PIONEERS of JAZZ

THE STORY OF THE CREOLE BAND

LAWRENCE GUSHEE

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Frontispiece: Front row, left to right: Ollie "Dink" Johnson, James Palao, Norwood Williams. Back row: Eddie Vincent, Fred Keppard, George Baquet, Bill Johnson. [Palao family scrapbook]

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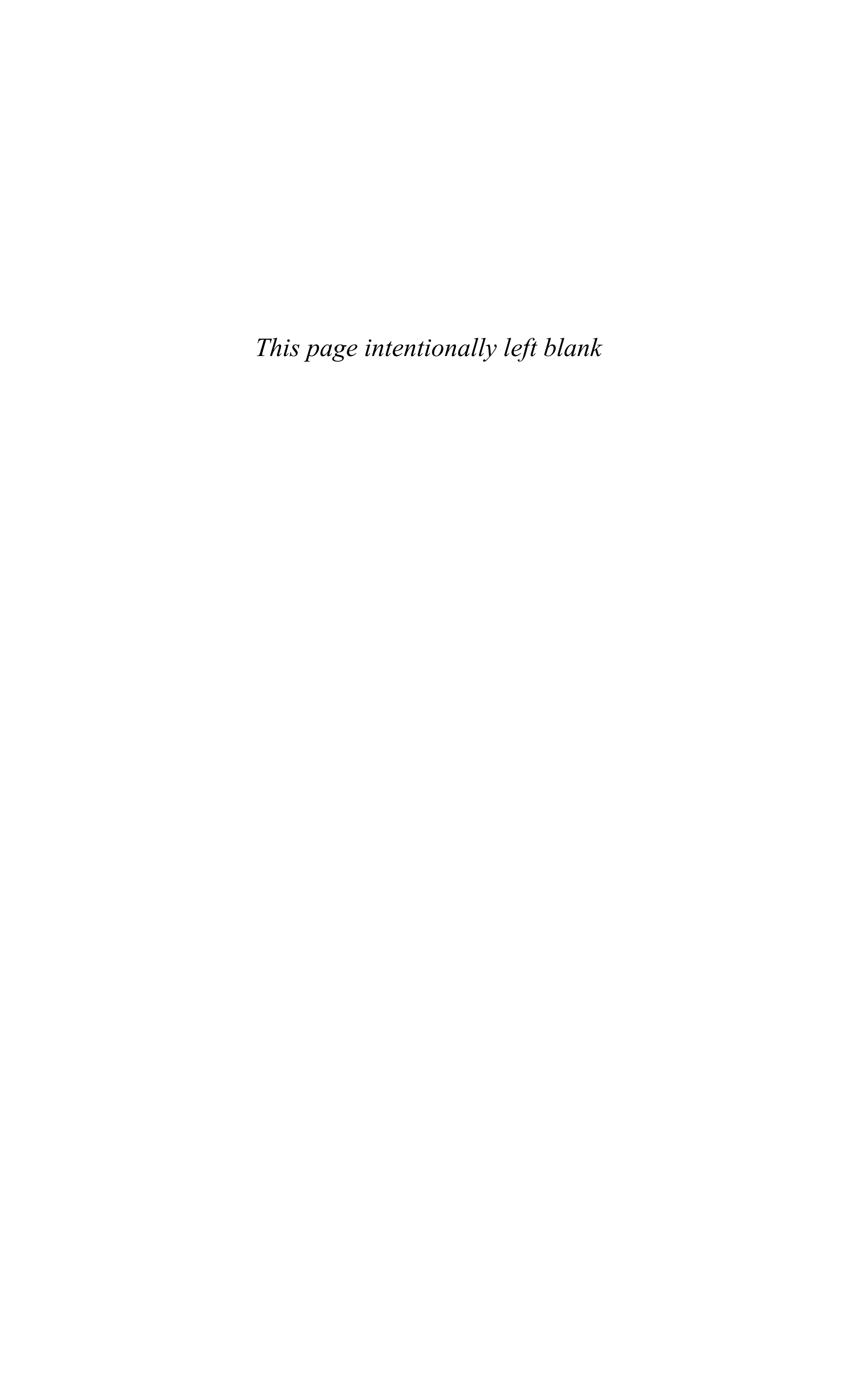
To the memory of two Bills

William Manuel Johnson,
who lived it,

and William Russell,
who knew it was important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Preface

LONG OVERDUE THANKS to a maternal aunt for giving me, ca. 1943, a bunch of old records from the 1920s, including at least one by the Original Memphis Five. (I think I still have it someplace or other.) Be that as it may, I soon developed an interest in recorded jazz, by Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and eventually a host of others. In high school I frequently made trips to the junk shops on Philadelphia's South Street, the main stem of the African-American community, and from time to time found recordings from the 1920s that tickled my fancy. For this I had only the guidance of *The Jazz Record Book*, Orin Blackstone's *Index to Jazz*, and the *Record Changer*. About the same time I received as a prize a copy of *Jazzmen* and also bought regularly *Metronome, Down Beat*, the *Record Changer*, and the under-appreciated *Jazz Record.* Far too young to be allowed into saloons or night clubs, I was nonetheless privileged to hear in person some of the oldest active jazz musicians—born before the turn of the century—including Sidney Bechet, Baby Dodds, and Bunk Johnson at Sunday afternoon concerts in the Academy of Music (fancy that!). All of this inclined me to appreciate the older jazz, although I also—thanks to *Metronome*—bought some of the earliest bebop recordings. Of course, wise after the fact, I now see clearly that in 1947 I should have been spending my afternoons with George Baquet rather than reading books and looking for old records.

After college and a couple of years of military service, I studied music theory and clarinet performance for some months in New York, and my apartment mate of the time won at auction a barely played copy of Doc Cook's "Spanish Mama" with its wonderful breaks by Freddie Keppard. It convinced me that the cliché that Keppard's few records were made when he was past his prime was pure hogwash. Be that as it may a few months later I was enrolled in a program of general musicological studies, where I eventually found a use for my schoolboy Latin by studying the music of the Middle Ages. As distant as this seems from the present undertaking, I owe to Leo Schrade some un-

derstanding of historical scholarship and the manner of interpreting documents that remain valid no matter the subject. So far as jazz went, I did no research but kept my hand in by playing clarinet and saxophone on a semiprofessional basis, then began to write jazz record reviews, most notably in the idealistic and short-lived *Jazz Review*. (These were mostly of contemporary or "modern" jazz.) Jazz was pigeonholed in a quite different part of my brain than other kinds of music, a state of affairs that persisted until 1978, when I was commissioned by Martin Williams, then of the Smithsonian Institution, to write liner notes for a reissue of the extant recordings of Freddie Keppard (and some that weren't by him, despite my attempts to persuade Martin to cut them).

There were so many loose ends regarding Keppard in those notes, especially his career with the Creole Band, that I found it impossible to close the file. During one of my first research trips to New Orleans in the late 1970s, Dick (Richard B.) Allen told me that a daughter of James Palao, the leader of the band, was living in Chicago. This was exciting news and I lost no time in making contact with Clotile Palao Glover (later Wilson), who introduced me to her ninety-plus-year-old mother, Armontine Carter Palao. Some of the information they shared with me was priceless because it was entirely personal. Little had to do with music or vaudeville, and often they learned things from me that were quite new to them. Be that as it may, these warm and generous people emboldened me to think that perhaps there was enough out there to write more than a short article or two.

Around 1980, German blues and jazz researcher Karl Gert zur Heide passed on to me third-hand photocopies of notes of a 1959 interview with the bassist and manager of the band, William Manuel Johnson. These notes cast so much light on the Creole Band that it now seemed that something more than "a short article or two" might truly be doable. At least it was enough to justify applying to the Guggenheim Foundation for a grant; this was viewed with favor. With both time and money (enough to buy the groceries and do some traveling) at hand, I drew up a "battle plan" and also continued to read extensively in both the general and theatrical newspapers of the time in order to establish a reliable itinerary. Proceeding at what seems to me now to have been a snail's pace, I wrote in 1987 a draft of an article dealing with the initial or pre-stages of the Creole Band. This was read at a national conference on black New Orleans music organized by Samuel A. Floyd, and was subsequently published in the journal of the Center for Black Music Research of Columbia College, Chicago.[1] Over the next few years materials slowly accumulated until by 1996 it seemed time (high time!) to begin to write.

To those on the outside, it sometimes seems that a college professor has limitless time for esoteric research. This is very far from the truth, thus any research support, however small, is precious. The Research Board of the University of Illinois, in addition to some material assistance for research trips, has also over the years funded a number of graduate research assistants: Rob Bird, Rebecca Bryant, Michael Corn, Ted Solis (I wonder if they ever thought a book would result from the sometimes bizarre tasks assigned to them) who helped with data entry and the ordering of newspapers on microfilm.

As the years passed, I gave talks on the Creole Band to meetings of professional societies and graduate students in musicology—first at York University, then at Rutgers, then to the New York chapter of the American Musicological Society. I blush to think how woefully tentative these initial efforts must have seemed; their chief role may have been to reveal how fragmentary my knowledge was. Finally, as the discovery of new sources slowed to a trickle then finally dried up, it seemed that it was time to put it all together.

