

**Jewish Jazzmen in New Orleans, 1890-1940: an Overview**

This postcard from 1921 leaves little doubt that violinist Charlie Fischbein had made the transition from "legit" player to jazzman.

Among the competing ethnic claims to priority in the "creation" of jazz in the Crescent City, Jews are conspicuous by their absence. African-Americans have Armstrong, Dodds, and King Oliver; the Afro-French claim Morton, Bechet and Ory; Italians will point out the contributions of Nick LaRocca, Leon Roppolo, or Wingy Manone. Then it gets complicated: clarinetist Larry Shields of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band was Irish and Hungarian; Alcide "Yellow" Nuñez

was an Isleño - a Canary Islander; Martin Abraham - better known as "Chink" Martin - was Mexican and Filipino. Clearly, the tendency to explain jazz as a kind of hierarchically-arranged mosaic of racial and ethnic musical traits is fraught with difficulties and, in my opinion, should be avoided as both too complicated and too simplistic. Ethnic orientation presents, in many cases, an excellent point of departure, as long as it does not become an end in itself.

Having made my disclaimer, let me now suggest that despite a perceived "lack" of Jewish involvement in the early development of jazz in New Orleans, the idea that Jews have played an influential role in the broader evolution of jazz has been widely accepted in jazz literature. In *Yankee Blues: Musical Culture and American Identity* (1985), MacDonald Smith Moore observes that "writers of every stamp associated Jews with the success of jazz, with the fusion of jazz and classical music, with the domestic avant-garde movement, and with an overall challenge to Yankee leadership of musical culture."<sup>1</sup> Citing the "Jazz Age" writings of music academic Daniel Gregory Mason, Moore discusses a "Jewish Nexus" which "linked [Black] hedonism and mechanism in consumer capitalism," providing an explanation of the "popularity of jazzy modernism."<sup>2</sup> From an opposite quarter, a surprisingly similar perspective was presented by Michael Gold, the editor of *The Daily Worker* in the 1930s, except that his Stalinism required an inversion of the value judgment. According to Fred Starr in his *Red and Hot: the Fate of Jazz in The Soviet Union, 1917-1980* (1983), Gold "insisted that jazz was a Negro music. The exception, according to Gold, were the many Jews who were attracted to the art. Jazz, he argued, had been created by the proletariat of two oppressed ethnic groups, American Negroes and Jews."<sup>3</sup> For better or worse, these perspectives had little to do with the New Orleans jazz scene. Mason was reacting against the work of George Gershwin, Aaron Copland, and Ernest Bloch; Gold was attempting to read theory into reality, even if the later stardom of Benny Goodman

and Artie Shaw did justify his wishful thinking in retrospect. Neither of these writers ever conceived of jazz as a discrete musical idiom rooted in the regional culture of New Orleans. Between 1890 and 1940 a jazz community gradually took shape here, serving as a rallying point for mostly young people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. They shared an interest in jazz as an exciting new dance music -- a liberating vehicle that encompassed a variety of locales, from the streets, dance halls, and saloons to the ballrooms of mansions on St. Charles Avenue. In this jazz community, Jews did, in fact, make their presence felt, as musicians, dance hall operators, composers, song pluggers, and fans. They worked side by side with a virtual "rainbow coalition" that included Creoles and Blacks. The generosity of the Karnofsky family toward young Louis Armstrong is familiar from various biographies including Armstrong's own *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans* (1954), but this was not an isolated incident.<sup>4</sup> In his interview for Tulane's Hogan Jazz Archive, clarinetist Louis Cottrell -- a Creole of Color -- tells the story of how his father, Louis "Old Man" Cottrell, learned how to play drums: "My father, being poor in his youth, was not able to afford any music lessons, but a white boy named John Kornfeld, who was taking drum lessons, would come from his lesson and teach him all he had learned that time, so "Old Man" also learned. The two were close all their lives; Kornfeld, who died first, became a good professional drummer also."<sup>5</sup> Based on "Old Man" Cottrell's probable birth in 1875, this exchange would have taken place about 1890 -- at

the virtual dawn of jazz. Cottrell went on to become one of the city's most celebrated drummers, enjoying long residencies with Armand Piron, John Robichaux, and Manuel Perez. He was also notable as a teacher of jazz drummers, passing the torch provided by John Kornfeld, about whom little is known.

Nor were Jewish musicians limited to "behind the scenes" activities. Far from it. Among the forty musicians listed as members of the Crescent City Musician's Protective Union in 1894, there were three Schindler's, three Kirst's, an Ehrenberg, and a Kaufman.<sup>6</sup> Member listings for Local 174 of the American Federation of Musicians for 1904-05 give further evidence of Jewish musicians active in

New Orleans during the early days of jazz.<sup>7</sup> Yet few of these players seem to have gravitated to jazz. Most of the Jewish players associated with jazz circles before World War I do not turn up on union rolls, precisely because the union was slow to accept the "faking" ethos popular among jazzmen. Charles Edward Smith, in his "White New Orleans," (*Jazzmen* 1939), mentions "a 'crying' clarinet player whose name was Monty Korn."<sup>8</sup> Laine later recalled a "Marty" Korn who played clarinet in his Reliance Bands, along with his brother, Marcus, a trombonist who "played by ear."<sup>9</sup> Recent research by Jack Stewart has revealed that the Korn brothers were the sons of an itinerant German Rabbi, Jacob Korn, who



