One

"BLUE HORIZON"

Creole Culture and Early New Orleans Jazz

But that's what the music is . . . a lost thing finding itself. It's like a man with no place of his own. He wanders the world and he's a stranger wherever he is; he's a stranger right in the place where he was born. But then something happens to him and he finds a place, his *place. He stands in front of it and he crosses the door, going inside. That's where the music was that day—it was taking him through the door; he was coming home.*

SIDNEY BECHET,
Treat It Gentle

As HISTORIAN GWENDOLYN Midlo Hall has noted, "New Orleans remains, in spirit, the most African city in the United States."[1] At the same time, however, cultural identity among peoples of African extraction in that city has remained anything but uniform. In fact, two distinct African-diasporic communities—the Francocentric *gens du couleur,* or "Creoles of color," and the English-speaking slaves and their descendants—have coexisted in the Crescent City for centuries, each group embodying very different norms and ideals.[2]

Although the subject of racial/cultural identity in jazz has been conceived largely in terms of a black and white binary, this chapter looks to the New Orleans Creole community's participation in and attitudes toward early jazz as a moment when alternative understandings were in play. Not that racial politics weren't a part of that environment, or even that the situation was always less malevolent than in other settings—bassist Pops Foster ruefully recalled the hierarchy of colors

when he remarked, "The worst Jim Crow around New Orleans was what the colored did to themselves."[3] But recognizing that jazz musicians and audiences have configured identities outside of our all-too-sedimented understandings of race should make us reconsider our past (musical and social) as well as alternative, hopefully more equitable and constructive, possibilities for the future.

As I've suggested, this is hardly the first study to explore racial issues in jazz. Indeed, the vast majority of critical discourse placing the music in broader cultural and social contexts has emphasized matters of race, and, given the complex and contentious history of racial interaction in this country, this emphasis is neither surprising nor misplaced. Yet critics dealing with these issues generally characterize jazz in terms of two mutating but self-contained worlds: black and white. On the one hand, black jazz is most typically seen as an expression of a unified community ("the people"). On the other, white jazz is often understood as the creation of a rag-tag group of outsiders, misfit individuals forced together by and alienated from an equally unified but incurably unhip metaculture (Bix Beiderbecke, that "tragic" early cornetist from Davenport, Iowa, appears as the quintessential example here). The two jazz communities may listen to each other, even influence each other, and slowly evolve as historical events dictate; but the sphere encompassing each community and separating the two remains somehow homogeneous in these accounts.

For many, jazz has played an especially strong role in representing "blackness" in America, and musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Nat "King" Cole, Miles Davis, Archie Shepp, and Wynton Marsalis have long exemplified the evolving hopes, fears, dangers, joys, and frustrations of living as African Americans. At the same time, writers have wrestled in various ways with the problem of "whiteness" in jazz, that is, the participation, appreciation, appropriation, and innovation by non-African Americans within what is often understood as a purely "black music."[4]

For instance, in his preeminent survey of American musics, *Music in the New World,* Charles Hamm lists as founding fathers of jazz such New Orleans natives as Buddy Bolden, King Oliver, Freddie Keppard, Sidney Bechet, Johnny Dodds, Kid Ory, and Louis Armstrong.

After describing some early recordings, Hamm writes, "All performers discussed to this point were black, and many histories of jazz have assumed the attitude most pointedly expressed in the opening statement of a book by André Hodier: 'Jazz is the Negro's art and almost all the great jazz musicians are Negroes.'"[5] Hamm then notes that the first jazz recordings were made by (the non-black) Original Dixieland Jazz Band and concludes that "the New Orleans jazz style of the 1910s and '20s encompassed both black and white performers, then. If there is a difference in the playing of the two races, it must be sought at a level other than general style."[6] Meanwhile, in *The Music of Black Americans,* historian Eileen Southern lists Jelly Roll Morton and his sidemen, Omer Simeon and Barney Bigard, as well as Armstrong and Oliver, as important New Orleans innovators. The title and scope of Southern's study leave no question that all of the musicians cited are to be understood as black.[7]

No doubt, all of the men listed by Southern and Hamm were outstanding musicians, largely responsible for taking jazz from New Orleans and disseminating it in a very brief time throughout the United States and, only slightly later, to Europe as well. However, to characterize all of these individuals as black (excepting the O.D.J.B.), as these and many other writers have, disregards the importance of Creole culture in New Orleans history. For there were not two racial categories in that city but at least three, and of the musicians of color listed above, a number of them—including seminal figures Bechet, Morton, and Keppard—did not consider themselves to be black at all but Creole.

