

# Influences on jazz music 1900-1945



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This essay will discuss three significant contextual factors which influenced jazz music from 1900 to 1945 – geography, culture and technology. The geography and culture section of this essay will discuss the jazz scene in New Orleans from 1900-1917, and how New Orleans city life and culture impacted the music there. The technology section will discuss how commercial radio birthed jazz's most commercially successful era, the swing era, in the 1930s.

### Geography and Culture – Jazz in New Orleans

Jazz originated in the early 1900s in the United States, and one of the most important places for its development was New Orleans. New Orleans was a melting pot of culture at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – as a port town, a diverse range of cultures mixed as people came to and left the city. The US bought the territory from France in 1803 in a purchase called the Louisiana Purchase. Prior to this it had been owned by the French and Spanish, which added to the diversity of the culture. There were significantly more free African Americans compared to slaves in New Orleans. They took pride in their heritage and were more outspoken about their beliefs regarding race, class and other contentious topics compared to black populations in other Southern cities (Hersch, 2007, p. 18). This allowed them to express themselves more freely, and likely contributed to the higher concentration of innovative musicians in New Orleans.

New Orleans' diverse ethnic background was a major influence on the development of jazz, as many of these musicians identified as 'Creoles of Colour'. Creoles of Colour were slaves of French and Spanish owners. The

French and Spanish were less conservative than the English population and freed many of their slaves. This gave Creoles a sense of superiority over African Americans. They lived in the wealthy downtown areas of New Orleans, separate from the blacks who lived uptown in poorer communities. The separation between Creoles and other blacks lasted until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when Jim Crow laws forced Creoles uptown into black neighbourhoods (Berendt & Huesmann, 2009, p. 8).

The differing social background between Creoles and blacks influenced jazz's diverse beginnings. New Orleans jazz took elements of classical harmony and fused them with West African rhythms, folk music from various cultures, and marching bands. Many Creoles were formally trained musicians, including classical pianists, music readers, and music teachers. This is where classical music's harmonic complexities and virtuosity met jazz. African Americans played more rhythmically complex and improvisatory music, and the free nature of jazz came from here. (DeVeaux & Giddins, 2009, p. 79). They would often take European songs and improvise over them, changing the structure and style until they sounded radically different (Stearns, 1956, p. 71). The practice of taking existing pieces of music and altering them to create something new is a formula jazz musicians use to this day.

Storyville, the New Orleans red-light district, holds a controversial place in jazz's history. Its brief existence coupled with the contrasting stories about it have caused debate over how much it influenced jazz, although it most likely played a significant role. Up until Storyville's opening in 1897, most jazz musicians had day jobs and were part-time musicians, and Storyville allowed them to play music full-time (Stearns, 1956, p. 71).

Some of early jazz's most influential performers played in Storyville, including Jelly Roll Morton and Buddy Bolden. They played in saloons, cabarets and other venues around Storyville, rather than in brothels (DeVeaux & Giddins, 2009, p. 84). Storyville was a place where young people could go to hear jazz, which inspired many of jazz's future figures to start playing. Members of 'The Original Dixieland Jazz Band' were observed at one of Storyville's cabarets, the 101 Ranch, 'hanging around and listening open-mouthed to the music' (Stearns, 1956, p. 72).

The rough nature of Storyville condemned it to an early fate. It was shut down in 1917, after the murders of 4 sailors during World War I, and many musicians who worked there had to move to other cities (DeVeaux & Giddins, 2009, p. 84).

Many jazz musicians had already left by the start of WWI in 1914. Most moved north to cities like Chicago and New York, where there was more work for blacks and a better living standards. This was part of a larger movement called the Great Migration, where millions of blacks travelled north to escape from increasingly threatening Jim Crow laws (Gioia, 2011, p. 47).

#### Technology – Swing, Radio and Benny Goodman

Technology was a major influence on swing in the 1930s. Without commercial radio, jazz would likely never have reached beyond its epicentres in places like New Orleans. This section will focus largely on Benny Goodman, and how his relationship with radio led to swing's explosion in 1935.

Commercial radio stations began broadcasting after WWI thanks to developments in radio technology during the war. The first commercial station in the US was KDKA in Pittsburgh; their first broadcast was on November 2, 1920 ( *KDKA Begins to Broadcast, 1920*, n. d., para. 4). KDKA was owned by the electrical manufacturer Westinghouse, who opened stations in other cities after KDKA's success. Other corporations followed, and soon an influx of radio stations was in motion (Skretvedt & Sterling, 2011, para. 7).

The wave of stations left broadcasters scrambling for content to fill their shows with, and one of the main contenders was music. Listeners enjoyed tuning in to hear music, and programmers could fill in time between shows (Skretvedt & Sterling, 2011, para. 10).

Radio let people listen to music from their homes more easily than before and offered free and convenient entertainment. This convenience did not extend to radio programmers. At the time, the only way to play music on radio was to broadcast a live performance. Playing records on radio was possible but the quality was poor – records had low sound quality even when listened to domestically and playing them over radio amplified this problem.

One of jazz's biggest success stories from this era was clarinetist and bandleader Benny Goodman, a crucial figure in the 1930s swing explosion.

Goodman's big band had a six-month residency on the NBC radio program *Let's Dance* (Ruhlmann, n. d., para. 3). Goodman's band toured the US in 1935 after leaving their segment on *Let's Dance* but their performances received mixed responses from audiences. Their slot on *Let's Dance* was too

late at night for east coast listeners to hear; they played the final hour of the Saturday night show, which was well after midnight (Spink, n. d., para. 8).

East coast audiences responded poorly to their 'hot' take on jazz, and the band had to adjust to this.

It was the west coast leg of the tour that paid off, as the time difference meant Goodman's music played about 3 hours earlier in western states (Gioia, 2011, p. 129). The climax of the tour came when Goodman began a three-week showcase at the Palomar ballroom in Los Angeles. Being on the west coast, the crowd were aware of Goodman's music and had heard them on the radio. It helped that local DJ Al Jarvis was a fan and they received frequent playtime on his show before playing Palomar. The audiences in L. A. were uninterested in the arrangements they had been forced to play at other venues, and the band reverted to their original swing sound. The shows at Palomar were broadcast across the country, sparking interest nationally (Spink, n. d., para. 17).

The shows at Palomar had such an impact that many historians deemed them the 'birth' of the swing era. The significance of this event cannot be downplayed; however it should be noted that the swing explosion was already on its way. More accurately, it was Goodman's band who created the tipping point for swing to become a cultural phenomenon (Clarke, n. d., para. 12).

Benny Goodman's triumph and the reason he was crowned 'The King of Swing' largely came down to his media presence. His relationship with radio helped his music reach millions of people nationwide, putting Goodman in

the spotlight. Swing was the dominant style of music for the next two decades, and without radio or Benny Goodman that may never have happened.

## Conclusion

Over the years many factors have influenced the development and direction of jazz. Geography and culture were important for jazz's formation during its earliest years. The history of New Orleans as a diverse and progressive port city created an ideal environment for jazz music to grow and shape itself.

Technology helped bring jazz to its peak of popularity in the 30s. Radio brought jazz into homes across America; it did much for jazz's respectability also. Benny Goodman was arguably the most important figure of this era. His success was dependent on radio, and jazz may never have become the dominant music of the 30s and 40s without Goodman and his band. Who knows if jazz would still be considered 'America's classical music' if not for radio?

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