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One King to Rule Them All

Abstract

He battled for superiority over his fellow musicians in the shady nightclubs of New Orleans, led his great Creole Jazz Band in the early 1920s, and stood tall in the face of racial prejudice. Joe “King” Oliver was the type of man to not just survive but thrive—like any true king would.

Keywords

Early jazz, King Oliver, Creole Jazz Band, New Orleans, Louis Armstrong, Chicago

Disciplines

African American Studies | Cultural History | Music

Comments

Written for FYS 118 - Why Jazz Matters: The Legacy of Pops, Duke, and Miles.

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Tyler Mann
December 9th, 2016
FYS: Why Jazz Matters

One King to Rule Them All

Kid, Pops, Duke, and even Jelly Roll were nicknames of some of the greatest Dixieland jazz players of all time, yet only one man was special enough to maintain the title of “King” throughout his entire career. To fully understand the significance of one of the most influential jazz musicians of the early jazz era, we must first understand the genre that was being influenced. Dixieland jazz, one of the few true American art forms, sprung up in and around New Orleans as the various cultures of working class people intertwined. Mississippi blues collided with gospel, work songs, and ragtime music to create a sound that was irresistible to all who heard it. The swing feel brought people from all socioeconomic statuses to their feet as they desired to let this fresh new sound take control of popular culture for many decades. Dixieland jazz owes much of its explosive growth to the more than suitable conditions that New Orleans presented for the budding genre. With a plethora of dance halls, night clubs, and other music venues in New Orleans in the early 1900’s, jazz had countless opportunities to seize the hearts of those who listened or danced. For this same reason however, the competition among musicians was at an all-time high, allowing of the crème de la crème to prosper. New Orleans was and still is to this day an extremely cosmopolitan city that has a wide variety of cultures all looking to combine their greatest features. The mingling of ethnicities in New Orleans was unlike anything in any other American city at the time and this was highly beneficial to jazz’s growth in popularity in many ethnic groups. Despite all this, New Orleans was far from the final destination of Dixieland jazz’s influence. With the closing of Storyville in 1917, a rough part of New Orleans with many nightclubs and legal prostitution, and the Great Migration beginning as

early as 1910, where these oppressed people travelled to would soon be the new hotbeds of the genre.¹ Chicago and New York City were amiable new centers for a genre to continue to grow and eventually evolve as countless innovators got their hands to the page or the horn. But prior to the development of early Dixieland jazz in those northern cities, New Orleans was the city to conquer for any aspiring musician. Battling in cutting contests and for stage time in Storyville, a young black cornetist by the name of Joseph Oliver was so superior to his competitors that the title of “King” was soon the only suitable name. Dixieland jazz swept the nation in the early 20th century behind the efforts of great men like Joe “King” Oliver, who not only produced works that inspired and challenged the future generations of musicians but also embodied the idea of a successful African-American musician in a time of omnipresent prejudice.

Born on May 11th, 1885, Joe was raised in various homes in New Orleans as his mother bounced around a handful of wealthy white homes as a cook and servant. This sort of upbringing was not uncommon for the time since some of the only available jobs for African-American women were as servants. Little is known about Oliver’s father since even Oliver himself did not know him but many historians speculate that he may have worked on a plantation in Donaldsville, Louisiana. Customary for the time, Joseph was participating in child marching bands as young as ten years old and although he started on the trombone, he quickly separated himself from those around him with his talent on the cornet. At the age of fourteen Oliver spent his time working as a butler while also being a key member in multiple local brass bands where he was slowly starting to get his name out as a musician. Unfortunately, Oliver’s childhood wasn’t without heartache, he lost his vision in his left eye at some point in his early teens and his

¹ Raeburn, Bruce Boyd. "The Storyville Exodus Revisited, or Why Louis Armstrong Didn't Leave in November." *Southern Quarterly*, 2015, 10-33.

mother passed away in 1900. Her departure from his life led to his older half-sister Victoria Davis trying to raise a bright-eyed young black boy in a highly corruptible city.²