The attentive reader will see that many absolutely priceless details regarding the early lives of Bill Johnson and Henry Morgan Prince have no source indicated. The person who collected these, and most generously and voluntarily passed them on to me, has emphatically insisted that his name not be mentioned. I hate to do it, not only because it violates the prime directive of scholarship—to clearly cite one's sources—but also because his dedication to the subject spurred me on to an effort that I might not otherwise have made. But, as they say, that's life.

I've singled out above a number of persons who have been especially influential over the years. My warm thanks to them all, as well as to others who have provided documents, advice, or encouragement over the years. They are (alphabetically) Lynn Abbott, Alden Ashforth, Gene Anderson, Pamela Arceneaux, Alma Freeman, Richard Hadlock, Thornton Hagert, Albert R. Kelly Jr., Brooks Kerr, Molly Kikuchi, Steven Lasker, James T. Maher, Mark Miller, Bruce Raeburn, William Russell, David Sager, Wayne Shirley, Fred Starr, John Steiner, and Steven Teeter. And especially to the person—who shall remain nameless— who said, "At least the discography will be short."

Sheldon Meyer of Oxford University Press has for more than thirty years fostered a prodigious list of distinguished publications in the history and esthetics of jazz. It seems almost that long that he's been on my track, most gently urging me to get something on paper that Oxford might publish. I'm also privileged to count myself among those for whom Jim (James T.) Maher has been an unflagging source of intellectual stimulus and moral support.

Above all, the Hogan Jazz Archive of Tulane University, directed by Bruce

Boyd Raeburn, and the Historic New Orleans Collection (holders of the William Russell Collection) comprise primary documents bearing on the history of ragtime and jazz in New Orleans. These unparalleled public collections are always welcoming to visitors and freely share their resources. To this short list must be added the collection of the New Orleans Jazz Club, now housed in the Old Mint as a branch of the Louisiana State Museum, and its curator, Stephen Teeter. Although the Institute of Jazz Studies of Rutgers University (Newark) is interested in New Orleans as part of a much larger picture, it still possesses documents of great importance. Its director, Dan Morgenstern, has given support and expressed interest in my researches over many years. His associates Ed Berger and Vincent Pelote have been of indispensable help on a number of occasions. I should also thank, even if they have rarely been of direct use in the present work, the Notarial Archives of Orleans Parish, with its historical section created and watched over by the incomparable Sally K. Reeves, and also the Louisiana Collection of the New Orleans Public Library, directed by Wayne Everard.

Documents of crucial importance in understanding the role of the band in the *Town Topics* revue were made available to me at that extraordinary collection, the Shubert Archive, even before it was formally open to the public. And special appreciation is due its curator Brigitte Kueppers and her successor Mary Ann Chach.

That the following expression of thanks comes in last place is not a way of indicating lesser importance; quite the contrary. Clearly, much of the documentation of the Creole Band's vaudeville peregrinations depended on the unstinting help of the interlibrary loan department of the University of Illinois Library in locating and ordering microfilm copies of local papers. But the newspaper library of the university library was also indispensable to the project.

My wife, Marion Sibley Gushee, has not only slogged through reams of my turgid prose and provided me a firm base for my scholarly research of all kinds, but she also has put up with a spouse whose mind was often on what happened ninety years ago. And our four children (Matt, Elizabeth, Sarah, and Rachel) grew up as their father spent countless hours hunched over a microfilm reader. Their curiosity as to what on earth I was up to will now, I trust, be satisfied.

Tradition would have it that at this point one begs the reader's indulgence—if not forgiveness—for the author's failings and errors, whether of commission or omission. I'm happy to embrace the tradition; additionally, let me point out that a work stitched together out of bits and pieces over a period of years

is especially prone to repetitions and minor (I hope) contradictions. I do hope that through my efforts and those of my copy editor, most of these have been deep-sixed; those blemishes that remain will no doubt be brought to my attention by friend and foe alike. Rest assured that in the event of a revised edition, such things will be taken into account. Finally, one of my fantasies is that a reader in, for example, Los Angeles or Waterloo, Iowa, will remember an item in his or her family archive—a letter, newspaper article, photo, poster, program, ticket stub, and so forth—that bears on the history of the Creole Band, something that can also be included in the hypothetical revised edition.

By a stroke of scarcely believable luck, the presence of Bill Johnson and his band in California in 1908 no longer has to depend on the exegesis of uncertain reminiscences collected some 40 years after the fact. This is thanks to the extensive coverage by the Oakland Tribune of their hometown baseball club, the Oakland Oaks, a charter member of the Pacific Coast League, founded in 1903, with headquarters at Freeman's Park, a 7000 seat locale at 59th Street and San Pablo Avenue in North Oakland. The following is taken from three successive issues of the Tribune, from Saturday, 20 June, 1908, through Monday, 22 June, all likely from the pen of T.P. Magilligan. Apparently, the president of the Oakland Oaks, Ed Walter, heard a ragtime band called the "Creole Crushers" at a Thursday night contest of the presumably segregated West Oakland ball club. He hired them to play before the Oakland Oaks Sunday morning game and also between innings. Actually, there were two games between the Oaks and the Portland, Oregon, Athenians, one in the morning, the other in the afternoon.

Their Sunday appearance was described in loving sports-writerese in the Tribune's Monday evening edition, 22 June. I omit some of Magilligan's prose.

> The morning's game was fraught with incidents that will tarry some in the memories of the fans. Music, attempted murder, mirth, frolic and baseball of the rip-snortin', buck-board kind marked the pre-luncheon affair.
>
> **Creole Crusher**
>
> For the edification of the assembled "Bugs" and "Bugines," Mr. W.M. Johnson's world-renowned Creole Orchestra shattered the air with melody and enlivened the proceedings. Mr. Johnson's Creoles put on tap a brand of rag time music that thrilled the bunch to their toes, and the chivalry and beauts cheered the musicianeers to the echo after each piece.
>
> Mr. Johnson's got some band, bo. 'Taint organized none like dose raiglar regimental bands, nor does it worry itself by carrying music rolls. That orchestra in-

cludes and contains one snare drummer, greatest ever; one trombone artist, unrivalled; a cornet player, unmatched, a mandolin and guitar twanger and a bass viol, the latter three of which dispenses sounds dat shualey can set some feet to movin'.

An Obliging Orchestra

Mr. Johnsing and his Creoles are shualy an obligin' lot, for they toots a heep after dey starts 'er up, and keep a tootin' and a blowin' and scrapin' until the last fan ambles out of the park.

The rag that orchestra dispensed, free gratis to the fan, was of a new and weavy pattern. The gent with the trombone just cut holes in dat ole atmosphere, and when he got off to a runnin' staht in any one piece he always finished head up and tail out ahead of his companion pieces in the picture. The cornet boy also trifled some with his instrument, and when he put de gumbo stuff on dat New Orleans rag dey was some shakin of feet dat resembled yards of fire hose in the left field bleachers. The mandolin and guitar boys were dere wid dat shivery stuff, and when dey tinkled they s[h]ualy played music till de cows come home. The man wid de voil cut up some stuff dat was sharp as a razah and keen as a yen ho[k].

Music Makes Hit

. . . The ravishin' music of the Creoles seemed to turn the otherwise solid brains of Dangerous Danzig into curdled milk and that gent tried to commit murder on the person of a respected citizen in the bleachers back of first base [more follows].

Remarkably, on the same page is an account of the playing and singing of "Kid" North, known for his association with Ferd "Jelly Roll" Morton, as well as his commercial partnership with Bill Johnson in 1909 [see pages 75-77 below].

I leave it to the reader to follow up the important hints regarding musical style, such as the "new and weavy pattern" and further digging in various newspaper archives.