This widely overlooked circumstance raises some consequential questions for jazz historiography. First, should scholars relate their takes on history through the lens of present conditions, or should they attempt, instead, to recount the past by bringing forward the terms and identities through which those individuals and communities in question understood themselves to be living? Second, and more pointed, if the overwhelming majority of people outside New Orleans have ignored the cultural differences between African-diasporic cultures in that city, should historians also downplay those cultural dif-

ferences (as Hamm and Southern seem to have done), using those mischaracterizations as tools to refigure unequal power relations?

Certainly, any historical narrative that emphasizes the immense contributions to jazz by individuals of color is understandable and well founded—it remains irrefutable that the vast majority of the genre's most influential players have originated from African-diasporic communities. This Afrocentric historiographical stance appears especially warranted in light of the deplorable "white washing" of the music's history that has surfaced on occasion (e.g., Paul Whiteman as the "King of Jazz"?). However, such narratives tend to ignore the fact that racial identity among jazz musicians and their attendant audiences within the various camps of this supposed black/white dichotomy has been marked by contradiction and antagonism as well as by cultural pride and unity. And what I hope to demonstrate in this chapter is that lived realities in the jazz world—as in the broader American social and cultural world—are more complex than our simple biracial categories would lead us to believe. Moreover, given the present tendencies to anoint jazz as "America's classical music" and its practitioners as "treasured artists," it might be useful to recall that these lofty understandings developed only recently (and not just in the mainstream white community). As we'll see, the prestige granted early jazz musicians in their own day was significantly less than the "cultural heroes" moniker now bestowed upon them.[8]

James Lincoln Collier has been one of the few jazz scholars to address at length the knotty topic of Creole identity and jazz history. His discussion of the rural roots of many Creole musicians serves as an especially welcome addition to the growing literature on early jazz.[9] Yet while I follow many of Collier's historical observations on this subject, we differ on some fundamental conclusions. Most significant, unlike Collier, I do not argue that calling jazz a "black music" mischaracterizes the genre. True, Europeans, European Americans, Latin Americans, Asian Americans, Asians, and Australians have contributed significantly to all aspects of the music, increasingly so over the past four decades. But so many of the significant figures and practices in jazz derive from African and African-diasporic communities that to ignore

these roots signals at the very least a gross injustice to historical accuracy. Unfortunately, as Ingrid Monson has rightly pointed out, some efforts on the part of white writers and musicians to "universalize" jazz—highlighting the fact that the music is performed and enjoyed all over the world by a wide diversity of peoples—"can be perceived as power plays rather than expressions of universal brotherhood."[10]

Non-African-diasporic participants need not feel threatened by the "black music" designation. This is much the same type of historical situation that allows us to speak of, say, a "European classical tradition" even if the music is performed in Chicago, composed by Heitor Villa-Lobos, conducted by Seiji Ozawa, and played by Yehudi Menuhin (or, in the case of his celebrated renditions of the art-music repertoire, even by Wynton Marsalis). "Blackness," then, should be taken as a cultural category rather than a genetic one. And if we understand jazz this way, the labels "black music" or "African-American music" are not biologically exclusionary but simply readily discernible historical realities.

My goal in this chapter is not to retell the "origins" of jazz in New Orleans per se; scholars have produced studies of varying degrees of detail that attempt to uncover the complex events and interactions that gave rise to jazz as a distinct genre in that place.[11] Also largely absent from this discussion is the role played by "white" musicians in New Orleans, though it is clear that we need to reconsider our conception of that aspect of race as well. In fact, many of those players whom we now consider rather routinely as white identified themselves more often in different terms, stemming from a diversity of ethnic backgrounds including Italian, Irish, Hungarian, Canary Island, Mexican, Filipino, and European-Jewish.[12]

Instead, by focusing on Creole musicians active during the time that jazz became recognized as such, I hope to present a richer, more multifarious narrative of the fascinating era and place when and where jazz emerged most forcefully. Showing the cultural transgressions, tensions, and contradictions—as well as new senses of kinship—experienced by Creole jazz players should cause us to rethink some deeply ingrained perceptions of the music. Resuscitating Creole identity will help to challenge today's too neatly circumscribed racial categories.