Although it's agreed upon that Oliver was the last to claim the crown as New Orleans' King of Jazz, he certainly wasn't the first. The most widely accepted chronology of such a prestigious title started with a man by the name of Buddy Bolden whose success led to the coining of the phrase "King Bolden" as early as 1904. Nicknames among musicians were a commonplace but a word like "king" brought a whole different level to self-promotion and perceived public opinion. In the ruthless musical world that Storyville was, to display musical dominance over another, a musician had to successfully cut their competitor. In the simplest of terms, to cut someone is to outperform them in a head to head improvisational battle. A battle like this is then won or loss based on the crowd's reaction to each person's performance. Moments like these made or broke careers and as one may suspect, a cut one night in Storyville transcended a young cornetist from a star to a king. Following Bolden as king of jazz was trumpeter Manuel Perez who then had the title taken away by the great Freddie Keppard.³ All of these men were inspirations to the generations of African-American children who grew up watching them prosper both musically and professionally. These men are regarded as the first and beginning of the second generation of jazz musicians with the main distinction between generations being that the second generation put more emphasis on improvisational ability than

² "Oliver, Joe "King" 1885." *Contemporary Black Biography*. . *Encyclopedia.com*. (November 15, 2016). <<http://www.encyclopedia.com/education/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/oliver-joe-king-1885>>

³ Barnhart, Scotty. *The World of Jazz Trumpet*. Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2005, 19-38.

to collective sound.⁴ For black youth to see a black man not working under the hand of a wealthy white landowner but instead living lavishly in the spoils of the entertainment industry was extremely positive for their own aspirations. Oliver officially received king status after Kid Ory, one of the great early jazz trombonists, called him such for cutting Freddie Keppard one night at Pete Lalas saloon club.⁵ From this crowning moment until his own prodigy surpassed him, Joe “King” Oliver was the greatest cornetist the world of jazz had ever heard.

Despite what African-Americans were adding to American culture, all was not well socially in the nation. Under Theodore Roosevelt, the United States government took a passive role in attempting to alleviate the racial tension that was becoming more and more detrimental to the country. With a glut of race riots in Georgia, Texas, and Indiana in 1906 alone, the black community felt isolated from the rest of the nation and was in desperate need of respect.⁶ While the entertainment industry was acting as an outlet for African-Americans to support themselves financially, it wasn't always clear to what extent the white audience would respect these black musicians when they were off the stage. How strange it must have been to live in a country where you can perform before a white crowd and receive the most exuberant of applauses but then have to bite your tongue when those same men and women refuse to let you eat in their restaurant or stay in their hotel. Alas, in the beginning of the 20th century in the United States, this was the best treatment a black person could get, artistic respect. African-Americans were not

⁴ Mississippi, University Of, and Bill C. Malone. *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, Volume 12: Music*. Edited by Charles R. Wilson. Vol. 12. University of North Carolina Press, 2008, 77-86.

⁵ Giddins, Gary. *Visions of Jazz: The First Century*. 1st ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

⁶ "American Racial History Timeline, 1900-1960." *Occidental Dissent*. 2012. Accessed November 16, 2016. <<http://www.occidentaldissent.com/american-racial-history-timeline-2/american-racial-history-timeline-1900-1960/>>

the only minority group being persecuted in the United States at this time though because as early as 1901, the California state government was passing legislation that segregated the “Asian-American” community.⁶ Contrary to the social problems plaguing the nation, economically speaking, American industry was on the cutting edge of utter global dominance. Regardless of their questionable business tactics or morals, men like John D. Rockefeller in the oil industry, J.P. Morgan in banking, and Andrew Carnegie in the steel industry turned America into the global super power that it still is to this day. While sometimes abusing their workers with unfit working conditions, absolute-minimum pay and no loyalty, the efforts of these captains of industry ultimately led to a higher standard of living for Americans. Also overlapping with Oliver’s rise to fame in New Orleans was William Howard Taft’s presidency, lasting from 1909 to 1913. The most significant detail of this administration to Joe “King” Oliver’s life was that they drastically reduced federal patronage for African-Americans, making life all the more difficult for Oliver’s friends and family who relied so heavily on that support.⁷