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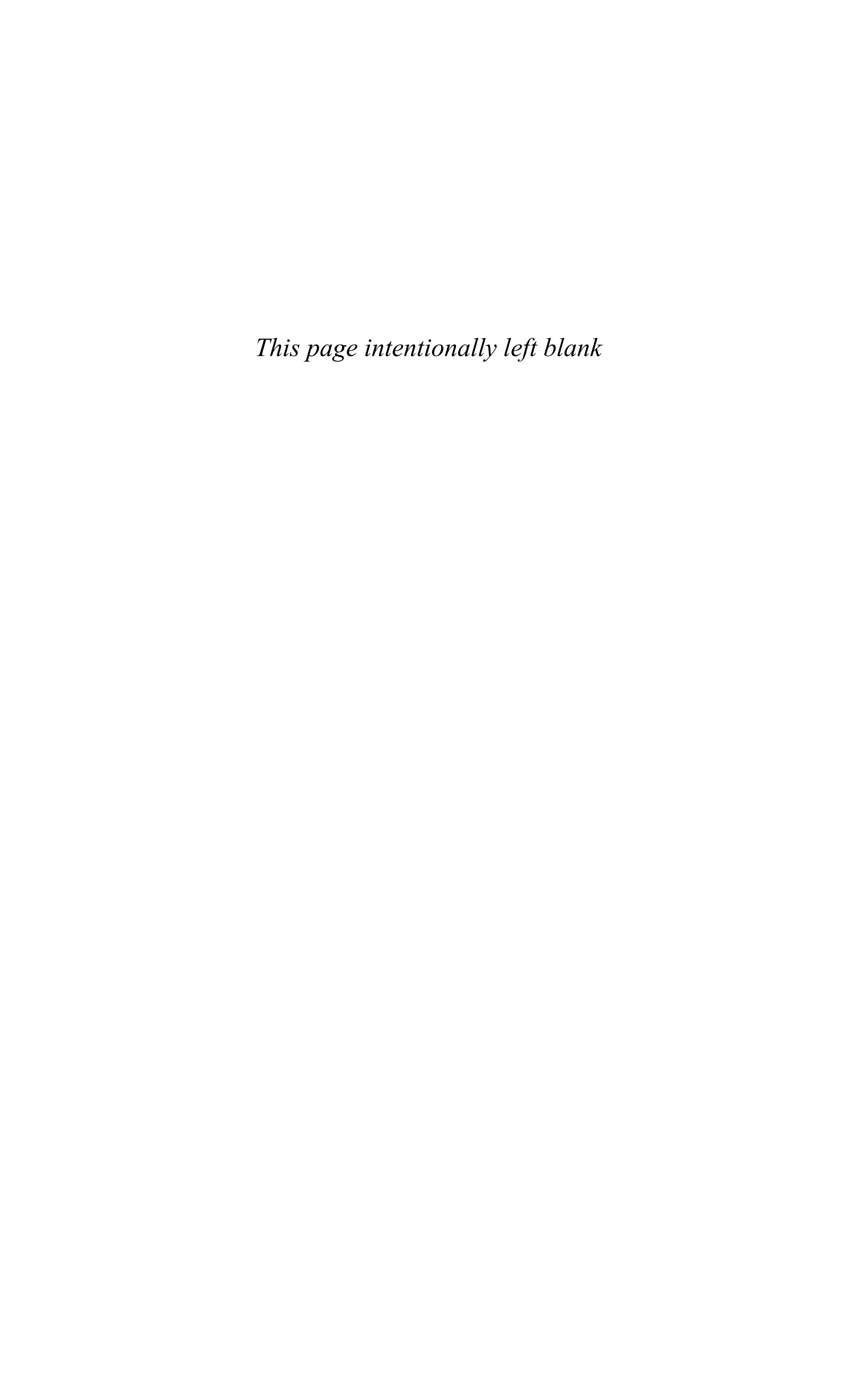
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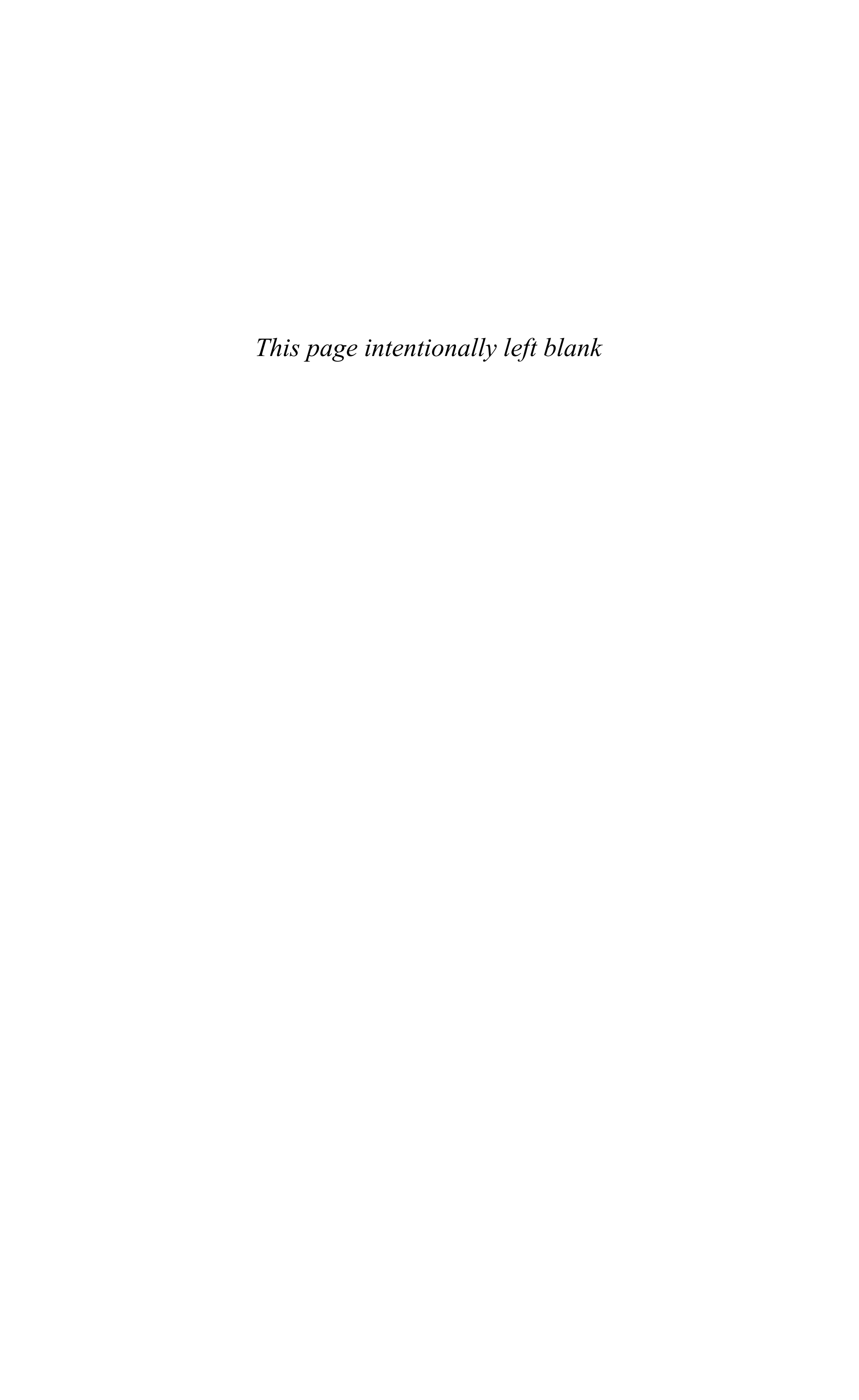
Pioneers of Jazz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Introduction

The Creole Band was *tremendous.* They really
played *jazz,* not just novelty and show stuff.
—Jelly Roll Morton to William Russell, ca. 1938

THIS HISTORY OF THE Creole Band offers itself as a narrative of the vaudeville career of the first jazz band to make its mark outside New Orleans. It will also address the more general question of the beginnings of jazz as a national music, and necessarily, if glancingly, deal with the beginnings in New Orleans. An alert reader may already be muttering under his or her breath "what does the author mean by 'jazz'?" and also, perhaps, "was it really a jazz band?" I beg such an alert reader to permit me the use of these terms for the time being, in exchange for my promise to answer these deceptively simple questions . . . eventually. The epigraph above begs the questions, perhaps, but is invaluable testimony from a musician whose mind and fingers had intimate knowledge of both ragtime and jazz and also had a thorough acquaintance with vaudeville tricks and hokum. He amply deserves being taken seriously.

While the chief purpose of the narrative is not to "set the record straight," I hope that it will do so, as well as introduce some degree of clarity into a subject that three generations of jazz writers have quite unintentionally muddled almost beyond clarification. I also hope that the pioneering contribution of some remarkable musicians will at last receive due credit, rather than being relegated to a brief and almost inevitably inaccurate footnote to the history of early jazz.

Without pretending to go deeply into some important points concerning the context in which the band operated, and some observations regarding the ingrained traditions of jazz history writing, I nonetheless offer here my points of view so that readers will know—as the contemporary vernacular has it—"where I'm coming from." These observations are organized in four topics:

1. the history of musical exchanges between whites and blacks in the United States (a short version),
2. the development since roughly 1890 of a modern style of dancing,
3. the nature of vaudeville and the special problems facing musical groups operating in that now forgotten but once absolutely central institution, and
4. the various ways of writing jazz history and the questions answered and not answered; here will be included a few preliminary remarks on the history of recording popular dance music.

Musical Exchanges between African and European Americans

Many of those who might well remain on the fence regarding the geographical or chronological origin of "jazz" have no doubts as to *who* created it. Jazz, they are sure, is an African-American music. By this they mean the creation of persons of African or partly African descent and not of African-Americans and European-Americans. Point out to them that the instruments employed are European, that the harmony employed is European, and that the song forms that underlie virtually all jazz prior to 1960 are as well, and they will say that it's the supposedly African traits of blue notes or scales, the prominence of the 4/4 beat, the vocality of the instrumental voices, and the importance of improvisation that are the essential factors in jazz, the ones that make it part company with Europe. That much of the music of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, as it became known through recordings in 1917–1918, is not improvised and not particularly vocal merely says to many that the music of the ODJB was not *really* jazz. To even continue this discussion with these assumptions is to follow a well-traveled and frustrating path, with traps of logic, philosophy, racial ideology, and politics everywhere one treads.