Marcus Korn (far right) is pictured here on clarinet with Mars' Orchestra at the Southern Hotel, Covington, LA, in 1907.

deposited his children in the Jewish Children's Home, while he sought to build a new life for himself in New Orleans and Philadelphia. Montague, born circa 1876 in Neustrelitz, Germany, was too old to be taken into the Children's Home, but the possible connection of a "crying" clarinet style to Klezmer sources in the Old World is enticing and deserving of further investigation. So is the possible parallel between the experiences of Armstrong, Kid Rena, and Champion Jack Dupree at the Colored Waif's Home and their counterparts at the Jewish Children's Home.

Edwin Edwards, trombonist with the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, whose 1917 "Livery Stable Blues" was the first jazz recording ever made, was another alumnus of the Reliance circle. When asked to recall his favorite jazz experience during a 1959 interview, he referred back to a pre-ODJB unit: "I believe the best band, jazz band, I had, was connected with, was Achille Baquet, clarinet; Mike Caplan was the cornet player; Bob Stein was the drummer; Joe Wolfe, pianist; and myself on trombone."<sup>10</sup> Given the fact that Baquet was a Creole of Color who had "jumped the fence," one must note that this band was not only multi-ethnic but also bi-racial. As Edwards remembered, "we played mostly for nice affairs. This outfit could read music, improvise, and play jazz too." The band worked at the Boston Club, the Louisiana Club, and for students at Tulane University.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, Caplan, Stein, and Wolfe are not included in the list of Reliance-era personnel supplied by Nick LaRocca to H.O. Brunn for his *Story of the Original*

*Dixieland Jazz Band* (1960).<sup>12</sup>

Obviously, Caplan, Stein, and Wolfe did not go on to become jazz stars as Baquet and Edwards did. It is likely that they inhabited a world of "legitimate" music-making in New Orleans (such as theater work) which enabled them to make excursions into jazz without actually having to rely upon it. Indeed, the boundary between so-called "fakers" and reading "musicianers" tended to evaporate as jazz became popular in the period after World War I. Jazz musicians were driven to acquire reading skills in order to "cover the spread" of an expanding popular taste for "sweet" as well as "hot" jazz in the 1920s. Even Louis Armstrong had to learn how to read! Accordingly, legitimate bandleaders such as Romanian-born<sup>13</sup> Charlie Fishbein began to proffer jazz in the dance halls throughout the city. When the ODJB's recordings came out in the spring of 1917, Fishbein -- a violinist -- was working at Kolb's restaurant in what his drummer Harold Peterson described as "a reading band."<sup>14</sup> Fishbein, a trained reader, responded to the model of the ODJB by incorporating a jazz approach into his repertoire. By 1921, he fielded a band at the Arcadia Dance Hall at Dauphine and Canal known as the Fishbein-Williams Syncopators. A postcard from this engagement depicts the musicians: photographs of heads crowning cartoon bodies in the manner of a famous ODJB cartoon and letterhead.<sup>15</sup> The membership of this band is interesting: Buzzy Williams, an itinerant ragtime pianist from Birmingham, Alabama, was co-leader of the group; Bill Kreeger played sax and clarinet; a Cajun named Guidry





Charlie Fischbein (center) leads the band at the LaVida Ballroom in 1922.

from St. Bernard was the guitarist; and Peterson was the drummer. According to Peterson, the Arcadia became "the first nickel-a-dance hall in town," but by this time (1922) the Fishbein-Williams band had moved on to the LaVida Dance Hall on Burgundy. There followed stints at the Cadillac, Joe Julian's in Bucktown, and Tom Anderson's on Rampart.<sup>16</sup> At the LaVida, Emile "Stale Bread" Lacoume played banjo with the band. Only a few years previously, on March 9, 1919, the *New Orleans Item* had run a story on him entitled "Orleans' Product: Stale Bread's Fiddle Gave Jazz to the World." On saxophone at the LaVida was Florencio Ramos, a Mexican national who had emigrated to New Orleans in the 1880s. One contemporary observer described the

Arcadia and LaVida as "home brew joints," but Peterson remembered that he was "always paid over scale" by Fishbein at the LaVida and that violinists such as Fishbein "had steady jobs."<sup>17</sup> Sometimes the work ran out, however, and leaders would become sidemen. *The Prelude* -- journal of AF of M, Local 174--places the violinist in Johnny Miller's orchestra for the opening of the Frolics on October 17, 1928, alongside saxophonist David Winstein and Girard Levinsen, sousaphone.<sup>18</sup> In the August 1929 issue of *The Prelude*, Fishbein is mentioned in the "A. Howl Says" column: "Charlie Fishbein, the migrating violinist, is back in town after a journey which ended in New York. Charlie sent this bird a postcard of the Virginia State Library (these

