

The Origins Of Big Band Music

A History Of Big Band Jazz

by [Bob Thomas](#), 1994

The Jazz music of the Big Band Era was the culmination of over thirty years of musical development. What is it that made Jazz so innovative and different that it could literally sweep the world, changing the musical styles of nearly every country? And what is it about big band Jazz that makes the feet tap and the heart race with excitement?

African Music and Ragtime

The musical and cultural revolution that brought about Jazz was a direct result of African-Americans pursuing careers in the arts following the American Civil War. As slaves, African-Americans had learned few European cultural traditions. With increased freedom to pursue careers in the arts and bringing African artistic traditions to their work, African-Americans changed music and dance, not only in the U.S., but all over the world. For after the war, African-American dancers and musicians were able to create work that was not hidebound by hundreds of years of musical and dance traditions brought from the courts and peasant villages of Europe.

What was the European tradition? European music through the nineteenth century was melodically based, much of it with a square or waltz rhythmic structure.

What was the African tradition? Much African music has an organization which is based around rhythm and accent, rhythms and accents that may actually shift and move in relation to each other as the music progresses.

The big change that took place in music rhythmically was the shift away from the Oom-pah-Oom-pah (1-2-3-4) rhythmic structure. Oom-pah has a strong accent on "1." African musical tradition tends to count towards the accented beat so that an African may count 2 on the same beat a European would count 1. It is also typical of West African music to have rhythms of different lengths overlaid each other, creating shifting accents. Which is to say that by the late 1920's African-American Jazz music had developed a tradition where musicians put a strong rhythmic accent on "2" and "4" (oom-PAH-oom-PAH) and melodic accents anywhere BUT on "1."

Ragtime

The first popular musical trend in the United States produced by this African-European synthesis was Ragtime which first achieved popularity in the late 19th century. Ragtime musicians often used what are called "ragged" rhythms.

Ragged rhythms were African-influenced rhythms, syncopated so that the accent was "off" the beat (the first beat is "on" or "down"). Ragtime musicians also occasionally used what were called "blue" harmonies and notes. Blue harmonies and notes used notes that didn't fit into the European concept of melody or harmony. Some of the notes don't even exist in European musical scales -- these notes fit "between the cracks," as people sometimes said.

New Orleans and Jazz Origins

The New Orleans bands of the late 19th century from which Big Bands evolved were varied. Some were social bands that played popular songs and music for dancing; some played marches and rags for weekend picnics and parties. Others specialized in their own variations on work and blues songs.

Big Band Jazz, according to one historian, had its start in New Orleans in 1898 at the end of the Spanish-American war. Military bands returned to the port to decommission, flooding the city with used band instruments. And African-Americans interested in music quickly bought up hundreds of these instruments and quickly began to form bands. Starting from square one, aspiring African-American musicians taught themselves to play.

This had two results: unconventional playing techniques and unconventional rendering of popular musical tunes. The playing techniques led to new and interesting sounds entering musicians' vocabulary: trumpet and trombone growling sounds, wah-wah sounds, the use of odd household objects as mutes, and others. The unconventional rendering of popular musical tunes led to Jazz. An African-American playing a popular tune would play it adding some African musical traditions: different musical scales (which became traditional in nineteenth century African-American "blues" music) and different and complex rhythms.

Not bound by European traditions of form, these early Jazz bands played music that was, to put it mildly, loosely structured. A soloist or an instrumental section of the band played the melody (as they interpreted it) and the remaining musicians improvised the harmony and rhythmic embellishments. Many Jazz bands "arranged" their music by rehearsing it by "ear" many times until all the musicians were in agreement about what went where, when. These Jazz bands often changed personnel, sometimes on a weekly basis. This frequent changing also helped the evolution of Jazz, preventing bands from becoming hidebound and determined to have a particular style or sound. On into the 1930's change was the watchword of Jazz.

Jazz Enters the Mainstream

As New Orleans progressed into the 20th century, traditional band music gradually changed, so that marches sometimes contained improvised sections, and solos and accompaniments sometimes sported occasional blue notes. Elsewhere in society it was not even unusual for conventional popular songs to display a few ragged

"Jazz" rhythms!

But not for the first time, these musicians dreamed of fame and fortune. [Fame and fortune was something which eluded many African-American musicians and bands due to institutionalized racism in the music industry and society at large. It was not uncommon for a African-American Jazz band to record a tune to no acclaim, have a record promoter pay little or no money for rights to the tune, and then for that tune to be issued by a White band to national promotion and great acclaim.] Enter radio and the recording industry into the world of Jazz.

The First "Jazz" Recordings

The first "Jazz" record "[Livery Stable Blues](#)", coupled with "[Dixie Jass Band One Step](#)" was made in 1917 by a White band from New Orleans called [The Original Dixieland Jazz Band](#). The band was one of the first to bring the New Orleans style of Jazz to New York. After a music agent heard them in Chicago he brought them to New York, where, within weeks, they were a sensation. Soon after their first recording Victor records signed them for several more. The music recorded by the band was nearly conventional with no blue notes and only a smattering of ragged rhythms. Nonetheless, the record sold over one million copies and had a profound effect on musicians and the public all over the U.S.

The First African American Jazz Recording

As Jazz proliferated, many New Orleans-based bands began spreading out across the country, playing in Chicago, New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, or hitting the smaller towns on the T.O.B.A. vaudeville circuit. The first Jazz record by an African Americans, was by [Kid Ory's](#) band recording under the name of [Spike's Seven Pods of Pepper Orchestra](#). The songs "[Ory's Creole Trombone](#)" and "[Society Blues](#)" were recorded in Los Angeles in 1922. After 1923 the flood gates were open and African-American Jazz became widely recorded. Early stars included other New Orleans musicians like [King Oliver](#) and [Jelly Roll Morton](#), a Creole musician who, in the early 1920's, recorded over a hundred of his own and other's Jazz tunes. Some of the records are solo piano, but many are of [Jelly Roll](#) with his band the [Red Hot Peppers](#).

