

2016

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Recommended Citation

MacFalane, Megan, "Origins of Jazz in America" (2016). *A with Honors Projects*. 169.
<http://spark.parkland.edu/ah/169>

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Final Paper
History 105
Parkland College
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Origins of Jazz Music in America

Jazz music, unlike a lot of other genres, was born in America in New Orleans, Louisiana in the early 20th century. The base of jazz was founded from “blues music” which was based off of African American slaves’ hymns and field hollers which they sang in the fields as they picked cotton. During the early 1900s, jazz became very popular against white critics wills because it was created by blacks. One of the most well-known musicians for jazz music is Louie Armstrong. The music was played in clubs and on the streets by not only Armstrong, but by many other artists as well like Dizzie Gillespie and Charlie Parker. Jazz also was one of the first types of music that people could really swing dance to, causing many integrated social gatherings.

Jazz is well known for causing a lot of different genres to be born in America, but before jazz was born there was a type of music that led up to jazz’s birth, and that was known as the blues music. The reason blues led to jazz music being invented was because blues had a 12 bar chorus which is what is used in jazz. Without this 12 bar chorus being in blues then jazz would not have been invented or even sound the same. Besides the 12 bar chorus not being the same in jazz it would also sound different in rock and roll because it is also known for using this same 12 bar progression. Pop music and many other genres of music would also sound different, because even though current pop music only uses the same four chords from this progression, it still

needed jazz because otherwise it would not even exist. That chord progression proved to be extremely important to the current world's musical choices. Jazz, as told above, brought about some of the music that is still common today like rock and roll and the now less common be-bop which was very popular in the 1950s. Many white supremacists tried to get rid of people's love for jazz music because it originated from black people in the south and since there was an extreme amount of racism at this time whites wanted to get rid of any evidence that blacks invented jazz. These critics even tried to claim that black people created jazz music off of white composer's classical pieces. Basically what is trying to be said is that if it had not been for jazz the majority of the music everyone knows and loves today would not exist, or it would at least not quite sound the same.

The history of jazz music, how jazz has influenced today's society and music as it is currently known and how it helped begin to bring different races together for the first time will be the main points in this paper.

Jazz was born in the United States in the early 1900s in New Orleans, Louisiana, in night clubs and in urban run down areas of town, but it was not completely specific to New Orleans; there were also other southern cities that had jazz clubs. The main reason the best place for jazz to thrive was in New Orleans is because it was considered a port town. This is also the reason that not only did jazz affect America's pop music and other genres, but it also influenced South America's music as well, because so many people from other cultures came to hear the jazz music being played and went back to their own culture and used it to make up their own musical style. This is mainly where Bossa Nova and Spanish type of music comes from. Jazz was a very obvious influencer in South American music mainly because it was a new kind of music. It helped develop what we know and love as music today. At first, jazz started out as just

instruments playing, usually a saxophone and trumpet and various other brass instruments. As time went on though, artists started doing more with jazz. A man named Louis Armstrong came up with a singing style called “scat” which meant the artist would sing words but that they were more of a string of nonsense words that went with the rhythm being played. Louis Armstrong was known as one of the most popular people in Jazz music and was most known for playing the trumpet and singing in jazz clubs. Louis Armstrong played jazz before it became legal. After it was allowed to be performed on the streets, he became even more widely known. When people think about jazz music, this is generally the person that is most thought of and he was even quoted saying “If it hadn’t been for jazz, there wouldn’t be no rock and roll (Armstrong 1).” The meaning behind this quote is that jazz brought about different and new types of rhythms that are still used today. He also put lyrics with jazz music that had to do with nature and love. One of his most widely known and still popular today songs is “What a Wonderful World.” Even though during his time, jazz music was considered taboo because it was “black’s music” and was even called Voodoo to try and keep people from wanting to listen to it, many songs currently are based off of some of the themes and lyrics he chose to write about in the mid-1900s. Louis Armstrong helped people realize calling it voodoo music would not work, which is why white people decided to claim that blacks, like Armstrong, took music from them and reused it for their own use and made it illegal to play jazz music. During this time, however, many clubs like “The Cotton Club” still had many people come play jazz music in their clubs. “The Cotton Club” was well known during prohibition and had fantastic connections politically, which is why every time the government busted them for alcohol they did not stay closed down for very long. Since this club was kind of known to be a “trouble maker” and go against the laws of the time period, it is no surprise that during the time period where jazz was illegal they had bands and singers like