Establishing oneself in the competitive but local music scene and establishing oneself nationally are two very different stages in an artist’s career. By 1907, despite working with many of the finest bands in New Orleans, Oliver still maintained a day job as a butler to help ensure a stable income. It was also around this time that Oliver reconnected with a childhood sweetheart by the name of Stella and got married. To get a sense of the passion and drive that Joe “King” Oliver had while in New Orleans, some of the bands he was working with included “the Melrose Brass Band, the Olympia Band, the Onward Brass Band, the Magnolia Band, the Eagle Band, the Original Superior Band, Allen’s Brass Band, Richard M. Jones’ Four Hot Hounds and Kid

⁷ "American Racial History Timeline, 1900-1960." Occidental Dissent. 2012. Accessed November 16, 2016. <<http://www.occidentaldissent.com/american-racial-history-timeline-2/american-racial-history-timeline-1900-1960/>. >

Ory”.⁸ This was the stage in Oliver’s career where he honed his craft, found his personal sound and began to demonstrate that his work was what great early Dixieland jazz was supposed to sound like. Every aspect of New Orleans could not have been more ideal for a jazz hotbed until the legendary Storyville was closed in 1917 and treatment of African-Americans was becoming increasingly questionable. Somewhat on the forefront of the movement, Joe “King” Oliver headed north to Chicago in March of 1919. Heading to Chicago for a fresh start in the music industry was not an original idea that Oliver had but instead just a glamourized story in the much larger collection of stories that was the Great Migration. Between 1910 and 1930, an estimated 500,000 black Americans headed to the North in hopes of better treatment and access to new job opportunities.⁹

Already a king, Joseph Oliver turned the Windy City into his kingdom within a matter of years. When he had first gotten to Chicago, he immediately became a major member and clear centerpiece in two different bands. He joined an ensemble led by clarinetist Lawrence Duhe and another ensemble led by bassist Bill Johnson who had long been encouraging Oliver to join him up North. Joseph’s name quickly exploded onto the Chicago scene since Duhe’s band played at the Dreamland Café, a perennial jazz hotspot, while Johnson’s played at the Royal Gardens, a mafia favorite. Oliver was no longer the part-time butler, part-time jazzman that he was back in New Orleans, no, he was New Orleans’ cornet king and was going to be treated as such. Louis Armstrong, an eventual pinnacle of showmanship himself, would always recollect on the style and presence that Oliver possessed both in New Orleans as well as Chicago. Standing at 6’4”,

⁸ Yanow, Scott. *The Trumpet Kings: The Players Who Shaped the Sound of Jazz Trumpet*. San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2001.

⁹ "American Racial History Timeline, 1900-1960." *Occidental Dissent*. 2012. Accessed November 16, 2016. <<http://www.occidentaldissent.com/american-racial-history-timeline-2/american-racial-history-timeline-1900-1960/>>

Oliver was by no means a small man and his taste in fine suits gave him a larger than life feel to those who met him. However, what may have been in part exaggeration back in his New Orleans days was nothing but the real deal when living in Chicago. With the taste of fame, money and the excitement of travel all swirled up inside of him, it really should come with no surprise that “King” Oliver pounced on the chance to travel west to California with his hometown friend and phenomenal trombonist, Kid Ory. While not a complete failure, their excursion in California was more short-lived than they had imagined and Oliver ended up back in Chicago in 1922 on the brink of starting arguably the greatest chapter of his career.