Let's take another path. First, let's take as a given that the borrowing and adaptation of European music by persons of African origin or ancestry have gone on since the eighteenth century at least. This has been pretty much a one-way street, due to the particular circumstances of coexistence of Africans and Europeans in the original colonies, and eventually the United States. Imagine an indigo plantation in Virginia. The owners might well have asked one or another of their slaves to provide dance music on the fiddle rather than send to Williamsburg or Richmond for European professionals. There's no reason to think that superficially they played anything other than what the imported professionals would have played—but with a particular attractive twist. We still might well deem it impossible or highly unlikely that the violin-playing son or piano-playing daughter of the house might pick up some African musical traits

or habits. Still, music is free as the air, and at some point something in the slaves' music might well have left a mark on their masters' awareness or conception, if not the practice, of music.

But the plantation is only one place where African-American music-making went on. Let's imagine a city—say, nineteenth-century Philadelphia or New Orleans—in which black musicians, slave or free, might find steady employment by playing dance music. Their first hole card was that the dance hall owner didn't have to pay them as much as their Caucasian counterparts; their second, that they played the tunes of the day with an ear-tickling verve that made the dancers want to move. One assumes, nevertheless, that the repertory was a mix of traditional jig, reel, and country dance tunes and popular hits of the day (including potpourris from opera).

Meanwhile, over the course of the nineteenth century other kinds of music making showed that the European majority had been listening to the sounds of the minority, most notoriously the so-called Ethiopian minstrelsy, ubiquitous from the 1840s on. It strikes us as bizarre that the vast public should have preferred Caucasian "impressions" of African-Americans, such as Daddy Rice's version of Jim Crow's dance, to the genuine article. (It's not impossible, to be sure, that the interpretation of such a skilled performer would go over better on stage than the real thing.)

In the case of the Virginia Minstrels—Emmett, Brower, Whitlock, and Pelham—it seems to be unknown whether a specific African-American band of just that instrumentation (fiddle, banjo, tambourine, and bones) was their prototype. But it's clear that such small combos combining the most important European dance music instrument (the fiddle) with the African-derived banjo, with percussive noisemakers to be had in every kitchen or hearthside, were endemic in early nineteenth-century America.[2] Nevertheless, can we imagine that in 1843 New York a band of "real" African-Americans could have appeared on stage and garnered the kind of runaway success that the "fakes" did?

No, we cannot; this would have been too drastic a break with the deeply rooted tradition of Caucasian mimicry of the slaves entertainment. Eventually, after the Civil War, "real colored" minstrels began to appear in theaters and tents all over the United States and often found themselves obliged to imitate an imitation. This paradox makes us mindful of the functions of theater, sometimes offering up to audiences wonders and fancies, other times a mirror.

What is least likely to be remembered in all this is the prejudice, very common in the nineteenth century (and plausibly before), that the African was a simple child of nature, capable of heartfelt emotional expression and skillful and convincing mimicry but not true invention or creation, understood as ac-

complishments of the higher faculties. At least putting it this way is more complimentary than comparisons to the higher primates, understanding Africans to be, like their cousins, the chimpanzees, amazingly adept at "aping" the behavior of Europeans.[3]

In the nature of things as they were in mid-nineteenth century United States, black folk rarely had a chance to comment on this. Yet there is one exceptionally telling paragraph in an account of the 1869 New Orleans Mardi Gras festivities that appeared in a French language African-American newspaper. (The following translation is mine.)

> If there's something that must strike strangers who have never seen a masquerade in New Orleans, it's the large number of persons who were costumed in "negro" character. Our Caucasians have the gift of imitation in the highest degree, for most of them imitated the "negro" and especially the traditional "negro" such as he is represented to us . . . by the minstrels of the Olympic Theater, with a perfection that indicates amongst our cousins a great superiority.[4]

A commonly encountered theme in nineteenth-century writings is that we Americans had no national folk music, as, of course, many European countries had, except . . . the music of the slaves in the South. Needless to say, this offered something of a dilemma. In the European context, folk music was the product of a sturdy and greatly admired yeomanry. How could slaves, deprived on all sides of the legal rights of free men and by many considered little better than animals, be considered "us"?

Yet in the large repertory of nostalgic songs with a "plantation" setting, best remembered in the many songs of Stephen Foster, there was an exploitation of the enslaved African-American as a rural character of deep feeling, like a child prone to laughter or to tears. This was prior to the War of Secession / Civil War. After the war—and emancipation—black folk could speak and sing for themselves and contributed a wealth of songs embodying either plantation nostalgia ("Carry Me Back to Old Virginny") or a kind of jocular spirituality ("Oh, Dem Golden Slippers"), both songs by the African-American composer and minstrel performer James Bland.

Additionally, not a few examples of prewar "spirituals"—"Go Down Moses," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"—were converted from their unharmonized (and often emphatically rhythmed) "folk" form to quartet versions that made their way, along with the plantation songs, into college song collections. They remain to this day mainstays of the choral repertory and are accepted all over the world as American folk music, along with their snootier and often quite artful cousin, the solo concert spiritual.

This aspect of exchange between African-American and European-American music—or the *idea* of such music, since frequently there's nothing in the notes themselves that seems particularly African—is largely positive in a moral sense, for all that Ethiopian minstrelsy was regarded by many as a "low" form of entertainment. With the 1890s came a flood of dialect songs representing the urban Negro as a ne'er-do-well, a low-life gambler, and a deceiver of women. These so-called coon songs would be performed on stage by both black and white singers—the latter (and sometimes the former!) in blackface makeup. Among the earliest and most popular of these were "The Bully Song" and "Mr. Johnson, Turn Me Loose." The question of which of the hundreds, thousands of such songs embodied *musical* traits of African origin—even if distant and quite dilute—is a complicated one, but some certainly did, whatever the ethnicity of the composers.

At the same time, Americans began to hear on all sides syncopated compositions intended for dancing. There was the little remembered "Pas Ma La" of 1893–1894, followed by a flood from 1896 onward of cakewalks—understood to be an African-American dance in origin—and ragtime two-steps. Ragtime, whether as songs, piano music, or music for dancing, was also understood to be African-American, not only in origin but in its most authentic practice. It found its way onto phonograph records, as sheet music on the music racks of millions of pianos, and as orchestrations and arrangements for all kinds of ensembles, from "military bands" to mandolin and banjo clubs, to more ordinary dance bands.

Before the turn of the century all over the country, including the Deep South, African-American instrumentalists were making their mark as dance band players. This was a relatively low-status occupation, be it remembered, thronged with immigrants of every stripe. But where the Italian or German immigrant musician if sufficiently skilled could also hope to garner a post in a major wind band, such as Sousa's, a pit band in a large theater, or even a symphony orchestra (few though they were prior to 1900), no black musician ever did. No one had to explicitly draw the color line, it was simply in the nature of things.

We should hardly be surprised, then, that at their appearances in theaters from California to Massachusetts the Creole Band were singers of plantation songs, dancers, and comedians. They were simply demonstrating the inherent musicality of their "race," as well as doing what was expected in perpetuating an entertainment genre that went back a century.

Dancing

Henry Morgan Prince (1885–1969), from Alabama, was an all-round entertainer with a show business career reaching back to the turn of the century. In his tours with the Creole Band, he sang the plantation songs in quartet, but the core of his act was dancing. His role as "Uncle Joe" was standard fare demonstrating the ability of hot music to make old arthritic bones young again in dancing a "mean buck and wing."[5]

Where the *Oxford English Dictionary* pretty much strikes out on the term "buck-and-wing," with its earliest entry from 1895, Marshall and Jean Stearns in their much-lauded *Jazz Dance* cite Jim McIntyre, one of the most noted of latter-day minstrels, as having introduced "a syncopated buck-and-wing on the New York stage around 1880 (it did not become popular until later)."[6] Another old-time dancer whom they cite stated in a 1932 interview that the buck-and-wing was a "bastard dance, with a little of this and a little of that all mixed." The most we can conclude without making a doctoral dissertation of it is that it was neither the Irish jig (most recently highly visible in the show *Riverdance*), nor the clog, nor the shuffling Essence, all well known to nineteenth century audiences. Perhaps the most important thing is the association of buck-and-wing with syncopation.

In a review of Mabel Elaine (1893–1955), the blackface dancer who worked with the Creole Band for nearly five months in 1916, the noted critic Amy Leslie wrote admiringly that Mabel did "regulation old-time essence and double pat jig and buck and wing."[7] This youngster (twenty-three years old at the time of the review) had learned these dances at the feet of masters: she'd toured with the white minstrels McIntyre and Heath in their famous show *The Ham Tree.*

In any event, these stage dances aren't an essential part of the prehistory of jazz, which has primarily to do with social dancing. From the 1840s onward, any ball, whether in the Old World or the New, would have had as its mainstays the couple dances polka, waltz, and mazurka and the group dances lancers and quadrille. There were many others, to be sure, but these were the principal ones.

