

The Great Migration impacted America in countless ways from its very beginnings at the end of the nineteenth century. The arrival of new residents in the Northeast, West and Midwest regions altered the economic and social landscape across the entire nation. It would take however the years between 1920 and 1950, when the United States experienced an explosion in new creative arts that transformed the cultural landscape of the country. Of particular note is the emergence of black musicians, who had a profound impact not only on the black communities of America but also on the entire country. They gave African Americans a face and a voice and they gave the United States a newer, more complete, national identity. The progression of creative arts during the period known as the Jazz Age contributed immensely to breaking down racial barriers and changing the notion of what American culture should be.

Jazz and the Great Migration

How African Americans and the Great Migration Changed the Sound of American Music

Pruitt, Bernadette

Barrie Homer, History 4399, Spring 2020

Topic

This paper will analyze the impact the Great Migration has had on the American arts and cultural scene. Specifically, this paper will look at the period 1920 to 1950 and the growth of the African American arts communities in American cities including New York, Chicago, New Orleans and Houston

Introduction

The Great Migration is one of the most important events of twentieth-century America. Its presence remains today. The gradual but consistent flow of African Americans from the plantations, farms, and towns of the South, to the emerging cities of the nation reshaped the country in a multitude of ways. From its industries to its arts, the nation's socioeconomic and sociopolitical landscape owed much to the Great Migration. Perhaps one of the most significant impacts of the Great Migration is to music. From the creation of the original American music art form of jazz, the Great Migration has influenced America's musical landscape perhaps more extensively than anything else in the twentieth century.

This paper will discuss how jazz became a national music as a result of the Great Migration. It will discuss its beginnings in New Orleans to its emergence as national trend as musicians followed the routes of the Great Migration first to Chicago and then New York. The paper will also look at how the Great Migration influenced the social landscape of Houston. Although jazz has become widely regarded as a true American music genre, it can be argued that without the Great Migration, jazz would not have become recognized as such.

From the South to Chicago and Beyond

In the late nineteenth century, New Orleans stood out from other cities in the South. Situated on the banks of the Mississippi, the city had been a diverse, urban center for centuries. Architecturally it had more in common with European cities than the rest of the South and culturally, it had more in common with South America and the Caribbean than its closest neighbors¹.

This all began to change in the late 1800s towards the end of Reconstruction. Cities and towns across the South experienced levels of white on black violence that were unprecedented.² Much of the violence was instigated by the Ku Klux Klan, who openly attacked and murdered black Americans in a years-long campaign of hate and terror across the South.³ These acts of violence inspired white mobs to attack black Americans and by 1876, the support for black people that existed before Reconstruction, had dissipated significantly.⁴

During this period of upheaval, segregation continued with the adoption of “Jim Crow” laws across the South.⁵ These laws eventually seeped into New Orleans and by the twentieth century, the racial intolerance that was so pervasive in other parts of the South soon became a fixture of New Orleans society. Despite the changes in laws, the social gatherings, parades and public celebrations that made New Orleans so unique, continued. Against this social backdrop, live music in New Orleans came to the fore. Gatherings of musicians would play in a variety of public spaces and at local functions. From violin and banjo duos at cookouts to larger bands performing in parks on the weekend.⁶

¹ Deveaux, Scott and Giddins, Gary. *Jazz*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015. pg 63

² Hine et al, *The African American Odyssey*: Pearson Education Inc, 2018. Pg 359.

³ Hine et al, *The African-American Odyssey* (Pearson Education Inc,2018,) , 352.

⁴ Hine et al, *The African-American Odyssey* Pearson Education Inc, 2018.) ,359

⁵ Hine et al, *The African-American Odyssey* (Pearson Education Inc, 2018.) ,359

⁶ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 31.

It was from this musical environment that the original music art form of Jazz emerged. Though it was influenced by a multitude of musical styles in New Orleans, perhaps the music most central to its origins is the traditional songs of the marching brass bands. In the late 1800s marching brass bands were integral to New Orleans parades but they also played in numerous social events around New Orleans.⁷ Often at social functions the brass instrumentation was blended with stringed instruments such as banjo or guitar creating a new dynamic sound that moved beyond the traditional sounds of a marching band. Although there is no specific date or time, it is believed that by 1901, the first iterations of Jazz music began to be played, and while there is no specific date, one person is widely believed to be the first true jazz musician. His name was Buddy Bolden.⁸

Buddy Bolden's influence looms large over the history of jazz and even though his legacy has been disputed for decades, it has ensured that the origins of jazz music are always associated with turn of the century New Orleans. Bolden's music career was cut tragically short by mental illness and in 1907 Bolden was committed to an asylum in Jackson, Mississippi where he would live out the remainder of his years.⁹

Bolden's career was short-lived but his impression on New Orleans' musicians was profound. It can be argued that without the raucous style of music Bolden had been a driving force in creating, artists like King Oliver and Louis Armstrong would not have had the careers they had¹⁰. For the first decade and a half of the nineteenth century, New Orleans would be home to many of the originators of jazz. However, as the 1920s approached, the New Orleans music scene would undergo its own sea change, much like the rest of the South.