intellectual boys!), and reports that he also became an actor, doing straight man for a comic."<sup>19</sup> By November 1929, Fishbein was again leading his own band, this time for the grand debut of a swank night club, the Club Forest. Rose and Souchon's *New Orleans Jazz: A Family Album* (1984) describes this location as "a smart supper club of the Prohibition era in Jefferson Parish," featuring "top name attractions" such as A.J. Piron, Louis Armstrong, the New Orleans Owls, Papa Celestin, and the Sharkey-Prima Orchestra.<sup>20</sup> *Prelude's* "The Early Bird" was not reticent in his promotion of the club and the band: "The most interest seems to be centered about the new Club Forest, both because it is new and is said to have cost \$150,000 and because it combines good cuisine with hot temperament and a wow of a dance orchestra. This last is to me the most important, because half of the fun is in dancing. That is why the orchestra, under the direction of Charlie Fishbein, gets the most of our praise. It is rhythmic and softly melodic, and there is a swing in its work that shows Charlie picked his men well and rehearsed them better."<sup>21</sup> The lineup included some of the region's best white jazz players: Tony Almerico and Red Bolman on trumpets; George Schilling, Eddie Powers, and Erasmus Loyacano, saxophones; Julian Laine (Papa Jack's son) on "hot" trombone; D. Larroque, piano; Joe Loyacano, tuba; and Von Gammon, drums. Many of these musicians either had been or would become leaders in their own right.<sup>22</sup> In the midst of seemingly ineluctable success, Fishbein was hardly prepared for the tragedy that was about to befall him. The December 1929 *Prelude* carried the bad

news: "Laura Polette, musical comedy character woman and wife of Charles Fishbein, jazz band leader and violinist, was instantly killed on a highway in Illinois when the car in which she was driving was crashed into by another auto travelling at a high rate of speed."<sup>23</sup> In the same issue, a reviewer of Fishbein's nightly radio broadcast on WJBO from Club Forest recommended the band "for those who like their music in the snappy rhythms of dance, but who show a distinct preference for softly syncopated melody instead of the typical New Orleans jazz."<sup>24</sup> Shortly after, Fishbein was elected to the Board of Directors for Local 174, while also maintaining his residency at Club Forest.<sup>25</sup> In February 1930, however, he incurred "The Early Bird's" displeasure: "Charlie Fishbein has made a fox trot arrangement of "Meditation" from *Thais*, and, though a clever piece of orchestration, Charlie should be shot for tampering with great music. However, his band is still one of the finest in town and is keeping patronage at Club Forest contented and gay. The boys play a fine jazz and then rough things up, just to please the paying audience."<sup>26</sup>

The Club Forest engagement was probably the high point of Fishbein's career as a jazz bandleader. The repeal of Prohibition, the rise of radio, and the onset of the Great Depression combined to undercut the appeal of posh supper clubs in the 1930s, rendering them too expensive for many, unnecessary for others.

Although Fishbein remained an active member of the AF of M into the 1970s, his musical stock among fellow jazzmen declined during the Depression Decade. According to bassist Ray Benitez,



Like many New Orleans musicians, Charlie Fischbein (tenth from right) relied on work with the WPA Band during the Depression.

trumpeter Sharkey Bonano used Fishbein to fulfill a union contract which called for ten pieces (three beyond his usual seven) because he "would not get in the way of his regular men."<sup>27</sup> Sharkey's designation of the violinist as a "potato man" was telling. Yet, while Fishbein's talents as a jazz soloist were undoubtedly modest, his success as a bandleader was notable, permitting him to rub shoulders with some of the most highly-regarded players on the local jazz scene.

One of the "regular men" to whom Bonano was referring was another Jewish jazzman, Meyer Weinberg, aka Gene Meyer. According to the November 1929 *Prelude*, Weinberg joined Local 174 on October 3, 1929, probably while he was still a teenager.<sup>28</sup> His friend and frequent bandmate, saxophonist and arranger Dave

Winstein--later president of the Local--remembered him as one of the Eastonites, a group composed primarily of students from Warren Easton High School.<sup>29</sup> Weinberg doubled on alto saxophone and clarinet and is also listed as a member of the Ellis Stratakos Orchestra at the Jung Roof in November 1929, along with drummer Godfrey Hirsch (later with Louis Prima and Pete Fountain) and trumpeter John Wigginton Hyman, aka Johnny Wiggs.<sup>30</sup> Guitarist Frank Federico places Weinberg in the ill-fated Stratakos band that traveled to Florida for an "extended stay" at a resort night club, only to be turned away without pay after a disappointing first week. During the long trip home, musicians were sent out to forage for oranges and grapefruit along the highway to sustain themselves.<sup>31</sup>



Godfrey Hirsch was one of the most successful Jewish jazzmen on the New Orleans scene. In early days (top) he worked as a pianist with the Gulf Coast Serenaders (1925). Later, he was much in demand as a drummer and vibraphonist, accounting for an extended association with Louis Prima's band (photo from 1930).



