

## READING: All That Jazz



Do you ever stop and listen to the sounds around you? Have you noticed that indoor sounds are different from outdoor sounds? Concentrate for a minute. It doesn't matter if it seems noisy or quiet; concentrate hard. You will hear sounds you were unaware of before. What you are hearing is the music of your world. Imagine what the music is like- that natural-sound music- if you are sitting on a California beach near the Pacific Ocean. Then pretend you are skiing in Colorado's Rocky Mountains and listen to the sounds around you. And then open your ears and take an imaginary walk down Broadway in New York City. Think of the

differences between city sounds and country sounds, between sea sounds and mountain sounds. Some places, of course, have more sounds than other places.

New Orleans is one of those places with a lot of music in the air. If you look at a map, you'll find New Orleans down in Louisiana at the mouth of the Mississippi River. You can understand that New Orleans has water sounds: sounds from shrimp boats and tankers in the Gulf of Mexico, sounds of water lapping the shores of the city's Lake Pontchartrain, and dock and riverboat sounds from the great Mississippi.

Because New Orleans has a warm climate, people are out of doors most of the time. So there are people-on-the-street sounds. Today in New Orleans, you can also hear cars, trucks, motorcycles, and airplanes.

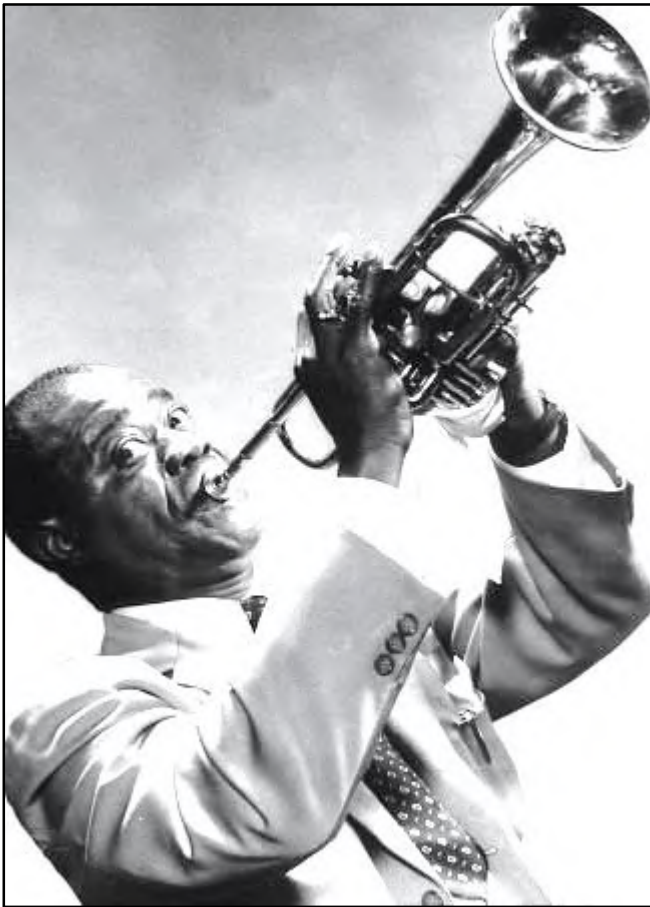
Back in 1900, the music of the streets was different. Oh, there were many of the same people sounds- but there were also chickens and pigs in the city, and they scratched and squealed. There was the clippety-clop of horses' hoofs, and the rolling sounds of wooden-wheeled wagons, the hoots of trains, and the sad notes of riverboat foghorns.

Some of the people sounds were different then, too. There were no big supermarkets, so people bought ice, milk, bread, fresh fruit, vegetables, meat, and other things from the backs of those wagons. The wagon drivers had to tell people what they were selling. Usually they sang their message. It was the same idea as a TV-commercial jingle, but it might go like this: *I got tomatoes big and fine, I got watermelons red to the rind.* Or like this: *My mule is white, the coal is black; I sell coal two bits a sack.* Imagine a whole lot of street peddlers all singing their wares at the same time.

Now, on top of all this, New Orleans had, and has, an unusual mixture of peoples. The city was settled by the French in 1718. The French language stuck. Some of the sounds and words of that language can be heard in

New Orleans even today. Many of the French and Spanish men who came to New Orleans in the 18<sup>th</sup> century married Africa-American women. Their biracial children, called **Creoles**, often spoke French or Spanish as well as English.

Out of the sounds of New Orleans, and the mixed heritage of its people, a new music arose. It was American music- unlike anything heard in the world before. It combined the rhythm and drum beat of Africa with the instruments and heritage of Europe. It added a dash from the spirituals of the black Protestant churches, and much from the talents of some black musical geniuses who could be heard in street bands and nightclubs. It was called **jazz**. It was unique- which means totally unlike anything before it. Have you ever mixed red paint with yellow? The color you get is not red, or yellow. It is orange. It is unique. Jazz is like that. It is not African music, or European music. It is uniquely American.



In 1900 nobody much outside of New Orleans had ever heard of it. But in the 1920s jazz began to spread: first to Chicago, then across the country, and then around the whole world.

The best way to learn about jazz is to listen to it. You could start with one of the greatest jazz performers: **Louis Armstrong(left)**. Louis was one of those boys who sold coal in New Orleans for two bits a sack. He was very poor. Then someone gave him a trumpet. It must have been a good angel. Louis Armstrong was born to play the trumpet. People began calling him *satchelmouth*, because his cheeks seemed to hold a suitcase full of air. “*Satchmo*” was soon playing on riverboats that went up and down the Mississippi. Then he went to Chicago and began making history.

*Satchmo* had a big grin, but when he played the trumpet he closed his eyes and blew clear, heavenly tones. Listen to some of his recordings and see what you think. As soon as you start listening you will learn something: no two jazz performances are exactly alike. Composers who compose European-style music write down notes and expect musicians to play those notes just as they are written. That isn't so in true jazz. You see, an important part of jazz is

**improvisation**. Improvising means doing your own thing. Jazz musicians talk to each other with their instruments. It is something like African drum talk. One musician leads with a theme. Then someone answers that theme. He plays the theme his own way. Then maybe the first musician improvises with another variation on the theme. Soon the whole band is playing with it. Does that sound wild? It isn't easy to do it well.

People in the 1920s were wild about jazz. The 1920s was called the Jazz Age. When the Jazz Age '20s ended- with a big thud called the Depression- jazz continued to grow in popularity. Today, many people call it America's most original art form.