



The Land of Jazz



By Cleve Baker, MD

"TAKE ME TO THE LAND OF JAZZ" - so directs a happy tune from 1919. In the late 1930's, that land was San Francisco, where I was born.

However, for the past 30 years, the "Land of Jazz" has not been San Francisco, Chicago, New York, or New Orleans, but Sacramento.

Actually, the Land of Jazz is a state of mind with a particular passion. Sacramento's role in preserving and disseminating America's musical culture, its musical roots, continues to this day. The first Jazz Jubilee was held 28 years ago in the newly-restored "Old Town." Ever since, millions of people come annually to Sacramento to enjoy and learn about traditional jazz and ragtime, its predecessor. They are hosted by thousands of volunteers organized by the Sacramento Traditional Jazz Society. Many physicians and their families participate both as volunteers and musicians.

Thus, America's musical culture, rooted in the first third of the 20th Century has been revived and preserved in the last third of the Century. The movement started in Sacramento and has been sustained for 30 years, here and elsewhere in the U.S and the world. As interest in the music and lyrics developed, so did interest in the social history, folkloric, and biographical revelations they contained. Those who think the Civil Rights Movement began in the 60's should read the fairly recent histories of ragtime^{1,2} and jazz eras and the biographies of their artists.³

Historic Insights

"American," as in "American Music." This implies origins from and acceptance by white and black societies alike. Before publication of Scott Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag* in 1899, the two populations were separated culturally but interacted amicably, particularly in cities along the Mississippi.

With *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), segregation and the "separate but equal" concept chilled race relations. Paradoxically, in the musical world, acceptance by the white world of the *Maple Leaf Rag* brought recognition not only of Joplin as a composer but of ragtime as an art form. As a result, the works of other black composers, musicians and actors slowly gained acceptance by whites. *Scott Joplin should be recognized as the Father of American Music.*

New Euro-Americans. At the turn of the century, there was an influx of whites from Italy and Eastern Europe, the so-called "tired and poor" ("poor" they were, "tired" they were not), who were untouched by the legacies of the slavery and the horrors of our Civil War. Two immigrant Jewish families, the Balines and Gershwins, had youngsters who enthusiastically grasped black (syncopated) music and became two of America's greatest musical composers - Irving Berlin and George Gershwin. Can you imagine American music without them? Glad the Immigration Service let them in!

"American Musical Culture." Is there such a thing? Antone Dvorák thought so 100 years ago, in his symphony, *From the New World*.⁴ But in my youth, educated American Society

would answer, "no." The "Great Masters" of Europe were Bach, Chopin, Brahms, etc; how could you compare them to Joplin, Armstrong, Morton, Oliver, Johnston, Waller, Gershwin, Berlin and others? America's "Great Masters," however, were very familiar with European classical music, and Europeans have subsequently come to recognize the sophistication of American music. In other words, it ain't "trash" as some once alleged.

Early Insights

I was born in San Francisco 36 years after publication of the *Maple Leaf Rag*. Traditional jazz and the blues had come and gone. The big band sound and swing were everywhere.

San Francisco, however, was an exception. Musicians there were drawn to the clear, crisp style of King Oliver, Louis Armstrong and "Jelly Roll" Morton. Most notable were pianist Paul Lingle, and the Yerba Buena Jazz Band of Lu Watters. Watters's pianist, Wally Rose, a concert-trained artist, insisted on including ragtime in the repertoire; otherwise, ragtime was dead. The band broke up during WWII but came back in 1946 - when I first heard it. The Yerba Buena Jazz Band was unique, but its intent was to revive the dynamic, 1920's ensemble style of Louis Armstrong and King Oliver.

My musical education included five years of childhood piano lessons and a few lessons from an orchestral arranger in high school. Primarily, I learned music by copying records. (Sheet music for jazz was almost nonexistent.)

By college I could find occasional jobs with bands and in bars. In medical school, playing was infrequent but jobs in North Beach gave me insights into the artistic creative mind. Playing piano bar is the next best thing to being a psychiatrist. But traditional jazz in San Francisco had been replaced by beatnik poets, rock musicians and topless dancing.

I also discovered that playing piano should be my "escape-hatch to sanity." Others swat golf balls; I played the piano. It's personally much more rewarding to make people sing, dance and laugh than to have them recoil to sticking, poking and worse in the treatment room. Believe me, humanity sees you differently, also.

Internship. My internship in New Orleans was typical - between sleep and work, there was little time for anything else. However, that same 1960, Preservation Hall opened, and I heard senior black musicians create the sound of original black Jazz. They sounded, I am sure, as Buddy Bolden did 50 years before. Only the old-timers could create that sound; I haven't heard it since.