Weinberg was remembered among his contemporaries as both a very good "legitimate" player and a gifted jazzman, affording opportunities for theater work. In the early 1930s he worked at the Saenger Theater with Lou Forbes' Orchestra, as part of a saxophone section which also included Eddie Powers.<sup>32</sup> Godfrey Hirsh also recalled Weinberg's participation in a group sponsored by the C.G. Conn Instrument Company which toured between New Orleans and Jackson, Mississippi, to promote the formation of bands among area schools.<sup>33</sup> The turning point in Meyer Weinberg's rise to jazz prominence, however, occurred on March 21, 1936 when he joined Sharkey's Band in a recording session at the Roosevelt Hotel. Also present were Dave Winstein, Julian Laine, pianist Armand Hug, guitarist Bill Bourgeois, bassist Ray Benitez, and drummer Augie Schellang. According to Hug, the band had rehearsed on the job at the Chez Paree on Pontchartrain Boulevard to tighten up for the session which yielded two sides, "Everybody Loves My Baby" and "Yes She Do, No She Don't."<sup>34</sup>

A year later, Weinberg was recording with Louis Prima in Los Angeles, a connection which lasted for more than two years. He appears with Prima on twenty-four sides recorded in various locations from Los Angeles to New York, as well as on a Hollywood session with trombonist Santo Pecora in April 1937 for Columbia.<sup>35</sup> When Pecora was asked by Richard Allen "who Weinberg sounded like?" during an interview in 1972, he replied: "Weinberg sounded like himself; he didn't sound like anyone else. I used to play with him, and he was a fine musician. He had a lot of technique. He didn't sound like Artie Shaw or Benny

Goodman."<sup>36</sup> In jazz circles, this is the highest praise possible -- to be recognized as a unique stylist. Another New Orleans bandleader, Johnny DeDroit, opined that Weinberg "should go down in posterity."<sup>37</sup> Indeed, in the guise of Gene Meyer, the clarinetist did achieve special attention in the jazz press in 1946-47 for salvaging a fundraising concert by Eddie Condon for the National Jazz Foundation of New Orleans. The NJF journal, *Basin Street*, revealed a near disaster threatening the May 5 concert at the Municipal Auditorium when the Condon Mob arrived late: "So we proceeded to sweat it out. Finally at 4:30 pm the happy-go-lucky group walked into the hotel, all present and accounted for with one exception -- namely, Joe Dixon and his clarinet were missing. Joe, for his own unexplained reason, balked at the sight of the silver plane and wouldn't come down with the rest of the boys. Hurriedly we consulted our local talent. Fazola? No, for a number of reasons he couldn't take the substitute job. We finally heard of another local boy and found out that he just blew into his native city from the West Coast after an engagement with the Perry Como group. Was he engaged for the night? Luck was with us. We were able to secure the services of that good stick man, Gene Myers, for Mr. Condon."<sup>38</sup> And there was lagniappe. Publication of the annual *Esquire* yearbook in January 1947 featured a photograph of Weinberg in solo flight during the Condon concert, documenting his service "above and beyond the call of duty" to the New Orleans jazz community. In his spontaneous excellence, he symbolized the very epitome of jazz aspirations, enjoying at once the respect of his musical colleagues and the admiration



Gene Meyer with Eddie Condon's Band at a National Jazz Foundation concert at the Municipal Auditorium in 1946.

of adoring fans.

What can we conclude from these brief accounts of Jewish jazzmen in New Orleans? First, that they are sketchy, and that more research needs to be done on the activities of Jewish musicians in New Orleans, for they made notable contributions on many levels. Second, that too much emphasis on their Jewish connection is unwarranted. What is significant about the musical careers of the Korns, Fishbein, Winstein, Hirsh and Weinberg is the similarity of their experiences to those of non-Jewish musicians--Italians, Irish, Germans, Greeks, and so on. The jazz community was multicultural in New Orleans, and we do not see reference to Klezmer or other tangible ethnic traits appearing in the

accounts of these musicians. Instead, we note musicians of diverse backgrounds coming together as Americans in their commitment to jazz. Indeed, the Jewish community in New Orleans had undergone a remarkable degree of assimilation even before the advent of jazz around the turn of the century, and the success of several Jewish jazzmen locally may be interpreted as a continuation of that process.

*Bruce B. Raeburn*

#### End notes

1. MacDonald Smith Moore, *Yankee Blues: Musical Culture and American Identity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 131.
2. Ibid.