On June 17th, 1922, Joseph “King” Oliver introduced his Creole Jazz Band to both the Lincoln Gardens Café and the world. This iconic band is often given the credit of making “the first important Negro recording”¹⁰ which also took place during Oliver’s first year back to Chicago in 1922. The membership of the band included Honoré Dutrey on trombone; Ed Garland, string bass; Lil Hardin, piano; Johnny Dodds, clarinet, and “Baby” Dodds on the drums. Aware of his eventual musical decline and the importance of recruiting talent as the bandleader, Oliver made one of the most important business decisions in all of jazz history by summoning the one and only Louis Armstrong to join him on cornet. The combination of two phenomenal cornetists in a single band separated Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band from all of their competitors. In the next two years they recorded for four different companies, Paramount, Gennett, Okeh and Columbia. With these companies, 35 to 37 sides were produced and despite some of the defects of these early acoustic recordings, these pieces were extremely influential.¹⁰ One of the greatest works by Joseph “King” Oliver was “Canal Street Blues” which was a twelve bar blues recorded in 1923 for Gennett Records. This piece was very true to Oliver’s New Orleans roots and is

¹⁰ Blesh, Rudi. *Shining Trumpets: A History of Jazz*. New York: Da Capo Pr., 1976

considered a Dixieland jazz standard. Long and impressive cornet phrases contrasting with bluesy improvised melodies on the clarinet epitomize the sound Oliver strived to achieve.¹¹ This recording is not only a shining example of the brilliance within Johnny Dodds but also a timeless piece of cooperative polyphony which was a cornerstone of Oliver's jazz style. Another notable piece that was recorded in 1923 was "Sobbin' Blues" which can be heard as the aural evidence of the unparalleled bond between Louis and Oliver because of its outstanding duet breaks between the two legendary musicians. The final song worth mentioning from Oliver's early days in Chicago is "Dippermouth Blues" because of the King's "serene three-chorus solo...that reverberated throughout jazz for twenty-five years".¹² With songs like the few mentioned above and many more that have been all etched into the stone of great early jazz, "King" Oliver's Creole Jazz Band was a spectacle to see. "The glory of the Creole Jazz Band is it sums up...all that went into the New Orleans way of making music: its joy, its warmth of expression, its Old World pre-war charm, its polyphonic complexity, its easy relaxed swing, ...its lovely instrumental textures, and its discipline and logic."¹³ To try to quantify the cultural significance or enduring influence of Joe "King" Oliver's Creole Jazz Band during the early 20th century would both be impossible and detrimental to the simple beauty that the band has maintained over the decades.

Despite being considered the peak of Joe "King" Oliver's career, race relations were at an all-time low with a variety of events showing little social justice progress occurring in the United

¹¹ Riccardi, Ricky. "Canal Street Blues." Canal Street Blues. January 23, 2009. Accessed January 22, 2017. <http://dippermouth.blogspot.com/2009/01/canal-street-blues.html>.

¹² Balliett, Whitney. *American Musicians II: Seventy-two Portraits in Jazz*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996.

¹³ Schuller, Gunther. *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968.

States. In 1913, Woodrow Wilson took office as the 28th president of the United States and was viewed by the vast majority of the nation as a symbol of liberal progression. This was not the case on the issue of race. One action Wilson made during his presidency was to issue an executive order segregating the federal government's operations in Washington D.C. An even more deplorable act undertaken by President Wilson on the topic of race was the segregating of the United States Navy and the replacement of African-Americans who held appointed offices with white people.¹⁴ Executive decisions like the two previously mentioned only further alienated the black community and made racial progress seem all the more impossible when even a man like Woodrow Wilson wasn't making any positive strides towards it. With World War I starting in 1914, the US economy quickly caught steam as the production of wartime goods was at unprecedented levels globally. With a greater demand for labor to supply the new demand for war goods, more and more Americans were finding work in factories. Nothing is better for the entertainment industry than the average American's income increasing because in the eyes of the musician, that translates to seats and records sold. Chicago's economy in particular was booming with many factories acting as major suppliers of war goods to the countries the United States supported. Possibly the most famous and notable of social events to occur in Wilson's presidency was the summer of 1919 often referred to as the "Red Summer" since roughly 25 distinct race riots broke out across the nation and exemplified the unmitigated racial tension in the nation. Due to his lack of social commentary, I would have to imagine that "King" Oliver saw his role as a successful black musician as more of inspiration for the youth rather than a platform for social justice. It's hard to blame Oliver for his lack of commentary during his career

