



Jazz in America

Ragtime and Early Jazz

- I. Ragtime – Ragtime is primarily a solo piano style; it was the immediate precursor of jazz.
 - A. It originated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
 - B. It consists of each hand doing something different:
 1. 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.
 2. The right hand plays syncopated melodies in a “ragged” fashion (hence, the name “ragtime”).
 - C. Ragtime is primarily an African American invention and was a source of pride to African American composers, musicians, and listeners.
 - D. Ragtime icon **Scott Joplin** is widely considered the most important ragtime originator and first truly great ragtime pianist.
 - E. 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.
 1. 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.
 2. 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.
 3. 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.
 4. Piano rolls were the first music “recordings,” that is, before records, tapes, CDs, mp3s, streaming....
 - F. Most experts agree that ragtime really isn’t jazz because it rarely includes improvisation, however, ragtime was the immediate precursor of jazz.
 1. The first jazz bands imitated the ragtime style.
 2. They added improvisation and, voilà!, jazz was born!
- II. Early Jazz (AKA “Dixieland”)
 - A. Early Jazz (“Dixieland”) developed in the early 20th century (1900–1928);* its four main influences were ragtime, military brass bands, the blues, and gospel music.
 1. The usual instrumentation of a Dixieland band was (and still is) trumpet (or cornet), clarinet, trombone, piano, string bass (or tuba), drums, and banjo (or guitar).
 2. The primary feature of Dixieland jazz is “collective improvisation,” that is, rather than each musician taking a solo in turn (as in most styles of jazz today), Dixieland jazz musicians all improvise at the same time.
 3. Each instrument has its own specific role:
 - a. trumpet or cornet: plays the melody (jazzed up)
 - b. clarinet: adds to (embellishes) the melody
 - c. trombone: usually embellishes the bass line but sometimes plays the melody; plays “afterbeats” (adding to the rhythm) and sound effects such as “smears” and “slides”
 - d. piano and banjo (or guitar): play chords
 - e. string bass or tuba: plays the bass line
 - f. drums: keeps the beat steady and swinging
 4. Dixieland bands (excluding piano and using tuba rather than string bass) were originally small marching bands.
 5. Besides playing for dances and parties, in the early 1900s Dixieland bands would also play for funerals (marching along with the procession) in celebration of the life of the departed.
 6. There were few long solos in Dixieland jazz until the appearance of trumpeter **Louis Armstrong**.
 - a. Louis Armstrong was the first great jazz soloist (improviser) and one of the most important figures in jazz history.
 - b. There are those who say that without Louis Armstrong, there would be no jazz today.

* All styles of jazz from Early Jazz to contemporary are still being performed and recorded today. The style dates given are approximations of when each respective style came to the forefront of jazz and experienced its most concentrated development; of course, styles and dates overlap.

7. Almost all early Dixieland jazz musicians were African American; **Bix Beiderbecke** was a notable exception.
8. Most early jazz recordings were made on brittle hard plastic (shellac) records called 78s; the number 78 referred to the number of revolutions per minute (RPM) that the record would make when played on a record player of the day.

B. Cultural Implications

1. The collective improvisation of Dixieland jazz represented, in part, African Americans' newfound freedom.
 - a. African Americans were no longer slaves and celebrated their newfound freedom through jazz improvisation, playing whatever they wanted; they were not "restricted" to notes written on a page, but instead could play whatever they "heard" in their hearts and minds (the music was not read, it was played "by ear").
 - b. Freedom was and continues to be an integral part of all styles of jazz.
2. Early Jazz made its way from New Orleans to Chicago, to New York, to the rest of the country, to the rest of the world.