Around 1890 a simplified type of dance began to be adopted, the two-step, which by the end of the century was often danced (in the United States at least) to syncopated ragtime pieces. About this time there also began to appear in previously "polite" venues some rather risqué close dancing, with the partners plastered against each other rather than decorously side-by-side. Eventually, between about 1910 and 1915, the country as a whole began dancing or

seeing danced various forms of close dances: the bunny hug and the grizzly bear, which are remembered, if only because of the quaint names; the turkey trot, which evolved from a close dance to the up-tempo one-step; the fox trot; and the exotic tango and maxixe. They were often referred to as "modern dancing." Although many of these were generally believed to have originated in the dance halls of San Francisco's Barbary Coast, some may have begun elsewhere, particularly in New Orleans.[8]

Sexy as the dances might have been when seen in the more liberal cabarets, not to speak of low-class dives, they were undoubtedly sanitized when taken up by professional society (or ballroom) dancers, of which the best recalled are Vernon and Irene Castle. But there were dozens of such couples, and seemingly overnight they began, ca. 1913–1914, to appear on vaudeville stages, accompanied frequently by on-stage bands composed of African-Americans. At the same time, dancers in cabarets—a relatively novel institution—often gyrated to the rhythms of black musicians.[9] These details are mentioned not to demonstrate that African-American musicians played dance music—they'd done so for two or three centuries—but they were beginning to have a public, even privileged, presence.

The relationship to New Orleans is this: while many of the earliest musicians we associate with ragtime played music as a part-time profession along with a variety of "day-jobs," a number of them, especially those who worked in dance halls catering to a transient or cosmopolitan public—such as those in the so-called District or Storyville—began to have music as their sole source of income. This required the development of a certain versatility along with note-reading ability in order to be able to play the latest hits from the New York publishers. The members of the Creole Band for the most part fitted this description; in other words they were far from being musical primitives or amateurs and consequently sufficiently "professional" to deal with the demand for polish and consistency of vaudeville.

Vaudeville

Vaudeville has negative connotations for many persons today: a particularly outrageous or corny joke may be met with "That's what killed vaudeville." And I've known some extremely knowledgeable conoisseurs to regard with disdain what they understand as vaudeville survivals in jazz performance. In one famous instance, this resulted in the unacknowledged removal on a modern reissue of the theatrical routines that prefaced a number of Jelly Roll Morton's Chicago recordings of 1926–1927. Of course, we all have a right to our opin-

ion in matters of art; but this shouldn't lead to anachronistically imposing our latter-day taste and automatically dismissing as hambone corn or hokum anything performed on a vaudeville stage.

A few preliminaries are worth noting: we have lost the sense of the social implications of different kinds of theater, first of all the distinction between performance under canvas and that done indoors, whether in buildings built for stage performance or general-purpose halls pressed into service. Circuses and tent and medicine shows were ubiquitous and for some tiny towns the only kind of professional theater they could hope to see. Then between the late 1890s and the Great Depression there were the important distinctions between burlesque, vaudeville, tab shows, road shows, and legitimate theater, which operated in different ways and addressed different audiences.

OF THESE, VAUDEVILLE was the most pervasive and the most significant.[10] Much has been made of vaudeville as quintessential popular and topical entertainment, in which performer and audience were extraordinarily responsive one to the other. Obviously, the situations depicted and the views expressed were superficially mere entertainment; but they can also repay the student looking for deeper symbolism and social function.[11]

Taking a closer look at the organization of vaudeville in its heyday, ca. 1910–1920, there was real big-time vaudeville, typified by the Keith-Albee and Orpheum chains; small big-time vaudeville, as represented by Pantages and Loew; and real small-time vaudeville, in such regional chains as the Gus Sun or Butterfield Theaters centered in Ohio and Michigan, respectively. In the Middle West and around Chicago, there were not so much circuits as groups of theaters, owned by such as the Finn and Heiman interests but booked out of the Western Vaudeville Managers' Association offices in Chicago. There were besides in the larger cities tiny halls or storefront theaters that never received mention in the trade press.

A typical vaudeville program in the downtown theaters of larger cities seating between 1,500 and 2,000 might consist of nine, even ten, acts playing twice in a day (or three with a matinee). The price of admission in the most prestigious of these was a (relatively) astronomical one dollar for the best seats. (But two bits would admit you to the peanut gallery.) This was one end of a spectrum of possibilities. By the 'teens there were quite a few small-town and neighborhood theaters that combined motion pictures with three to five acts of vaudeville—so-called combination houses. The price of admission might typically be ten to thirty cents. Greedy theater owners also developed the prac-

tice of so-called continuous vaudeville, with the acts following one after the other without intermission or division into discrete shows. Under this regime, an act might have to perform four times in one day.

In much of the United States prior to air-conditioning, theaters were obliged to go dark between Memorial Day and Labor Day. To some extent this was compensated for by the large number of outdoor entertainment parks that once were found everywhere. But many vaudevillians enjoyed this enforced vacation, particularly if they had enough in the bank to tide them over.

To turn to the nature of the entertainment: the great preponderance of vaudeville acts were duos, although there were some solo acts and a few larger ensembles. An act often could claim no more than ten minutes or so, give or take a minute or two. This obviously put a premium on speed and snappy, highly polished delivery. Certain stars, for example Sophie Tucker, could be given thirty minutes or more, but this was quite exceptional and restricted to big-time vaudeville. Sometimes, however, a chain would book a large ensemble cast in what amounted to a mini musical comedy or drama. This would naturally also take up a good chunk of the time available and would reduce the total number of acts.

In any event, much of the art of presenting a vaudeville show was held to be in the clever positioning of acts for maximum effectiveness. In a nine-act show, the best slots were prior to intermission and next to the last position. The choice and positioning of acts was a matter of great interest to bookers, and reviews in the professional press very frequently comment on it.

Every theater would have a collection of stereotyped drops, thus vaudeville acts did not normally have much specific scenery, with novelty and color lent by costuming instead. If this were not so, the fact that the Creole Band traveled with "special scenery" would hardly have received the frequent comments it did. The music that accompanied virtually every act was rendered in the most pretentious theaters by orchestras of fifteen or more, in the most meager ones by a duo of piano and drums. Most of the music was probably read from publishers' stock orchestrations, although major stars might have special arrangements prepared. In this regard, one of the most intriguing survivals of the band's career is a fragment of what the Palao family understood as a cover for their music.

Certainly vaudeville had its share of acrobats, trained animals, hoop rollers, and such features redolent of the circus, but the mainstay was comedy and song, sometimes the two mixed together, with a fair amount of dancing. Most of the music was the product of the ever-churning Tin Pan Alley publishers, aided by an army of "pluggers" whose raison d'être was to place a song with

as many important, or even unimportant, vaudevillians as possible. It's no exaggeration to say that the primary mode of dissemination of the popular song in the United States between 1900 and 1930 was the vaudeville stage.

Musical acts—that is, ones based on the playing of a collection of instruments—were pretty much obliged to have gimmicks, such as elaborate, often exotic, costumes or peculiar instruments, or to present their acts in a kind of choreography. The lesson that had to be learned was that the vaudeville audience was not there to be edified, as at a concert, but to be entertained. And music without words is not that entertaining by itself. This aspect of vaudeville was alive and well when dance bands began to appear on the vaudeville stage and found themselves obliged to impersonate Arabs, Eskimos, soldiers, sailors, and what have you.

FROM THE BUSINESS SIDE, vaudeville took full advantage of modern inventions: the telephone, the telegraph, the railroad, and the press release. Where burlesque still maintained an older practice of moving an entire company from one theater to the next, a vaudeville performance might present acts that had never appeared together, nor ever would again, with all the details arranged by virtuosos of permutation and combination in the central booking office.[12] The one major exception to this was the Pantages chain of theaters, stretching from Manitoba to California and eastward again to Kansas City, where the distances involved and the difficulties of travel during the winter months made it impractical to follow the normal practice. In the states surrounding the hub of Chicago, the dense rail net made it possible not only to combine acts in a variety of configurations but also to have them play split weeks, with the first half beginning on Monday (or sometimes Sunday), the second on Thursday, thus embracing the weekend. The same would hold true in the very largest cities, such as New York and Chicago.

While certain performers earned salaries in the many hundreds of dollars per week, the average vaudevillian was not spectacularly well paid, although better than most office and factory workers. In any event, the perks of living a seemingly glamorous life were enough to recommend it for many. The $75 per week that each of the members of the Creole Band earned (a rough average figure) was quite decent and, with seven members in the act costing all together some $500, enough to be prohibitive for many small-town theaters.

African-American acts in mainstream vaudeville were uncommon, certainly far fewer than their representation in the general population would indicate.