Internship also exposed me to the evils of segregation. Ours was a "whites only" hospital; we could treat blacks as outpatients, but could not admit them. Others hospitals were split into "whites only" and "colored only" departments. I found it strange that in a "white only" hospital, the nurses monitoring vital signs and post-op status from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. were black. Interns rode ambulances that took us on occasion to black homes for deliveries, severe illness and trauma. I have lasting, touching memories of these encounters when I hear the music of Ma Rainey, Spencer Williams, Bessie Smith and others. Segregation was never "separate but equal" but "separate and unequal."

Emerging from the Dark Years

The middle 30 years of the 20th century were fairly devoid of traditional jazz. The airways were full of big bands, shrill bands and the "cool school" of Dave Brubeck and Cal Tjader. Elvis came and went (whew!), only to be replaced by the Beatles. Popular music became global in its origins and its market.

Turk Murphy, who took over the Yerba Buena Jazz Band after Watters retired in 1952, kept playing traditional jazz - as did the Bay City Jazz Band in San Francisco, and the Firehouse 5 Plus 2 in Los Angeles - but the style was not popular for long. By the late 1960s, however, people began to truly miss the sound of the "driving ensemble."

Sacramentans, both amateur and professional, wanted it back! Out of jam sessions

developed the Sacramento Traditional Jazz Society (www.sacjazz.com) of today. The revived music excited audiences in pizza parlors and bars, and the concept of a jazz festival, later called the Jazz Jubilee, was not long in coming.

The Society has been devoted to preserving American Jazz by encouraging bands to form and to play it, by offering the music to the public and, most importantly, by sponsoring youth scholarships and camps. This concept spread nationwide with bands and festivals cropping up not only across the U.S. but in foreign countries, including some behind the old Iron Curtain.

Ragtime. This style was kept alive during the 50's and 60's by such individuals as Wally Rose, Joe Carr, Max Morath, Dick Zimmerman (of Grass Valley) Trebor Tichnor (of St. Louis), and Dr. Elliott Adams (a Sacramento dermatologist). Ragtime rocketed to popularity with the movie, *The Sting*, in 1973. Scott Joplin recaptured public attention, some 60 years after his death. The Sacramento Ragtime Society, now working with the West Coast Ragtime Society, meets monthly; they jointly sponsor the annual West Coast Ragtime Festival (www.ragtimemusic.com) in Sacramento every November.

Professionals can now support themselves playing ragtime and traditional jazz. Most important, public interest has sustained the music revival for 30 years - time to rediscover it, enjoy it, teach it and preserves it on CD and in print.

Great credit for awakening public enthusiasm must go to three individuals at FM radio station KXPR/KXJZ - the late Phil Jenkins; the late Hank Lawson; and their successor, Nick Dragos. They played actual recordings of artists, original bands and long-gone compositions. To this day, I consider Phil, my "professor." The remarkable collection he shared with Sacramentans over the years is now at the Museum for African-American History in Oakland.

Looking back

The rich legacy of American Music from 1898 to the swing era has been retrieved, recorded, shared and studied.

Bands and public tastes come and go, but this treasury of music and folklore won't be lost again. Not only have modern bands preserved the music on high quality CD's, but the sounds of original bands have been copied from old 78 records to high tech digital CD's and are available not only to enjoy, but also to study.

From this music, the history and folklore of the era has been retrieved. Folklore is history only waiting to be interpreted. People tell in their folklore what they don't write in history books. African-Americans haven't written complicated histories, but it's all there in their lyrics and music. A recent book⁵ tells how black quilts, hung in plain view, directed runaway slaves along the underground railroad. In black music also, there are messages "hidden in plain view."

The drive for equal civil rights by artists such as James Europe, Eubie Blake and many others needs to be recognized and emphasized in standard history books.

Published ragtime and jazz music, once unavailable, can be found in "fake books" and standard publications; It's much easier to find what you hear and want to play. One wonderful aspect of the revival is the generosity of artists who share music with enthusiastic listeners.

Jazz Societies and private individuals sponsor jazz camps at which kids - both young and old - can study jazz under the "pro's." Schools can receive scholarship aid for middle-school and high school jazz programs.

One consequence of this interest is that local economies get an economic boost from successful jazz festivals. Another is that contemporary jazz and ragtime musicians have

mastered these styles to write excellent compositions - quite up to the caliber of those from 1899-1930.

Americans can enjoy and better understand the momentous 20th Century from its extraordinary music, that music's history, and lives of those who created it.

American cultural and social history of the last 100 years is the Ying and Yang, black and white, equal and inseparable. American music has mixed parentage. Both black and white races should share the pride of the remarkable achievement of our ancestors. They left their gift to us, and we need to pass it on to our children.

Martin Luther King "Had a Dream" of equal opportunity for all Americans. How might that come about? Jelly Roll Morton may have had an answer,⁶ "Jazz music helps to get the misunderstanding between the races straightened out. You creep in close to hear the music and automatically you creep close to the other people."

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