¹⁴ "American Racial History Timeline, 1900-1960." *Occidental Dissent*. 2012. Accessed November 16, 2016. <<http://www.occidentaldissent.com/american-racial-history-timeline-2/american-racial-history-timeline-1900-1960/>>

considering that his musical peak was in the 1920-30's, being outspoken would have destroyed his career that he had worked so hard to establish. Socially speaking, not much changed with the entry of the Harding Administration in 1921 and this is best explained by the Supreme Court ruling for *Ozawa v. United States* in 1922.¹³ The concept of "American justice" stood on little ground when the highest court in the land, ruled to confirm policy that refused to grant American citizenship to Japanese immigrants. In spite of the growing economy and culture, the United States had many internal flaws revolving around the treatment of its own people and was in dire need of extreme social reform.

There are moments that make careers, like Oliver's cutting of Freddie Keppard in Pete Lala's saloon club, and moments that break careers, like Louis Armstrong's departure from the Creole Jazz Band in 1924. While not nearly as instantaneous as Oliver's crowning in New Orleans, the loss of Armstrong can clearly be traced back as the beginning of slippery slope for Joe "King" Oliver's career. Seeing the Creole Jazz Band as a shell of what it used to be in conjunction with a decline in business at the Lincoln Gardens, Oliver decided to try his hand at a new flavor of jazz, big band. In February of 1925, Oliver debuted his Dixie Syncopators at the Plantation Café in Chicago and produced some of his last great works. His cornet break on the song "Snag It" as well as his original piece "Doctor Jazz" are agreed upon by most jazz historians as his best work with this band.¹⁵ The final twinkles of a fading star. From the perspective of Joe "King" Oliver, a sad musical power shift occurred in Chicago in 1926 when most jazz enthusiasts considered Jelly Roll Morton to be the jazz icon of the Windy City.¹⁶ No longer dominating the city's music scene, Oliver saw Chicago as a hotbed that could've

¹⁵ Yanow, Scott. *The Trumpet Kings: The Players Who Shaped the Sound of Jazz Trumpet*. San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2001.

¹⁶ Blesh, Rudi. *Shining Trumpets: A History of Jazz*. New York: Da Capo Pr., 1976.

swallowed his career up like he had seen New Orleans do to so many artists back in his day. The band ended up at the Savoy Ballroom in New York City after a tour throughout the Midwest in 1927 and this venue was the last respectable establishment to be considered the home of the great Joe “King” Oliver. His work at the Savoy Ballroom led to Oliver being presented with the opportunity for a long-term contract at the up-and-coming Cotton Club but his hubris got the best of him and he declined due to the unimpressive pay. This self-destructive business decision allowed for the great Duke Ellington to take the gig at the Cotton Club and blossom into the greatest jazz bandleader of all time. Unfortunately timed to accompany Oliver’s gum disease, the Savoy closed and the Dixie Syncopators disbanded. Oliver made his final recordings leading a ten-piece orchestra for the Victor Talking Machine Company. Despite being the headline musician, Oliver’s presence was far less than it had ever been with any of his previous bands, exclusively due to how painful it was for him to play the instrument he loved. Oliver was losing his teeth due to a very poor diet throughout his childhood and adolescence and this made his once crisp sound hard to recapture and painful when he did. An act of heroism is present on the 1929 recording of “Too Late” where Oliver put forth arguably the most exciting recording of his career despite the unimaginable amount of pain that it caused him.¹⁷ 1929 was not a year of glory for anyone in the United States with the greatest stock market crash in American history occurring that year. No expendable income meant little to no money being spent on acquiring records or attending performances so musicians across all genres suffered alongside their fellow American. Already well on his way out professionally and health-wise, Oliver’s recordings ended in 1931, setting up the once great king of jazz for a sad final chapter to his life.

¹⁷ Yanow, Scott. *The Trumpet Kings: The Players Who Shaped the Sound of Jazz Trumpet*. San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2001.