3. S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: the Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union, 1917-1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 100.
4. Louis Armstrong, *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986/1955), p. 94ff.
5. Louis Cottrell, Jr., interview by William Russell and Ralph Collins, 25 August 1961, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.
6. Constitution and By-Laws of the Crescent City Musicians Protective Union (New Orleans: Malus & Hofline Printers, 1894), p. 30.
7. Constitution, By-Laws and Price List, Musicians' Mutual Protective Union, Local No. 174, A.F. of M. (New Orleans: Wm. Miller Printers, 1904), passim.
8. Charles Edward Smith, "White New Orleans" in *Jazzmen: The Story of Hot Jazz Told in the Lives of the Men Who Created It*, ed. Charles Edward Smith and Frederic Ramsey, Jr. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939), p. 45.
9. Papa Jack Laine, interview by William Russell, 26 March 1957, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.
10. Edwin Edwards, interview by Richard B. Allen, 1 July 1959, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.
11. Ibid.
12. H.O. Brunn, *The Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960), pp. 9-25.
13. Voter registration application, Parish of Orleans, State of Louisiana, Feb. 14, 1927.
14. Harold Peterson, interview by Richard B. Allen, 6 August 1979, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.
15. The musicians are portrayed in flamboyant action poses, thought to be suggestive of the excitement associated with jazz. For an example of the ODJB cartoon, see Bruce Boyd Raeburn, "Dancing Hot and Sweet: New Orleans Jazz in the 1920s," *The Jazz Archivist*, vol. VII, Nos. 1-2 (December 1992), 10-13.
16. Peterson interview.
17. Ibid. See also the comments on dance halls by Luke Schiro, interview by Richard B. Allen, 5 December 1967, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.
18. "Frolics Reopens," *The Prelude*, Vol. II, No. 12 (November 1928), 9.
19. "A. Howl Says...", *The Prelude*, Vol. III, No. 21 (August 1929), 6.
20. Al Rose and Edmond Souchon, *New Orleans Jazz: A Family Album*, 3rd ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), p. 220.
21. The Early Bird, "Night Life, Entertainers, Jazz Bands," *The Prelude*, Vol. III, No. 24 (November 1929), 10.
22. For example, George "Happy" Schilling's dance orchestra, 1910-26, or Tony Almerico's Parisian Room Band, 1948-1960. See Rose and Souchon, passim.
23. "Killed," *The Prelude*, Vol. III, No. 25 (December 1929), 7.
24. "Radio," *ibid.*, 11.
25. "Election Dull Affair," *The Prelude*, Vol. IV, No. 26 (January 1930), 6.
26. The Early Bird, "Night Life, Entertainers, Jazz Bands," *The Prelude*, Vol. IV No. 27 (February 1930), 10.
27. Ray Benitez, interview at Monk Hazel's funeral, 6 March 1968, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.
28. "Minutes," *The Prelude*, Vol. III, No.

24 (November, 1929). 6. Frank Federico, who considers himself to be roughly Weinberg's age, estimates a 1910-13 birthyear--see Frank Federico, interview by Jack Stewart, 24 October 1995. Voter registration application, Parish of Orleans, State of Louisiana, Aug. 1, 1934, shows his birthday as Oct. 8, 1912.

29. Federico interview and David Winstein, interview with Jack Stewart, 22 October 1995.
30. The Early Bird, "Night Life, Entertainers, Jazz Bands," *The Prelude*, Vol. III, No. 24 (November 1929), 10-11.
31. See Garry Boulard, *Just a Gigolo: The Life and Times of Louis Prima* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1989), pp. 15-16, and Federico interview.
32. Godfrey Hirsch, interview by Richard B. Allen, 20 October 1987, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.
33. Ibid.
34. Armand Hug, interview by Richard B. Allen and Paul Crawford, 14 July 1960, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.
35. For discographical details, see Brian Rust, *Jazz Records, 1897-1942* (London: Storyville Publications, 1972), passim.
36. Santo Pecora, interview by Richard B. Allen, 9 November 1972, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.
37. Johnny DeDroit, interview by Richard B. Allen, 4 December 1969, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University.
38. "Condon Comes to Town," *Basin Street*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (May 1946), 1.

Presented by Bruce Boyd Raeburn on

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### Paul Sarebresole and New Orleans' First Rag

This year, while the jazz world is celebrating the centennials of the birth of soprano saxophonist Sidney Bechet (1897-1959) and Original Dixieland Jazz Band drummer Anthony Sbarbaro (Tony Spargo) (1897-1969), ragtime enthusiasts the world over will be celebrating the 100th anniversary of the first ragtime piece, or pieces, since there were six of them published in 1897<sup>1</sup>. One of these pieces, *Roustabout Rag*, is the work of an almost unknown New Orleanian of Franco-Celtic lineage.

Although syncopated music had been popular in the United States since the early minstrel songs of the 1830's, by the 1890's music started becoming popular specifically because it was syncopated.<sup>2</sup> The first published rags of 1897 were a more structurally rigorous form of the general syncopated style known as "ragtime." The six rags from that year were published by firms scattered across the United States.<sup>3</sup> In addition to *Roustabout Rag*, there were *Louisiana Rag* by Theodore H. Northrup (Thompson Music Company, Chicago, Ill.), *Harlem Rag* by Tom Turpin (DeYong & Co., St. Louis), *Pride of Bucktown* and *A Bundle of Rags* both by Robert S. Roberts (Philip Kussel, Cincinnati), and *Darktown Capers* by Walter Starck (Shattinger Music, St.





Louis, Mo.), and later issued by the famous John Stark.<sup>4</sup> No copyright was filed on *Roustabout Rag*; the date, 1897, is known only from the cover of the sheet music. *Louisiana Rag* was the first to be published, in October 1897.