⁷ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) ,33

⁸ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)) 33

⁹ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 35

¹⁰ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 35

Like other African American southerners, musicians in New Orleans wanted the better life and more tolerant society that the North promised.¹¹ Over the course of four years, between 1916 and the end of 1919, more than five hundred thousand African Americans had migrated away from the rural South.¹² The movement had been slowly bubbling since the turn of the century and had grown across several states in the South. The mass migrations, mostly from rural agricultural towns in the South, also included many musicians from the South including Jelly Roll Morton and King Oliver. Like a blooming flower the music stretched out from New Orleans as its artists joined the Great Migration.

The logical destination for many African Americans migrating from Louisiana was Chicago. A large city in the Midwest, it served as the final destination for the Illinois Central Railroad route. Geography aside, for many musicians it also presented potential economic benefits. Chicago was home to record companies and large venues - prime territory for a musician trying to make a career out of their craft.¹³ Blacks, particularly with the onset of the Great Migration of World War I but also going back to the period of Reconstruction, recognized Chicago as a place of opportunity for African American migrants and a place of tolerance, particularly before the 1919 Chicago Race Riot. In 1872 the city had one black policeman patrolling the streets and enforcing the law, and, by 1876 it had elected its first black politician to the Illinois State Senate¹⁴.

By 1919 however, Chicago's population had increased far more than its residents were prepared for and waves of new migrants joining the growing black population were met with

¹¹ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 43

¹² Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 43

¹³ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, (Oxford University Press, 2011) 45

¹⁴ Hine et al, *The African-American Odyssey* (Pearson Education Inc,2018,) pg 471.

hostility¹⁵. A number of factors contributed to the tensions between the white and black population of Chicago at this time including the shortage of housing, competition for jobs, and the continuing arrival of new migrants¹⁶. All of this came to a head in late July of 1919 when a violent riot erupted during a parade for black soldiers¹⁷. The violence resulted in more than 1,000 people being made homeless, the calling the National Guard, and repeated violence against black pedestrians¹⁸. When the heat of the summer was cooled by heavy rains in August, only then was the violence finally quelled¹⁹.

By this time, many of the musicians from New Orleans had already moved to Chicago. Jelly Roll Morton had left in 1908 and had been living in Chicago on and off since. He was soon followed by Kid Ory and King Oliver, who both settled in Chicago in 1918 and 1919 respectively²⁰. By the time Louis Armstrong arrived in 1922, the riots had long subsided to a footnote in the city's recent past and New Orleans jazz was already a staple of the Chicago music scene²¹.

Louis Armstrong's first gigs in Chicago were with King Oliver's band at the Lincoln Gardens, a dancehall on the South Side of Chicago that was renowned for high quality musicianship.²² As Armstrong himself recalled of his first night "The place had begun to fill up with all the finest musicians from downtown."²³ The Lincoln Gardens is a significant part of the jazz narrative as it was one of the largest venues to host jazz bands in Chicago, it was also where white teenagers would go to see the latest music. Among those who would sneak into the venue

¹⁵ Hine et al, *The African-American Odyssey* (Pearson Education Inc,2018,) pg 465

¹⁶ Hine et al, *The African-American Odyssey* (Pearson Education Inc,2018,) pg 465

¹⁷ Hine et al, *The African-American Odyssey* (Pearson Education Inc,2018,) pg 465

¹⁸ Hine et al, *The African-American Odyssey* (Pearson Education Inc,2018,)468

¹⁹ Hine et al, *The African-American Odyssey* (Pearson Education Inc,2018,)468

²⁰ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, (Oxford University Press, 2011) 43.

²¹ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, (Oxford University Press, 2011) 45

²² Terry Teachout, *Pops*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), 64

²³ Louis Armstrong, *in His Own Words* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 50

as teenagers were Bix Beiderbecke and Benny Goodman, both of whom would become celebrated jazz musicians themselves.²⁴ By the mid-1920s, the jazz music of the South had firmly taken root in Chicago. Yet it was another city in the North that would become synonymous with the rise of black artists and musicians during the Jazz Age. The city was New York, and the most famous neighborhood during the Jazz Age was Harlem.