(For "mainstream" substitute "white" if you will.) Much of what they were allowed or expected to do drew on venerable minstrel routines, although there were a few notable exceptions, such as Fiddler and Shelton, whose appearances in full evening dress seem to have been much approved. So the Creole Band's reliance on the Uncle Joe routine and the singing of "My Old Kentucky Home" was almost to be expected, as also their wearing of southern farmhand costumes and their blackface makeup.[13] It was certainly novel and a bit odd dramaturgically for this to be combined with up-to-date ragtime or jazz. (There was beginning, by the way, to form in the first years of the twentieth century a collection of theaters for black patrons exclusively, which eventually were to be grouped in chains; one of the latest, the TOBA [Theater Owner's Booking Association], is often mentioned today in histories of black entertainment. This helped mitigate the fact that in some locales access to "white" theaters was made very difficult or impossible.)

A number of quite discriminatory business practices made the professional life of performers less than completely happy. Certainly, the terms of the standard contract were unfavorable to them, and their careers depended on following the dictates of personal managers and bookers, so as never to hear the dreaded "You'll never work in this town (or for this circuit) again." Alas, the Creole Band was to find itself in just that situation.

Perhaps due to their quarrel with agent Harry Weber—to be discussed below—the Creole Band never cracked true big-time vaudeville. For example, contrary to Jelly Roll Morton's assertion, they seem never to have played New York's Palace Theater. They were, nevertheless, an important act, especially after their appearance in *Town Topics,* a production of J. J. and Lee Shubert. They were well paid, traveled with special scenery, and were handled, at least for part of their career, by a major agent. My guess would be that they were seen and heard by more than a million Americans (including Canadians). We need to remember that contrary to the "personalism" that characterized vaudeville, they were not known as individuals but as a group.

A Word on Jazz Historiography

Not the least of the things for which I beg the reader's forgiveness is the use of the six-syllable word "historiography." I intend it to mean the history of writing jazz history. This section will discuss this topic especially as it applies to the interpretation of the historical role and importance of the Creole Band.

To start with, we should point out three fundamentally different points of view with regard to the beginnings of jazz.

1. Jazz began in New Orleans around the turn of the century, moved to Chicago, then to New York and Europe.
2. Jazz began (a) either someplace else or (b) more or less everywhere, more or less at the same time.
3. Jazz was "merely" a late form of orchestral ragtime played for dancing, and thus could have developed in different flavors in more than one place.
4. (This is really a subcategory of the third point.) "Jazz" was a name that happened to be applied in San Francisco, Chicago, and New York to ragtime dance music. Thus the beginnings of jazz are not so much the beginnings of a music but the beginnings of the use of a word.

Of these possibilities, the first is by far the predominant one, and those who hold to it credit the origin of the music to special conditions prevailing in New Orleans but not elsewhere.[14] My view is that there's something to be said for all of these. On occasion, as one of those jokes that's meant to tell the truth, I've said, "One thing for sure, New Orleans jazz began in New Orleans."

One of the salient oddities about discussions of the general question is that the subject under discussion, in other words "jazz," is undefined, it apparently being assumed that everyone's in agreement as to what "it" is. My guess is that a good many persons are in fact in tacit, if uninformed, agreement, the main points of which are, first, that jazz is a kind of conglomerate of a repertory and a way of playing that was first well represented on certain "classic" recordings of the period 1923–1928. Second, it's also assumed that the most important feature of this music is that it was spontaneously improvised. With the passage of time, this type of jazz and its "swing" progeny were relegated to the position of a forerunner, with the bebop recordings of 1944–1956 being a line of demarcation.

It seems clear that the first point is a result of the way in which the history of jazz was first written starting in the late 1930s, namely, by record collectors particularly enamored of these recordings of the 1920s and sometimes alienated by "swing" and its adolescent fans.[15] The second point is true to the extent that the framework of a jazz performance often permits spontaneous improvisation but fails to recognize how frequently what is played is very much the same from performance to performance.

Add to this the foregrounding of certain soloists deemed most innovative or creative and chiefly responsible for the stylistic development of the music, and we have a menu for the production of a jazz history that's spectacularly successful in avoiding what might be called esthetic or musical issues, not to speak of broader questions of social and economic history. In the last cou-

ple of decades, some important books have been written by persons fully qualified to discuss questions of musical technique and construction and sometimes with enough hands-on jazz experience to avoid the more idealistic blunders of the earliest writers. Even so, this deepening of discourse has rarely led to breaking down the parochial boundaries between the music and the broader context in which it lives. In this regard, the absence of African-Americans from the roster of writers on jazz has resulted in important distortions or evasions — not that being African-American automatically solves all problems of historical research, narrative, or interpretation.

The foundations of jazz history as they have been constructed by three generations of writers, scholars, and critics, and, more recently, technically descriptive analysts, center unequivocally on sound recordings. Accordingly, it's only to be expected that, in serious writing about jazz, discography has been primary, bibliography distinctly secondary, to the point that one suspects that an enduring tradition of writing on jazz is to downplay the importance of both primary published documents and the work of other writers. I exaggerate: in his epochal history of the Fletcher Henderson band, Walter C. Allen made use of every scrap of primary documentation he was able to find, albeit in the service of discography. One might say, however, that for the jazz historian the recording is analogous to the musical manuscript (or letter or archival document) for the academic musicologist examining the European musical past. If we didn't have them, there wouldn't be much to talk about, and even the anecdotes wouldn't make much sense.[16]

This fundamental bias must be one of the roots of the neglect of the Creole Band in the history of jazz, even now that more and more works of scholarship using as wide a possible range of sources have been written. Even so, considering the amount of speculative prose devoted to Charles "Buddy" Bolden — the alleged father of jazz who also left no recordings, even from his later career — the neglect is strange. Perhaps, after all, it's because their history unfolded outside New Orleans and in the context of show business.

THIS IS HARDLY the place to discuss all the musical features that one might identify as comprising "jazz." With one exception: a lot of reading and listening has led me to substitute the word and concept of "personalism" for "improvisation." It's of course not news that jazz is fundamentally learned and played by ear — although this doesn't mean that it can't be performed using musical notation in varying degree. Or rather, a musical performance does not happen as the accurate reproduction by one or more musicians of a written

composition using a codified instrumental technique. Only the most naive would think that this rules out some degree of uncertainty or "personal interpretation" in the end result. But it's always clear that the music is Beethoven's, or Steven Sondheim's. There are of course jazz arrangements, but these demand players acquainted with the subtleties of jazz played by ear.

The jazz player in a deeply rooted sense "owns" what he plays, or the band owns it as a collective. "It's my music" or "It's our music," and while it can be written down with greater or lesser accuracy, some of the most essential properties can't really be transcribed, such as the fine nuances of rhythmic or melodic performance or instrumental timbre. Since you "own" it, there's no one to say that you can't change it or substitute an entirely different version if one occurs to you. Thus, improvisation is an effect rather than a cause.

IN NEW ORLEANS around the turn of the century and for some years thereafter, there was a sharp distinction between union musicians with relatively predictable and consistent "professional" instrumental technique and note-reading skills and ragtime musicians playing by ear. The two factions regarded each other with some disdain. A specific example that emerges in interviews of members of the Papa Jack Laine circle is the case of clarinetist Achille Baquet, who was seen by some as having lost his talent for ragtime or jazz performance because of his formal musical instruction from Santo Giuffre.

"Playing by ear" is a term that can mean quite different things. Many musicians the world over learn pieces from their teachers by rote, so that what they play is a pious replica of the original. And depending on the repertory or the culture, it may well be expected that the pieces always be played the same way. On the other hand, in other musical cultures, musicians pick up pieces by ear, sometimes written ones, and change them or simplify them in the process. In the case of many jazz performances, the players have in common a knowledge of a melody or a chord progression. What they play refers back to this common mental model that may never actually be heard.

Although for Caucasian dance musicians in New Orleans ca. 1900 there seems to have been something of a face-off between musical literacy and illiteracy—between the union professionals and the Laine crowd. African-American musicians, even though reasonably well paid for their efforts, needed any musical skills they could acquire in order to successfully compete. For them, the meaning of "ownership" of music went beyond individuality and should be considered as also imbued with all the intensity and emotional depth of a disenfranchised and often dispossesed social group. Nonetheless,

those orchestras that read written arrangements often seem to have been admired.[17]

Whether the practice of playing dance music by ear was common ca. 1880 or before is as yet (and possibly for always) an unanswerable question: we didn't ask the right questions early enough. Likewise unanswerable is whether at that early date there existed alongside a written repertory a body of traditional or local tunes that might be trotted out as the night wore on and the dancers loosened up.

There's some testimony to this being the case around 1910, which is not surprising. Thus, a ragtime band wouldn't play hot ragtime all the time, as eventually became the norm, but only for certain numbers or certain occasions.

Another question we'd like to know more about than we do is whether the beginnings of jazz go along with a certain kind of instrumentation. A perusal of that amazing collection the *New Orleans Jazz Family Album* shows a profusion of seven-piece bands dating from about 1905 to 1920: violin, clarinet, cornet, trombone, string bass, guitar, and drums. But there's evidence that only after 1905 did the drum set gradually become a normal if not indispensable member of a dance band; and also that throughout the period much dance and entertainment music was provided by pianoless three- to five-piece bands without wind instruments, or with only one. We also know of early ragtime musicians who played the accordion, most notably Henry Payton.