After noting its interesting collection of rhythms and thematic material, ragtime historians Jasen and Tichenor have this to say about *Roustabout Rag*:

Besides *Harlem Rag*, the first published product of a black composer [and noted earlier as being relatively elegant], the most compositionally noteworthy of these [other] early entries was Paul Sarebresole's *Roustabout Rag*, published by Grunewald of New Orleans. It featured the "three-over-four" rhythm pattern that became ragtime's most

conspicuous element after 1905: a sequence of three different notes placed within a four-beat measure, which resulted in the accenting of a new note whenever the phrase was repeated.<sup>5</sup>

Sarebresole was eight years ahead of his time because "three-over-four" syncopation (sometime known as "secondary rag") did not catch on until the publication of *Dill Pickles--A New Rag*, by Charles L. Johnson in 1906. The use of the device became even more solidified with the publication of George Botsford's *Black and White Rag* two years later.<sup>6</sup>

Like much of the New Orleans vernacular music of the time, *Roustabout Rag* continues to rely on the old fashioned, Celtic, dotted-note syncopation that was later very successfully used in Tony Jackson's famous composition *Pretty Baby*.<sup>7</sup> A more innovative technique was the use of repeated riff-like phrases which continue through the underlying chord changes, producing a somewhat modern dissonance that foreshadowed the full-blown chromaticism epitomized by Jelly Roll Morton's *King Porter Stomp*.

Some of the thematic material in *Roustabout Rag* had been used two years earlier by New Orleans composer William J. Voges in his delightfully syncopated medley of popular airs of the day, *Pasquilla*. However, while Voges used entire tunes in sequence, Sarebresole combined parts of various tunes to create a new heterogenous whole. Such free mixing of quoted theme fragments later became totally commonplace in jazz.

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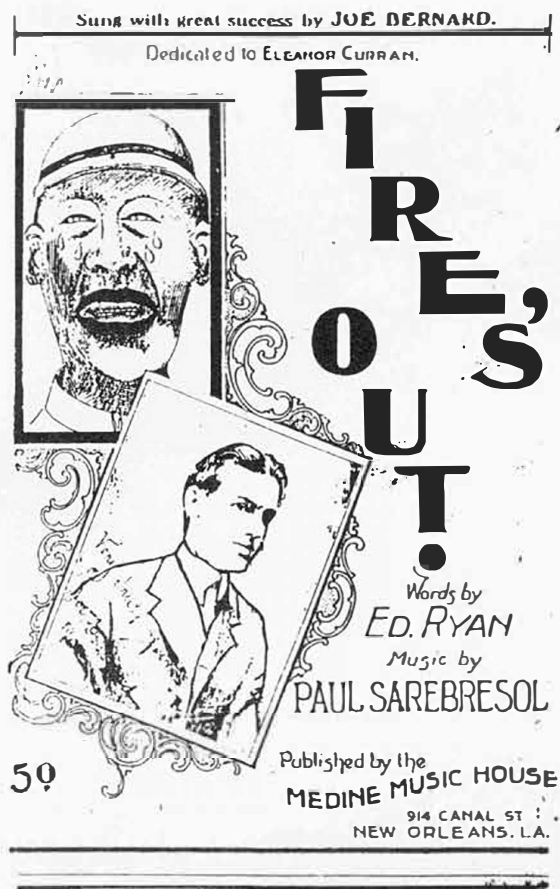
Another device, used seven years earlier in *Olean Gavoite*, also by Voges, is a polka "lick" that becomes a ragtime, then blues, then jazz, and ultimately a swing "lick." It is a defacto sforzando repeated twice an octave higher. The whole sequence is repeated again on the next chord. During the early swing era a sforzando "lick" began to be called a "wow."

Paul Sarebresole was yet another of the important New Orleans composers that stretch from Louis Moreau Gottschalk to Jelly Roll Morton. He was born Paul Sarrebresolles<sup>8</sup> in New Orleans<sup>9</sup>, in May of 1875.<sup>10</sup> His father, Paul Sarrebresolles, Sr., was a native of Muret, Haute

Garonne, France,<sup>11</sup> which is about thirty miles southwest of Toulouse. Its proximity to the Spanish border, accounts for the Hispanic spelling of the name. He appears to have arrived in New Orleans around 1874, and was employed initially as a cook, but later operated a grocery and saloon, all in the French Quarter area.<sup>12</sup> The composer's mother, Ellen Mahoney Sarebresole,<sup>13</sup> was a native of Louisiana (probably New Orleans), but both her father and mother were from Ireland.<sup>14</sup>

The Sarebresoles continued to live in the French Quarter at various addresses.<sup>15</sup> At the turn of the century, young Paul Sarebresole, his mother, and his sister, Mrs. Cora Menant, were living in the household of William E. McNeil, at 918 Dauphine Street, in a building since demolished, where all three were listed in the census as servants.<sup>16</sup> By 1902, when he is listed as a musician,<sup>17</sup> they had moved out of the French Quarter to 918 Kerlerec in the Faubourg Marigny section of the Seventh Ward. In 1910, Paul was still employed as a musician and played in a band. By this time he was living with his mother and sister at 1807 Burgundy Street, in the Marigny neighborhood.<sup>18</sup> This Italianate shotgun double house is still standing.