For seven years, Joe “King” Oliver, or at least what was left of him, toured the South and Midwest with a subpar jazz band. Misfortunes began to pile up, a Chicago bank failure left Oliver with little money, performing became increasingly tough with the Great Depression in full swing, the music world had passed him, and perhaps the most sad, playing his beloved cornet was causing him immeasurable amounts of pain. Far from how one would expect the end of a king’s life to be, Oliver was so desperate for money that he ended his life selling fruits from a stand and working as a part-time janitor in poolroom in Savannah Georgia. He died on April 8th, 1938, at the age of 52, toothless and destitute.

For every genre of music there are a handful of individuals whose contributions are truly incalculable due to the ripple effect that their careers had. Joseph “King” Oliver is man who all proceeding jazz musicians owe a great deal to for without his work, there is no way to say for sure that jazz would be the same. Oliver was the main inspiration for a young Louis Armstrong who grew up to be maybe the greatest jazz musician to ever live. He took the time to mentor Armstrong and this fact alone should have Oliver’s name preserved in the jazz archives. It’s hard to argue with the fact that Oliver started Louis’s fantastic career considering that Joe was the one to bring him to Chicago. But of course, Louis was not the only famous musician inspired by the king. Bubber Miley, Tommy Ladnier, and Muggsy Spanier were all influenced by Oliver’s pioneering work with plunger mutes on the cornet.¹⁸ This influence extends beyond just those who heard him play though because the infamous Miles Davis was renowned for his muted trumpet playing and that somber human sound that he sought after originated with the king. Oliver’s influence on Duke Ellington was the way in which he led his Creole Jazz Band. To be considered one of the great Dixieland jazz bands doesn’t come without intelligent band leading

¹⁸ Yanow, Scott. *The Trumpet Kings: The Players Who Shaped the Sound of Jazz Trumpet*. San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2001.

and Oliver displayed plenty of that. He was strict when necessary, always honest, hard-working, and extremely determined to leave a legacy. Duke's desire to always try to improve the overall talent of his band as well as regulate the member's strong egos were actions taken straight out of the band leading bible that Oliver left behind. Even though Joe "King" Oliver's influence permeates across all subgenres of jazz, his importance to Dixieland jazz is best illustrated by the fact that the Dixieland revivalist group, Lu Watter's Yerba Buena Jazz Band, modeled much of their work after him in the 1940's.¹⁷ If the title of greatest jazz musician is reserved for Louis Armstrong; the greatest jazz bandleader, Duke Ellington, and the greatest jazz innovator, Miles Davis, then the only appropriate title for the king himself is the greatest jazz influence.

I entered this seminar and had the great story of jazz told to me starting on chapter "Louis Armstrong". I was quickly informed that that was not the true origin of the genre, just a good place to start. I knew there was the prelude, and was drawn in by the idea that these heroic epics were as reliable as the smoke that filled those hazy saloon clubs so many years ago. No, no not every detail of Joe "King" Oliver's origins are set in stone but there's a natural beauty in the mystery. What's real and what matters is the music he created and the broad way he influenced the great American genre that is jazz. I sit here today listening to Kendrick Lamar's "u" with a vastly superior knowledge of all that came before this beautiful great-grandchild of jazz. The instrumentation has both meaning and history that was certainly not present prior to this fall semester of 2016. I'm aware of the history behind Kendrick's bluesy voice on the second part of the track and how that mood has long been the defining sound of jazz. I wouldn't be listening to Kendrick Lamar today if Joe "King" Oliver didn't contribute all that he did in New Orleans, Chicago, and beyond. His influence is greater than that of just jazz music, he stood tall as a black musician in a time of life-threatening racial prejudice. No respect was given to Joseph Oliver that

he did not earn at least three times over. All that Oliver has behind his name today was put there thanks to his blood, sweat, teeth, and tears. How does one quantify the significance of influencing three of the greatest jazz musicians to ever live, personally ensuring the success of jazz master, Louis Armstrong, as well as producing works that are still viewed as the standards of early jazz nearly one hundred years after their conception? “King” Oliver’s impact on jazz wasn’t a pebble tossed into a lake but instead a boulder. Despite only living for fifty-two years and being a professional for thirty, Joe “King” Oliver’s fingerprints are visible on all that is jazz since the first time the cold brass of a cornet touched his golden lips.

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