom-pah, oom-pah” fashion.
 - b. The right hand plays syncopated melodies in a “ragged” fashion (hence the name “ragtime”).
 3. Ragtime is primarily an African American invention and was a source of pride to African American composers, musicians, and listeners.
 4. Ragtime icon **Scott Joplin** is widely considered the most important ragtime originator and first truly great ragtime pianist.
 5. Since ragtime was conceived and developed before records were invented, it was “recorded” on piano rolls and played on “player pianos,” i.e., pianos fitted with an apparatus enabling it to be played automatically by means of a rotating perforated roll.

* While most all classical music performed today is written, improvisation is an integral component of classical music history. Indeed, besides being great composers, such important figures as Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven were virtuoso keyboardists *and* excellent improvisers.

- a. These were long rolls of thick paper that had holes (i.e., perforations) punched in them. When spun through a special type of mechanical piano (called a “player piano”) the instrument would mechanically play the notes indicated by the perforations; different songs had different patterns of perforations.
 - b. By someone simply pumping two foot pedals back and forth at the bottom of the piano, the piano roll would spin through a mechanism and that would mechanically press down the appropriate piano keys, making the piano mechanically play the song; the faster you pumped the pedals, the faster the tempo would be.
 - c. Many people learned how to play ragtime songs (called “rags”) by watching the piano keys go up and down, memorizing the order in which they went down, and then, through a lot of practice, mastering it themselves.
 - d. Piano rolls were the first music “recordings,” that is, before records, tapes, CDs, mp3s, streaming....
6. Most experts agree that ragtime really isn’t jazz because it rarely includes improvisation, however, ragtime was the immediate precursor of jazz.
- a. The first jazz bands imitated the ragtime style.
 - b. They added improvisation and, voilà!, jazz was born!
- B. Cultural Implications of Ragtime
1. Ragtime represents musics from both Europe and Africa.
 - a. The piano is a European instrument.
 - b. The left hand (steady march-like rhythm) was derived from European classical music and marches.
 - c. The chord progressions were rooted in European classical music.
 - d. Ragtime uses standard European music notation (all the music was written).
 - e. The right hand’s syncopated, “ragged” melodies, derived from complex polyrhythms (several different rhythms played simultaneously), have their roots in African music.
 2. Ragtime was developed in response to and reflected the “balance” of American attitude in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
 - a. The recognized and cherished American traditions (e.g., conservatism, motherhood, rural life) were symbolized by the piano itself (a “classical” instrument) and ragtime’s simple left-hand march rhythms.
 - b. New fast-paced living (e.g., expansion of lively public leisure, excitement of diverse urban opportunities, etc.) was symbolized by ragtime’s ragged complex right-hand syncopation.
 3. Ragtime was enjoyed by both European and African Americans.
 4. Ragtime reflected the full gamut from conservative to liberal attitudes.
 - a. Conservative example: ragtime was performed on the piano, a white middle class symbol of nostalgia and status.
 - b. Liberal example: ragtime’s syncopations reflected the exciting pace of modern industrial life.