Sarebresole appears to have written only three other musical compositions: *Get Your Habits On* (1898), *Fire's Out* (1902), and *Come Clean* (1905), of which, the last is the best known. *Get Your Habits On* was published by Sarebresole and Fabbro and uses the then popular reference of one's "habits." An ordinary "coon" song, it alludes to the easy availability of cocaine at any pharmacy and to other aspects of the



local sporting life. *Fire's Out*, with words by Ed. Ryan, was published by Medine Music House at 914 Canal St., and popularized by singer Joe Bernard. It is another "coon song" and again is not particularly outstanding, except for some colorfully descriptive lyrics.

His best known composition, *Come Clean*, published by the Cable Company<sup>19</sup> in 1905, is another link in the chain of early 20th century New Orleans songs that led to jazz. The first strain has a French quadrille feeling and is yet another part of the *Tiger Rag* family of pieces. It recalls the Johnny DeDroit recording of *Number Two Blues*,<sup>20</sup> having similar chords and melody line, as well as a similar sing-song

cadence. In addition, the final part of this strain is the same figure later used at the end of the first strain of *Snake Rag*, as recorded by King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band.<sup>21</sup> The second strain is a modified habanera interrupted by some cascading figures and concluding with a typical cakewalk finale. This anticipates Scott Joplin's use of such "latin" material in *Solace* by several years.

What active part Paul Sarebresole played in the New Orleans music scene is not very clear because so little evidence remains. A picture does emerge even if it is a bit hazy. He was a member of the American Federation of Musicians Local 174. Evidence shows that most of the members of this union between its inception and the middle 1930's were musicians employed by the theaters.<sup>22</sup> The covers of both *Roustabout Rag* and *Get Your Habits On* proclaim them to have been played by the Rosar Trio. This was probably a group led by Peter C. Rosar, who was the stage manager at Wenger's Theater at 1001 Custom House St. (later renamed Iberville St.).<sup>23</sup> This theater was a very large cabaret dating from 1892 that was subsequently gutted, renovated, and expanded into a playhouse that ultimately became the Lyric Theater. Laurent Dubuclet was the music director in 1902, when it was the Trocadero Theatre.<sup>24</sup> Dubuclet<sup>25</sup> was linked to Sarebresole for several years, as the arranger of both *Roustabout Rag* and *Come Clean*. In addition, Sarebresole's two coon songs, with their "dry humor" lyrics, are more theatrical pieces than the typical singable or danceable ragtime songs of the day. Sarebresole, then, was probably a part of the early cabaret and theater scene in the







House where Paul Sarebresole died in 1911, at 1359 St. Anthony street. Photo by Jack Stewart.

southwest corner of the French Quarter that was later to be known as the Tango Belt.

When Sarebresole wrote *Get Your Habits On*, he published it jointly with a member or members of the Fabbro family who lived around the corner from him at 716-20 Dumaine Street. Albert and Charles Fabbro were printers, and Charles later worked as a compositor for the *L'Italo-Americano*, the local Italian newspaper. Nathalie Fabbro worked for L. Sparicio at 915 Decatur St. Johnny "Doublehead" Sparicio (1883-1948) ran a bar on Decatur St. where the bandleader Jack Laine (1873-1966) was at one time a

bartender. Sparicio was also a violinist, music teacher, dairy farmer at Milneburg, and godfather of Laine's daughter Alma Laine Gazchek. One of "Tutor" Sparicio's students was early jazz clarinetist Alcide "Yellow" Nuñez (1884-1934), a mainstay of Laine's Reliance Band.<sup>26</sup> It is possible, then, that Sarebresole was himself a musical associate of Jack Laine. Laine once noted that he created ragtime by combining a variety of musical elements,<sup>27</sup> and this is the same approach used by Sarebresole in *Roustabout Rag*.

Despite the musical success of the talented son, the Sarebresoles were not a healthy and wealthy family. The elder

Paul Sarrebresolles died in Galveston, Texas, on August 30, 1880, when young Paul was five years old.<sup>28</sup> At that point Paul's mother seems to have taken over the family grocery for the next three years.<sup>29</sup> Paul, his sister Cora, and his brother Emile, were the only three survivors of five children. Cora, by the age of thirty-five, was not only a widow, but had lost all five of her own children. His mother Ellen died in New Orleans, on January 9, 1920.<sup>30</sup>

Paul Sarebresole himself died of pneumonia on October 3, 1911, at the age of 36.<sup>31</sup> By the time of his death he had moved to 1359 St. Anthony Street, between Urquhart and Villere streets, in the Faubourg New Marigny section of the Seventh Ward area.<sup>32</sup> He died without any estate and no descendents.<sup>33</sup> On October 4, 1911, he was buried in St. Louis Cemetery No. 3, in an "oven" type, wall-vault grave. The cemetery was expanded in 1920 and this rear wall-vault row was demolished. With his sister's written permission on January 20, 1920, his remains were transferred to a small, common vault with only the inscription "Erected in memory of all who were buried in Grand Alley Left and Right."<sup>34</sup>

Jack Stewart

#### End notes

1. David A. Jasen and Trebor J. Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime*, Dover Publications, New York, 1989, pp. 1-20. These six pieces fit the "strict" structural definition of ragtime and go to a further formality as program pieces when one compares them to cakewalks and other highly syncopated dance music. However, according to some analysts

and most listeners, rags, cakewalks, and ragtime songs are all considered to be ragtime in the broader sense of the term. This was especially true among New Orleans musicians at the time.

