

The birth of jazz

Life



Jazz is a mixture of European and African music. The harmony is mostly European, the rhythm is mostly African and the melody is a blend of both. The pilgrims brought with them to the New World the folk songs and church hymns they have sung since childhood. Negro slaves from Africa brought their highly developed sense of rhythm which showed itself in their singing, dancing and drumming (Stearn 14). When the two traditions began to merge, a new music was born. The Negro slaves had no money and little opportunity to buy instruments or study music.

So, they made their own instruments from animal bones, sticks, bamboo reeds and wooden boxes. The boxes became banjos and the all-important drums. The blending of the music was given a boost when white people and Negroes began to sing hymns together during the religious revival that took place in 1750. Each learned each other's style of music. Then came the spiritualists when some Christian hymns were transformed by Negro rhythm and feeling. Spiritualists were a great and immediate success in America and abroad. However, jazz got its big start only around 1870 in New Orleans.

New Orleans was built on a curve of the Mississippi River which made it a major port and a hub of commerce and was settled by the French and Spaniards. In the days of slavery, the French and the Spanish had isolated plantations there, and they let the slaves do as they pleased on holidays (Stearns 19). Many slaves had adopted elements of the Catholic religion and mixed them with their own beliefs. Sometimes, they used Catholic holidays to celebrate their African gods. For instance, on Saint Patrick's Day they played the drum rhythms of Damballa, a snake god, because they had seen pictures of Saint Patrick driving the snakes out of Ireland.

In this way, many African rhythms survived in New Orleans and contributed to the beginnings of jazz. New Orleans was a brass band town. It had many marching bands modeled after the famous ones Napoleon had set up. In 1871, thirteen Negro organizations sent their own bands to the funeral ceremonies for President Garfield. Negro bands like these began to use their own ideas about rhythm and improvised melody so that the European music they played began to swing. This was the start of Dixieland jazz. Work Cited Stearns, Marshall W. The Story of Jazz. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.