These early releases were great hits and record companies began recording nearly anyone who even claimed to be a Jazz musician. With records coming out by the hundreds, thousands of young people across the U.S. decided they wanted to be "Jazz" musicians. The Jazz music boom had begun.

But the enthusiasm for Jazz was not shared by everyone. Many in White middle America were concerned, and magazine and newspaper articles decrying the influence of African-American music on society and the scandalous behavior, including dancing, it supposedly led to were not uncommon. But the social outcry had little effect. Jazz had arrived and it was going nowhere but up!

The Roaring 20's and [Fletcher Henderson](#)

As a decade of rebellion the Roaring 20's was made for Jazz. The young and the hip delighted in anything that was new and exciting. The more staid and uptight members of society thought Jazz decadent and amoral which gave Jazz, for some, extra appeal. But the exciting new rhythms and harmonies were ultimately the irresistible force behind society's acceptance of Jazz.

The first bandleader to achieve national notoriety was [Fletcher Henderson](#) who formed a band in the early 1920's. Originally his band was a dance band, playing waltzes and foxtrots. Over the course of a few years Jazz rhythms and blue notes became more and more prominent in the band's music. By the time the band took over at Roseland Ballroom and featured [Louis Armstrong](#) on trumpet, it had become a Jazz band.

In 1928 [Henderson](#) lost his arranger and he tried his own hand at creating the band's charts. It turned out that [Fletcher](#) was not only an excellent arranger, but he was essentially the first to arrange music in the style we now describe as "big band."

[Duke Ellington](#), a formally trained musician, also formed his band in the 1920's, again as a dance band. The arrival of an innovative trumpeter named [Bubber Miley](#) and a talented saxophonist named [Sidney Bechet](#) exerted a profound influence on the [Ellington's work](#), gradually helping to change the band into a remarkably creative Jazz big band.

[Bubber](#) developed a style that included a lot of blue notes, growling sounds and effects that attracted a lot of attention to the band. [Bechet](#) only stayed with the band for a short time, but he had a strong feeling for Jazz, giving the band not only a sense for the mechanics but also for Jazz phrasing. [Ellington](#) described [Bechet](#) as the "epitome of Jazz."

One other well-known and well-loved band in NYC at this time was Chick Webb's. The band started in the mid-1920's and became a regular band at the Savoy, which opened in 1926. It was Chick Webb's band at the Savoy that won several famous "battles of the bands", most notably with Count Basie and Benny Goodman. (And, in 1934, it was Webb that gave Ella Fitzgerald her start in the music business.)

Most of New York's Jazz clubs were in Harlem, and in 1925-26 there appeared several popular plays and a book which portrayed Harlem as the happening place in NYC. As a result, downtowners and tourists streamed into Harlem to see this colorful neighborhood, and the nightlife took off.

It was at this time that a great number of now-famous clubs opened. The Savoy (Chick Webb's regular gig) and the Cotton Club ([Ellington's](#) regular gig) were two of these clubs. The good thing about the many new clubs was it gave employment to many African-American musicians and variety artists. Although the Savoy was

integrated, it was nearly alone in that respect; most other clubs were segregated. They featured African-American entertainers, but were owned and operated by Whites for a white clientele.

From 1927 until the late 1930's things were so busy in Harlem that good musicians could play every night of the year, sometimes in many different bands, due to constant personnel changes in most of them.

It Don't Mean a Thing...

However, it wasn't until 1935 that Jazz with a "Swing beat" achieved national attention and then in large part to [Benny Goodman](#).

As a youth [Goodman](#) was an extremely talented clarinetist. He studied with a respected Jazz clarinetist in Chicago, leaving Chicago in 1928 for NYC where he was successful as a sideman. However, he didn't form his own band until a few years later when he got a recording contract thanks to the great Jazz impresario John Hammond. Soon after that he bought some scores from [Fletcher Henderson](#), some of them arranged by [Henderson](#) himself. Despite [Henderson's](#) fine arrangements, his band hadn't been doing well. Goodman, at the urging of John Hammond (he was a most remarkable man, influencing the history of early Jazz as much, if not more, as any musician), hired [Fletcher](#).

The same arrangements which brought [Henderson's](#) band lukewarm interest proved to be dynamite for the [Goodman](#) band. For the next several years [Henderson](#) arranged tunes for [Goodman](#) band in a Jazz/Swing style.

Benny Goodman, King of Swing

[Henderson's](#) arrangements (with the help of a flourishing radio broadcast industry) are credited with helping sweep the Goodman band to national popularity the following year at the finish of an apparently unsuccessful cross-country tour in California.

As it turned out, the radio broadcasts of the tour were scheduled too late for people in the east and midwest. On the west coast, however, the broadcasts gained a devoted audience who, surprising the band, swarmed its final concerts. And it was with [Benny Goodman](#) that the Swing big band boom began, and our narrative on Jazz draws to a close.

After Goodman's dramatic success ignited the Big Band craze, excellent musicians who had been working as sidemen for other bands found encouragement to start their own bands. Bands led by the Dorseys, Glenn Miller, Bunny Berrigan, Lionel Hampton, Harry James and [Gene Krupa](#) sprang into being. Also at this time Count Basie's band came to New York from its original home in Kansas City.

With big band Swing music in full flower, it was only logical that jitterbug dancing should also rocket to national popularity, which it did.

Bob Thomas