These considerations, along with the five-piece instrumentation of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, make one reluctant to identify any particular combination of instruments as a jazz or ragtime band, distinct from a dance band in general. So while we may be delighted with looking at the old photographs in R&S, we can't help asking "compared to what?" and want to see a collection of photographs of "ordinary" dance bands, and ones prior to 1905.

That we need to be aware of such questions is shown by the history of the African-American brass band in New Orleans. It seems that prior to 1920 they played mostly from written arrangements and only gradually both pared down their repertory and began playing largely by rote memory to produce that wonderfully richly textured ensemble sound known from recordings from the 1940s on.

The ordinary jazz aficionado might well lose patience with such abstruse matters, beloved though they may be by the historian or musicologist. And he or she might well settle for a legendary musical hero, larger than life, as the person who started it all. What's wrong with this, apart from the fact that one can argue that the ensemble is the primary force in the development of jazz, is that we have no way of choosing between those who credit Buddy Bolden with the

invention of jazz and those who either choose someone else or think the whole idea of an individual starting it all is crazy. For my money, the time ca. 1905 was about right for the beginning of something new and important, which might be in large part the playing of "blues" or of blues-like "ratty" songs.

There is, I must admit, something comic about this search for objective criteria. Certainly for as long as I've been aware of the music—approximately 55 years—a person is a jazz musician if accepted by other jazz musicians. Admittedly, this is fundamentally circular but does embody something of great importance: namely, that one of the characteristics of jazz has been that it is under the control of those who play it more than it is of agents, record companies, club owners, audiences. My guess—I underline "guess"—is that this has been true since the 'teens at least, perhaps even before. This may mean, by the way, that jazz is such a small segment of the market for music that it can be ignored as a major source of income by the music business.

There are those to whom all speculation as to how a given person or band of the first two decades of the century may have sounded or how good they "really" were is a waste of time. Well, certainly, such speculations are arid alongside listening to a phonograph record. But it's not really a matter of either-or. We do have phonograph records of Keppard, Baquet, Louis Delille, Jimmie Noone, Bill Johnson, maybe even Eddie Vincent. If we accept the proposition that an individual's musical voice changes little or not at all once he attains mastery, then we can perhaps imagine something of what the overall sound was like.[18]

So, one answer to those who skeptically ask, "Was the Creole Band a jazz band at all?" or who comment, "Maybe if you heard them, you wouldn't like it," is that we can say something about how most of the musicians in the band sounded. Also, it was accepted as a jazz band by such as Jelly Roll Morton and Paul Howard, who even remembered some specifics about the way they played. (Once again, see Appendix 5.)

It seems all too obvious that the failure of writers on jazz to delve into the history of these musical pioneers was occasioned not by any lack of interest in their story but by the band's failure to make phonograph records. One might say that jazz writers have had no need to consider issues such as the ones mentioned above. They can rely on "ostensive definition," as though the answer to the question "what is jazz?" is to point at a record (or better yet, play it).

But were they a prototype in some concrete sense? Mabel Elaine, the pert blackface dancer who toured with the Creole Band to great applause for nearly five months, a year later hired a band of the same instrumentation led by vio-

linist Herb Lindsay[19] to accompany her in front of a steamboat drop. But where the Creole Band had been a great success, Elaine and company were, to judge from the reviews, a flop. So coming from New Orleans and having the same instrumentation was no guarantee of acclaim.

Brief Note on Sound Recordings

We live today in a time when every band, every would-be star can make a CD—although distribution is another matter. Why don't we have blues records from the 1890s? Why didn't Buddy Bolden make commercially issued recordings? And so forth.

Actually, we do have field recordings (on cylinder) of Native American music from the 1890s. These were made for purposes of study or archival documentation. Probably the main reason we don't have blues recordings is that American folklorists got interested in Indian music first. But a recording that would sit in a museum collection to be listened to by a select group of musical anthropologists isn't what we're talking about. What we wish had existed are "commercial" recordings pressed in hundreds, even thousands, of copies and distributed all over the United States and potentially purchasable by anyone with 75 cents or a dollar to spare—and a phonograph to play them on. But 75 cents was a major expenditure in an era when a penny or two would buy a newspaper, 15 cents a meal—spartan, but still a meal—and a dime would pay one's way into the gallery of a vaudeville theater.

As to the choice of music to be recorded, the companies were guided then, as now, by popular appeal, but with a heavy emphasis on vocal music and instrumental novelties by instruments that recorded well. There was a small but prestigious segment of the market devoted to recordings by the great operatic stars of the day, with Enrico Caruso being the best remembered.

Recordings used published music for the most part, as turned into sound by reliable professionals—studio musicians in today's parlance. Publishers would permit compositions they owned to be recorded because—after 1909 at least—they'd get a so-called "mechanical royalty" on each selection. Performers, if they were soloists, might come into the recording laboratory (to use another expression of the time) without written music, but when it came to dance music, the studio ensembles read from orchestrations. Oh, there might be a medley or two of "old-time tunes" or an attempt to get onto record an impression of a minstrel show, part of which might be played by ear. And a few recordings of African-American vocal quartets exist—from as early as 1895—but, after all, African-Americans were expected to perform by ear.[20]

Notwithstanding the preponderance of vocal selections, whether traditional songs, hits of the day, or operatic favorites, and instrumental novelties, there was plenty of dance music made available. The earliest catalogue available to me is that of the New Jersey Phonograph Company, from before November 1891. Among the 270 pieces were some 50 dance selections.[21] This is just one company, but one can generalize: for the next twenty-odd years, we find in record company catalogues among the many selections recorded by dance orchestras, none from Chicago, San Francisco, New Orleans, or even Boston. The simplest answer as to why dance orchestras from these or other places didn't appear on record is that all recording was done in New York City. From our vantage point, it's amazing that the record companies didn't realize what a wealth of (to us) original, inventive, and exciting music was out there for the taking. Nor did it apparently occur to them that musicians from far-off places could be brought to New York, as finally happened with Art Hickman's San Francisco ensemble in 1919, or that portable recording equipment could be carried to the boondocks, which eventually happened around 1924.

The couple of instances in 1913–1914 when African-American dance musicians were recorded was most likely because they were the chosen accompanists for fashionable ballroom dancers: Europe's Society Orchestra made it into the Victor studio on the coattails, so to speak, of Vernon and Irene Castle, and Joan Sawyer's Persian Garden orchestra was recorded by Columbia because of her notoriety. Despite the fact that the musicians involved were musically literate, there are passages, especially from Europe's Orchestra, in which the band departs excitingly and uniquely from the written score. So far as I know, these players were either from New York or some other place north of the Mason-Dixon line, and they are playing published hits of the day. The bands also followed fashions of the time in the foregrounding of banjorines (or banjo-mandolins) and the drum set.

When you hear these bands, you can nevertheless understand why the Castles or Joan Sawyer would have loved dancing to their music. The same goes in lesser degree for the thirteen recordings made in wartime London in 1916 by the American band at the high-fashion Ciro's Club (alas, called a "Coon Orchestra," although that might have been a selling point). There were also ten tunes recorded in 1917 by them. So far as I know these were not imported to the United States or issued on U.S. Columbia or a subsidiary.[22]