Duke Ellington come play jazz music for people to hear. This place was also well known for being very strict on who they let play their music there and if they were black they were treated very poorly no matter if they were the performer or a waiter. Jazz did help some with racial problems of the time period, but there were still many whites who did not like that jazz music came from black people, so they still tried to make it sound like jazz was an evil form of music. It was even said that, "Motivated by political and racial concerns, many jazz critics during the Harlem Renaissance publicized their dislike of jazz music in order to express their dislike of African Americans (Anderson, 135)." Even though some whites were spreading the lie around about where jazz's roots came from, others ended up enjoying the music and listened to it, which is how it slowly developed into a mainstream music to listen to in the mid-1900s. After the ban was lifted, musicians like Louis Armstrong were seen to be playing on the streets of New Orleans. His music was also put on the radio as jazz became more popular and less hated by whites. It is still common to see and hear people playing jazz music on the streets if you visit the New Orleans area. Not only would this be seen in New Orleans in the mid- 1900s but it started to spread up north to other big cities like Chicago and New York. Other musicians started becoming more known in this time period like Ella Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald was known for singing and was from the north east section of the United States. She became more popular in the 1920s but wasn't super well known until later on. Sadly, during this time period jazz was known for being music for men, and very few women ever tried to play jazz or even took much of an interest in it unless they were dancing to it in the clubs. Every genre that is known today is somehow based off of jazz and whether people know it or not it has greatly influenced the types of music we love and listen to today.

When jazz was first created it was a hated genre because of racial problems. As time went on it became accepted and is well known and played by many musicians today. Over time other genres appeared after jazz, like bebop, swing and mainstream music. Bebop was the first of these to appear from jazz and was created from two famous people named Dizzy Gillespie, who was known for playing the trumpet and Charlie Parker who played saxophone. Together they helped create the new genre that was well known in the 1950s called bebop. With bebop, it was known for having lots of improv in it. Jazz was the original music to bring improv about, which is where the soloist would take chord progressions from the main melody line and derive their own music to go along with the song for the length of their solo. The two artists that helped create bebop were known to use more of improv than regular jazz music. Not only did they start using more improv, but bebop also brought about a new way to improv which is where they would avoid the melody and just go for the sound they wanted, as long as it fit into the musical chord progression. Another part of jazz that was common during this time was “swing jazz” which was a whole new concept to people because they had never really had music that they could truly dance to. This started a whole new generation of music because it essentially went from here to modern jazz. Rock and roll and pop styles that are currently listened to derived from this version of jazz and basically every other genre of music that is known to Americans was derived from modern jazz. Another way jazz was a big influence in American culture was because during this time period televisions were being invented and more households began to own them. Jazz was played on many T.V. shows during this era which helped spike its popularity across the United States and definitely influenced other musicians when they started writing their music. Before televisions were invented though, the majority of households owned

a radio that they could also use to listen to jazz which is how it first was discovered by many different people.

During the Modern Jazz era which was around the mid-1900s Big band swing music was played a lot. There were a couple different versions of swing music; big band was one of them. Essentially what big band swing music was known as was large orchestral type bands playing upbeat music that people could dance to. Both the black and white races began to enjoy this type of music causing the two races to end having common ground which started a very slow process of the two races coming together. Not only did jazz help start the very slow process of bringing black and white races together, but during World War II U.S. soldiers brought jazz with them to Europe causing it to become a popular music over there as well. The fact that a small part of jazz originated in Europe, and was brought to America, helped with the current form of jazz become accepted in Europe during World War II. Even though jazz progressed in American pop culture, there were definitely still some big problems with racism, as Ferris states, "...makers of recordings and the managers of commercial radio stations still severely segregated popular music intended for blacks or whites, African American music inevitably became more familiar to and popular with a greatly widening audience (Ferris 166)." Since each race enjoyed this kind of music the white people started travelling to black neighborhoods to hear the best jazz musicians play together. This helped some of the racial issues during that time period because they had to be in the same areas as each other in order to hear the music they both enjoyed. Of course, there were still some problems with racism when blacks would try and record their music. There was also a problem with the media not wanting to give blacks the credit they deserve for their hard work and creativity. As was also mentioned by Owen McNally, "Certainly, racism reared its ugly head in many insidious ways in the recording and publishing industries where black

composers and musicians were often ripped off by the white power structure. Even the media-created title, King of Swing, would have been far more justly afforded to such legendary black band leaders as Duke Ellington, Count Basie or Jimmie Lunceford. Not even the greatest black jazz artists, such as Louis Armstrong, Ellington or Charlie Parker, were exempt from the long, poisonous reach of the overt racism of their time (McNally, 1).” Even though jazz was helping with racial barriers and getting people to be able to at least tolerate the other race, there were still a lot of problems with racism. As was talked about by McNally, many music producers did not want to work with the African American race, and the media would rather give white people the awards and credit for writing and performing the music they never wrote.

Overall, the history behind jazz music in America has proved quite interesting since it has impacted the future of America in so many ways. If it had never been invented America’s racial problems would probably still be just as bad today as they were 50-plus years ago. Jazz caused black and white people to mingle and associate with each other in order to listen to the music. This in turn caused an eventual change in society itself with white people beginning to accept black people’s creativity and talent. Jazz music not only influenced America’s current music genres, but it also influenced society, causing it to change and grow. Jazz and all its subcategories have done so much for current and past American society because this country would not have the pop music it has today, and rock and roll may have never been invented which for many people would be a huge deal. Some individuals would argue that all of these things would have been invented eventually, it may have just happened later than it did, but it never would have happened the exact same way. America and other countries like Europe have jazz to thank for a lot of the music that people currently know and love, because if blues and jazz had never come about where would America be today?

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