Harlem has always been associated with immigration/migration. Before the arrival of black migrants from the South in the early twentieth century, white Europeans four centuries earlier began relocating there from the Netherlands. Dutch New Yorkers had in fact named the area Harlem in honor of the city of Haarlem in their homeland.²⁵ Decades later, however, the Great Migration led the way in a geographic shift and by 1920 the vicinity's demographics had changed for good. It was during this time that the community's most prominent African American cultural figures put Harlem firmly on the map. Historians and literary scholars refer to this era as the Harlem Renaissance, a time when Harlem became a magnet for many black intellectuals and artists.

It was the musicians and singers, however that first gained the attention of the world beyond Harlem's boundaries. New music venues in Harlem became attractive destinations for wealthy white New Yorkers who wanted something different from the restrained surroundings of Carnegie Hall. One of the standout venues was the Savoy Ballroom. The Savoy, as it became known, was one of the most progressive venues of the era. Encouraged by the numbers of affluent white patrons who came to Harlem and wanted to dance, the Savoy was fully integrated when it opened in 1926.²⁶ On the dancefloor at the Ballroom, black and white Americans danced

²⁴ Terry Teachout, *Pops*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), 64

²⁵ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 91.

²⁶ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 117

alongside each other and with each other. Moreover, the integration at this venue meant that soon the dances learned in Harlem were soon being danced in halls in other parts of New York and then across the nation.²⁷ The importance of the Harlem Renaissance cannot be understated. It contributed to breaking down some of the racial barriers that existed in American society by integrating dancehalls and opening music clubs that played to white and black audiences.²⁸ Beyond Harlem, venues were hiring black jazz musicians to fill their floors. Bandleaders like Fletcher Henderson held residencies in downtown Manhattan. Henderson's months-long residency at the Roseland Ballroom in 1924, during which Henderson invited Louis Armstrong to join the band was a seminal moment for American music. The residency turned into a tour and according to Armstrong they were the "first colored big band to hit the road."²⁹ The band's tour of New England during 1924 and 1925 opened jazz up to new audiences and thus began the integration of jazz into the mainstream.

By the end of the decade, the Jazz Age was over and the nation was heading into the Great Depression. The impact, of the Jazz Age, however, continued to be felt in music clubs all over the nation. Even though the clubs of Harlem and Chicago had ushered in a new music movement, it was not confined to these cities. Although high numbers of black migrants moved to Chicago and New York, many others migrated to other parts of the South where other opportunities presented themselves.

One such city was Houston, Texas. During the same time as the Harlem Renaissance, Houston was a city with a significant black population and an emerging cultural scene of its own.

³⁰ Houston's San Felipe District was the epicenter for black-owned businesses and entertainment

²⁷ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 117

²⁸ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 118

²⁹ Louis Armstrong, *in His Own Words* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 93

³⁰ Tyna L. Steptoe, *Houston Bound* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 51

services, including a music hall that had been opened at the end of World War One in the four-storey Pilgrim Hall.³¹ The city wasn't New York or Chicago, but it did not have to be. Houston had its own jazz musicians, many of whom had grown up in the area and learned their craft playing in the variety of music halls across town. While Houston did not have the Savoy or the Lincoln Gardens, it did have the Eldorado Ballroom and the Bronze Peacock, the latter catering to an integrated clientele.³² Crucially, these venues contributed to the immersion of jazz into the mainstream as white audiences paid to see local musicians such as Arnett Cobb, Illinois Jacquet and Milton Larkin. The Houston musicians were the epitome of the New Negro Movement. Despite the nation being in the grips of the Great Depression, they were defying the general trend and making a good living as full time musicians in the South, able to secure themselves financial independence³³. As their careers grew however, they all eventually migrated out of the South, taking professional engagements with a variety of bands across the nation, something that would not have been possible had so many other musicians not been part of the Great Migration and paved the way for future generations of black musicians.

Conclusion

The emergence of jazz music as an art form coincided with the Great Migration. The result was an expansion of a localized African American music style that prior to the Great Migration had only existed in the marching bands of New Orleans. Had it not been for the Great Migration, it is likely that jazz would not be considered an original American music today.

Furthermore, without the Great Migration it is hard to say how much creativity there would have been in Harlem and the South Side during the 1920s. There certainly would not have

³¹ Tyna L. Steptoe, *Houston Bound* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 54

³² Tyna L. Steptoe, *Houston Bound* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 192

³³ Tyna L. Steptoe, *Houston Bound* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 166

been a Jazz Age, which means that many of the other performing arts such as dance and theater would have taken a different route as well. The importance of the Jazz Age and the Great Migration cannot be stated enough. One would not have existed without the other.

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