

LOUISIANA MUSIC: A PRIMER

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When people visit New Orleans, they'll inevitably hear music at clubs like Preservation Hall, Snug Harbor and the Palm Court, or they'll experience it being played outdoors in historic Jackson Square or swingin' down a street during a second line parade. Often, they'll exclaim, "Oh, this is jazz? I didn't think I liked jazz, but I like *this*."

New Orleans is the birthplace of jazz. That used to be debated by folks arguing in favor of hubs of the genre such as New York and Chicago. The discussion quieted after the publication of *In Search of Buddy Bolden: First Man of Jazz*. Historian Don Marquis' book documents the life of the New Orleans native trumpeter (1877-1931), and also offers glimpses of the times and his remarkable sound. The Bolden family house still stands at 2309 First Street.

Jelly Roll Morton (1890-1941) would undoubtedly have disputed the book's title, as the New Orleans pianist often proclaimed he invented jazz. Morton, known almost as much for his arrogant demeanor as his impressive body of work, was certainly pivotal in jazz's creation. He rose from playing ragtime piano in brothels in New Orleans' Storyville District (shut down in 1917 and demolished in the 1930s) to achieving international fame.



New Orleans' beloved Satchmo.

Many jazz artists, including now luminary figures such as cornetist Joe "King" Oliver (1885-1938), took the music north in search of more lucrative environs. New Orleans' most famous musician, the renowned trumpeter and vocalist Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong, took it a step

further and made jazz popular around the world. Though the charismatic Armstrong (1901-1971) moved away from his hometown in 1922, he remains beloved. The New Orleans municipal airport has been named for him and a bronze statue of the trumpeter reigns over a park named in his honor. Armstrong Park, located in the Treme neighborhood, hosts numerous festivals. Within the park's gates is Congo Square, which holds a significant place in New Orleans music. It was there that on Sunday afternoons slaves were allowed to retain their African drumming and dancing traditions. Those vibrations can be heard today in the unique Mardi Gras Indian rhythms and ultimately in jazz itself. Just a block from the park, the Backstreet Cultural Museum celebrates the Mardi Gras Indians, jazz funerals and brass band-led social aid and pleasure club parades.

The glory of jazz in New Orleans is that classic jazz and its purveyors remain influential to those who play music today. Artists such as Dr. Michael White, who can be heard at the jazz brunch at the InterContinental Hotel, has seriously studied jazz's early players such as fellow clarinetist George Lewis. White has become renowned as a keeper of the traditional flame and for expanding the genre. Trumpeter and vocalist Kermit Ruffins, one-time member of the Rebirth Brass Band, spent his

formative musical years watching endless videos of his idol, Louis Armstrong. He shares Satchmo's sense of showmanship and upbeat attitude that is on display when he fronts the Barbeque Swingers at his own club, Kermit's Treme Speakeasy,



Kermit Ruffins.

his longstanding gig at Vaughan's in the Bywater neighborhood, and all around town. The Rebirth blazed on to win a Grammy and tears the roof off the Maple Leaf Bar on Tuesdays. Jazz, being an improvised, freedom-loving music, naturally continues to evolve. Modern jazz took hold in New Orleans in the 1950s, when local musicians were exposed to trailblazers when great players such as he arrived in the city to perform. Most artists eager to explore the new music played their regular jobs and then got together to woodshed afterward.

Pianist Ellis Marsalis was among those to seriously delve into the modern sounds. The patriarch of the musical Marsalis family—saxophonist Branford, trumpeter Wynton, trombonist Delfeayo and drummer/vibraphonist Jason—Ellis continues his pursuit of modern jazz leading a band every Friday night at Snug Harbor.

While residing in New York in the early 1980s, Ellis' son Wynton put New Orleans modern jazz on the map. The trumpeter's accomplishments, as well as those of his brother Branford, opened the doors for many of this city's up-and-coming players. Those who benefited from the brothers' success include the likes of trumpeters Nicholas Payton and Irvin Mayfield. Mayfield can be heard regularly at his Bourbon Street club, Irvin Mayfield's Jazz Playhouse in the Royal Sonesta Hotel. He's also at the head of two Grammy-winning ensembles, the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra and Los Hombres Calientes.



Musical patriarch Ellis Marsalis.

Both Delfeayo and Jason Marsalis are also very active on the New Orleans modern jazz scene. The trombonist directs his Uptown Jazz Orchestra on Wednesday nights at Snug and Jason gets the call whenever a solid, expressive drummer is required. That New Orleans boasts a wealth of musical families—Marsalis, Jordan, French, Neville, Andrews, Brunious, Johnson, Frazier, Brooks, Boutté—ensures the continuum of jazz in the city where the music was born.

To learn more about JAZZ and the many more genres that define Louisiana music, check out LouisianaSoundtrack.com.

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