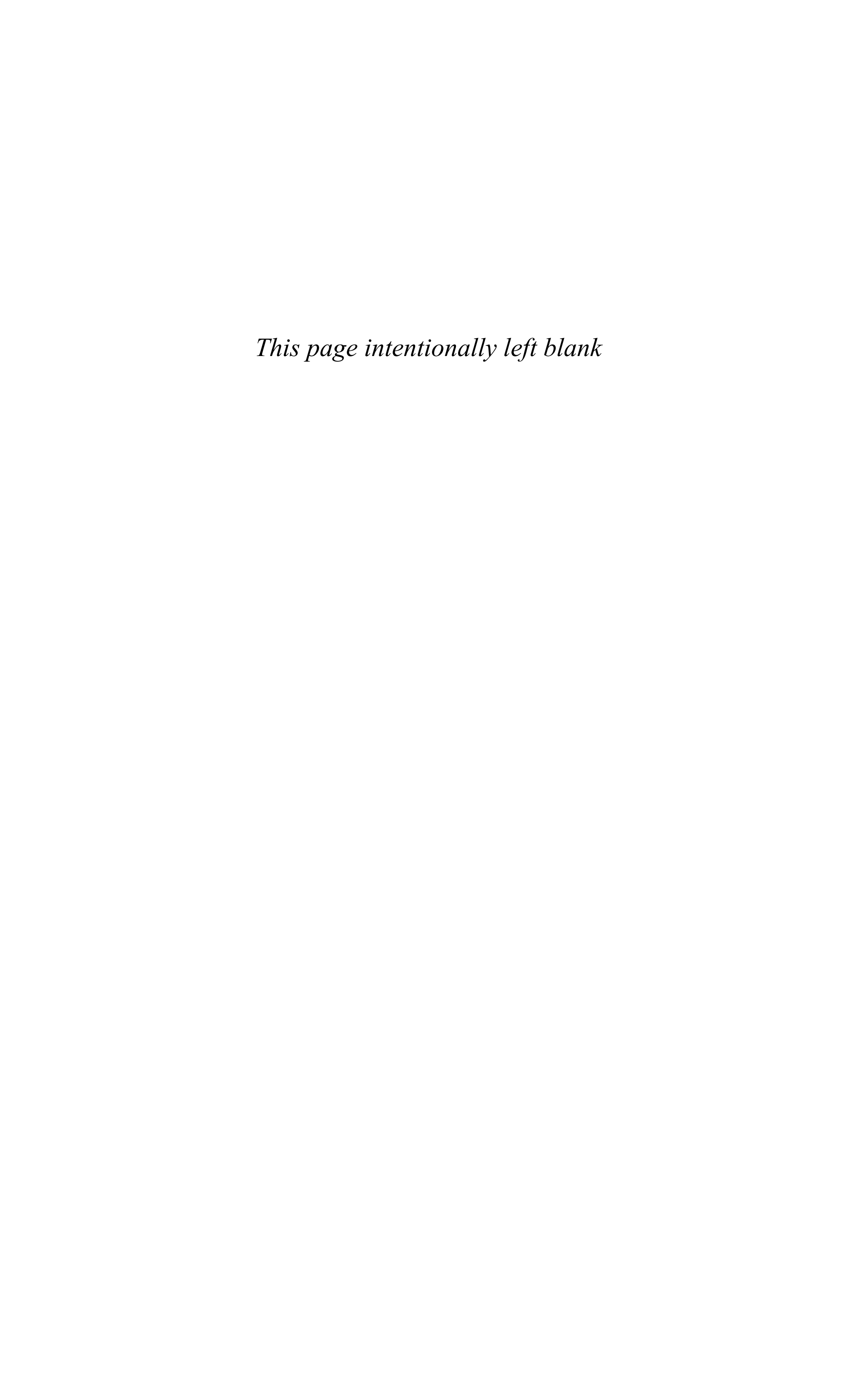
It is not so surprising, perhaps, that, as soon as the managers of the Victor Talking Machine Company became aware that there was a really unusual band of African-Americans—southerners, as well—playing at the Winter Garden doing a terrific job of accompanying Mabel Elaine's clog dancing as well as

playing by themselves, they became interested in the commercial possibilities. And, to believe George Baquet (via Danny Barker), this most important of all U.S. phonograph companies really tried to sign them up.[23]

Then when Victor heard another new band from New Orleans (via Chicago) at Reisenweber's at the end of January 1917 and saw how excited the dancers were, I imagine they thought it worth a try to record them. The try (the first record of the ODJB) did very well indeed. But we can imagine that if the men in the band had gotten disgusted and gone back home, their one record would have been a curiosity, and another group would have had the honor of being the first jazz band.

Eventually, of course, the companies came to understand that (1) there was a wide potential market for up-to-date dance music, especially from bands with a novel performing style and solo players of merit; (2) there was an African-American audience for blues, sermons, and hot dance music performed by African-Americans; (3) there were singers, preachers, and bands that had never left the South that could make records that would sell; and (belatedly) (4) there was a white, rural population that would buy string band music and "country" singing, sacred as well as secular. All of these things made phonograph recordings of the 1920s a more nearly complete documentation of local musics, including those of oral tradition and ethnic minorities.[24]

Perhaps the moral is the truism that things don't happen before their time. And the more unusual the novelty, the more preparation is required. The history of the Creole Band is partly one of changes in U.S. entertainment and dancing that made their acceptance possible, partly the role they played in the eventual taking over of our national musical ears by a once purely local way of making music.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I Dramatis Personae

READERS OF BIOGRAPHIES of the great "classical" composers—Mozart, Beethoven—suspend disbelief willingly enough and grant the relevance of the small details of an artist's life to his or her work. But even in the case of a musician considered to be "ordinary" when compared to the extraordinary Beethoven or Mozart it's nonetheless interesting to be able to cite some event, some fact of the day-to-day existence of the musician that explains something about the work.

With the members of the Creole Band, what we know about their lives is decidedly patchy: There are virtually no letters, no diaries, and few interviews or photographs. Thus it's hard to say how interesting their lives might have been apart from their music—and for most of them, alas, there's little or no surviving written or recorded music. Why bother? For me, the answer is that even if we can say little about them as individuals, we can nonetheless place them in some kind of New Orleans context and make some guesses as to the musical habits or training stemming from their social milieu. And knowing what bands they worked with permits some suggestions as to musical style. But in any event, I've chosen to see the band, its triumphal career and eventual disintegration, as the most significant thing—historically and artistically—in their lives.

Perhaps the most vexing problem for the writer is the unevenness of documentation. A great deal is known about Bill Johnson, a fair amount about Morgan Prince, Palao, and Keppard. Norwood Williams is virtually a cipher, despite Bill Russell's interview with him, as is Eddie Vincent. Falling in between are the three clarinetists, Baquet, Delille, and Noone. To devote a full chapter to each of the musicians strikes me as overkill, although Bill Johnson might well merit one, not only because of the relatively rich source material but also because he was in fact the organizer and manager of the group.

A further decision was made to separate the biographies prior to 1914 from those coming after 1918, not only because it gives a kind of shape to the narrative but because the earlier biographies have to do mostly with New Orleans while the later ones virtually do not at all. The writer realizes that the amount of detail found below will try the patience of readers not enthralled with New Orleans genealogy; I assure them that it could be worse and suggest that skimming will do little harm.

James Palao

James Florestan, or more familiarly Jimmy Palao,[1] was born in Algiers, a short ferry ride across the Mississippi from New Orleans, on February 19, 1879, the son of the newly wed Felix Palao and Clotile (sometimes spelled Clotilde, the standard French form) Rebecca Spriggs.[2] Presumably, Jimmy was born at the Spriggs family home at Homer and Verret Streets.[3]

As one might suspect from their names, his parents represent two quite distinctive themes in the ethnic symphony of New Orleans. It's not clear whether the name Palao is Spanish, Catalan, or Portuguese in origin, and the variety of spellings as found in city directories and legal documents is disconcerting. In any event, while Jimmy was standoffish about learning French, he nonetheless had printed in about 1924 a business card on which he called himself "Creole Jimmy Palao"[4] and his residence in Algiers, a relatively new community escaping the easy French-American dichotomy of New Orleans proper, might disappoint a structuralist.

The Spriggs family can be traced in Algiers as early as 1870, when the household consisted of James, a 36-year-old cook, his wife Clara keeping house, and their four children: Rebecca (11), Henrietta (7), Hannah (3), and Marie Louise (1).[5] It seems likely that James Spriggs was related to another Algiers resident, Berry Spriggs, an illiterate laborer born in Kentucky, recorded by the census in 1880 on Madison Street. James Spriggs passed away on April 4, 1883, but the family continued to live on Verret Street. (Clara lived until 1922.)

After his mother's early death in 1884 (September 28 in Algiers, of epilepsy, according to the death certificate[6]) Jimmy continued to live with his grandmother, and the connection with her family was so strong that he was sometimes called "Jimmy Spriggs" by his contemporaries. Several sources stress that Mrs. Spriggs was an important member of the sodality of the church of the Holy Name of Mary, located at Verret and Alix streets, just a stone's throw away from the family home. One is led to suspect that Clara Spriggs was "creole" by birth, since tradition has it that she insisted—to no avail—that young

1.1 This studio photograph of Felix Palao possibly dates from ca. 1920. [Palao family scrapbook]

Jimmy should learn to speak French. (The 1900 Federal Census has her born in Louisiana of parents born in Virginia.) However, Jimmy's widow, who had grown up speaking both French and Spanish, thought that Mrs. Spriggs's grasp of the language was weak.

Jimmy's father was a handsome man whose features were not particularly African. One might even judge him to have been Cuban, an impression conveyed perhaps by the straw hat and light summer suit of the only photograph known to me. His family background is not entirely clear—what else is new in New Orleans genealogy?—but it seems most likely that he was the son of Edouard Onésiphore Palao (ca. 1830–1897), who for some years kept a cigar store at the corner of Chartres and Hospital (now Governor Nichols) Streets. Be that as it may, he departed from what seems to be the norm for many downtown "Creoles of color" by not having a specialized trade (e.g., plasterer, bricklayer). As nearly as one can tell, he earned his living as a longshoreman.

Edouard and Marie Madeleine Perrault (d. 1911) were married around 1857 and had four or five children: Maximilian (born 1857), Malvina (1859), Felix (1860), Vincent (1862), and Edgar J(oseph) (1864).[7] Edgar interests us because he was a violinist, and he occasionally pops up in New Orleans oral histories, perhaps because despite his early demise in 1914 he had gone to Cuba during