2. Jasen, pp.1-20, *passim*; John Edward Hasse, ed., *Ragtime Its History, Composers, and Music*, New York, Schirmer Books, 1985, pp. 1-69, *passim*; Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy*, Norman, Oklahoma, University of Oklahoma Press, pp. 159-213, *passim*; Peter Van Der Merve, *Origins of the Popular Style*, New York, Oxford University Press, pp.1-305, *passim*; Edward A. Berlin, *Ragtime. A Musical and Cultural History*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1980, pp. 99-122, *passim*; Winthrop Sargeant, *Jazz, Hot and Hybrid*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1975, 129-146, *passim*; Terry Waldo, *This is Ragtime*, Hawthorn Books, Inc., New York, 1976, pp. 3-47, *passim*; William J. Schafer and Johannes Riedel, *The Art of Ragtime*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1973, pp. 3-47, *passim*; Ann Charters, *The Ragtime Songbook*, Oak Publications, New York, 1965, pp. 9-34, *passim*. The musical examples cited in the above works and in additional music collected over time show this gradual, then rapid progression.
3. There were more than six syncopated, "raggy" type pieces published that year, and Hasse, p. 10, lists twenty-three pieces, plus Ben Harney's *Rag Time Instructor*.
4. Jasen, pp. 17-19 and *passim*.
5. Jasen, p. 19.

6. Jasen, p. 5.
7. Gus Kahn, lyrics, Tony Jackson and Egbert Van Alstyne, music, *Pretty Baby*, New York and Detroit, Jerome H. Remick & Co., 1916.
8. Confirmed by 1900 Census, father's death notice, and mother's listing in WPA tombstone file.
9. Death Certificate.
10. 12th Census of U.S., 1900.
11. Death Notice, *New Orleans Bee*, September 5, 1880.
12. City directory listings show the following: 1874, cook, U.S. restaurant, r. 139 Bienville; 1875, cook, John's Restaurant, r. 51 Orleans; 1876, grocery and saloon, 222 Bourbon; 1877, grocer, 222 Bourbon; 1878, restaurant, 56 Royal; 1879, cook, r. Conti, sw. cor. Bourbon; 1880, r. 225 Burgundy
13. Death Notice, Paul Sarebresole, *Daily Picayune*, October 4, 1911, p. 8, c. 4.
14. Ibid., 12th Census.
15. City Directories provide the following: 1891 Helen, wid. Paul, r. rear 71 Esplanade Av.; 1899 Emile, lab. r. 937 Barracks; 1899 Paul, clk. r. 937 Barracks; 1900 Ellen Mrs. r. 937 Barracks.
16. 12th Census of the United States, 1900.
17. Soards, *City Directory*, 1902.
18. 13th Census of the United States, 1910.
19. In 1904, the Cable Company of Chicago opened a branch in New Orleans, at 914 Canal Street, previously the Medine Music House, and continued Medine's policy of publishing local New Orleans composers.
20. Johnny DeDroit and his New Orleans Jazz Orchestra, *Number Two Blues*. OK 40150, c. March 16, 1924.
21. King Oliver, *Snake Rag*. Gennett 5184. Richmond, Indiana, April 6, 1923.
22. Death roll, AFM 174. First, examination of various Local 174 handbooks over this period show a preponderance of theater musicians represented. Second, stories in the local union publication, *The Prelude*, substantiate this. Finally, conversations and interviews with former, longtime president of 174-496, David Winstein also confirm this tendency.
23. Soard's City Directory, 1894-1897.
24. Soard's, 1902.
25. For a biography of Dubuclet see: Jack Stewart, "The Other Professors," *The Jazz Archivist*, May 1996, Vol. XI, 1, pp. 2-6.
26. Research at this point has not proven definitively whether "Tutor" Sparicio and Johnny Sparicio are one and the same or father and son or uncle and nephew.
27. *Jack Laine: Patriarch of Jazz*, television documentary, NET (National Educational Television Network), circa 1962.
28. Death Notice, *New Orleans Bee*, September 5, 1880.
29. City directories note the following: 1881, Paul, Mrs. grocery, 58 St. Philip 1882, Helena Mrs. grocery, 58 St. Philip 1883, same as 1882.
30. Ibid., WPA Tombstone files. She is buried in St. Louis Cemetery No. 3. Emile listed in City Directories in 1899 and 1907.
31. Death Certificate, State of Louisiana, October 10, 1911.
32. Death Notice, *Daily Picayune*, October 4, 1911, p. 8, c. 4.
33. There is no record of any will or

estate in the records from Civil District Court in New Orleans. Also, in both the 1900 and 1910 census he is listed as single, and his death notice indicates no wife or children; it mentions only his mother and sister as living relatives.

34. Records, St. Louis Cemetery No. 3.

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