And, just as important, it upsets many prevalent notions of New Orleans jazz—and, by extension, *all* jazz—as "folk music" and its participants as "natural," if somewhat backward, folk heroes, notions that persist in many ways to this day, though mostly in subtle and unacknowledged guises. To begin, it helps to recount briefly the musical and cultural environment in which Creole musicians developed their craft.

TWO "BLACK" CULTURES IN NEW ORLEANS

I contend that Creoles are a unique race of people . . . [with] specific traits and traditions that have been transmitted from generation to generation by Creole speaking people, a unique nation of mixed bloods.

CREOLE NATIONALIST GILBERT MARTIN,
in Mary Gehman, *The Free People of Color of New Orleans*

The emergence of a distinct Creole community in New Orleans stems from the issue of the first *Code Noir,* or Black Code, by the French monarchy in the seventeenth century. This series of edicts—first signed into French law in 1685 and adopted in modified form in Louisiana in 1724—spelled out the rights, responsibilities, and rules of conduct regarding the interactions of free persons and slaves in France's New World colonies. As Joseph Roach's work on the subject has shown, rather than banning racial interaction, the code's original framers sought to promote a unified French "body politic" with "One Blood." Indeed, Roach argues that "miscegenation was . . . a geopolitical strategy of Louis XIV's France."[13] More than a document of law, the code activated a Franco-acculturation of African-diasporic peoples, permeating all areas of public and private life. For example, the code stipulated that masters baptize their slaves in and teach them the ways of the Catholic church; this conversion would later serve as one of the ways that New Orleans Creoles differentiated themselves from their black Protestant neighbors.

While the Louisiana version of the *Code Noir* omitted certain ar-

ticles of the original proclamation providing for the manumission of slaves and racial intermarriage, it did leave open the possibility of the emergence of a group of freed peoples of color in that region. Legally, for instance, children born to free women and slave men were deemed free. On a more practical level, the ever-increasing mixed-race population tolerated by the relatively liberal policies of both the French and Spanish colonial governments nurtured an environment in which skin tone did not necessarily determine social status. Meanwhile, the turn of the nineteenth century brought a dramatic influx from St. Domingue of free, French-speaking Creoles into New Orleans.[14] The arrival of these Creoles—many of whom, significantly, had fought unsuccessfully on the side of the white French colonists against the slaves in the uprising of 1791—further ensured a certain amount of socioeconomic mobility for individuals of color. The fact that Creole ownership of slaves was not uncommon by the late eighteenth century illustrates quite clearly the emergence of a separate and increasingly prosperous African-diasporic cultural community in the region. This phenomenon marks a profound difference between the French-dominated territories and the British-ruled North American colonies and states such as Virginia and the Carolinas where being "colored" remained virtually synonymous with being a slave.

The political power and social prestige held by the Louisiana Creole community fluctuated with the changing local governments but generally fell somewhere between the various European-American ethnicities on the one extreme and the English-speaking, African-American population on the other. Even as their economic status began to wane in the nineteenth century, however, Creole society strove to maintain staunchly middle-class values, priding itself on appearing well mannered and well educated (in the European sense) and living within an overall Francocentrism. As LeRoi Jones (now Amiri Baraka) notes: "The Creoles, in much the same manner as the house Negroes on plantations in other areas, adopted as much of the French culture as they could and turned their backs on the "darker" culture of their half-brothers. It is safe to assume, for instance, that there were no black Creoles dancing in Congo Square."[15]

We should read Jones's use of the term "darker" somewhat meta-

phorically here. For the conflicts that arose between these two communities in New Orleans stemmed as much from differences in language and religious and even culinary customs—that is to say, cultural customs—as well as urban geography (the two groups remained largely segregated for some time) as from skin tone.[16] If, however, we should understand these conflicts as "Francophone versus Anglophone" rather than "brown versus black," the fact remains that the rift between the two populations was a very real one and different individuals negotiated it in different ways.

With the influx of Anglo-Americans after the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, city officials increasingly amended and began stringently enforcing the code's articles. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, anyone possessing any degree of African blood heritage was deemed legally "Negro," ignoring the reality that the vast majority of Creoles considered themselves to be more French than anything else. Subsequent to these pronouncements, Creoles found themselves without the relative legal privilege and elevated social standing they had enjoyed among the Euro-American populations in the city and were often forced into unfamiliar arenas of social interaction among their cross-town antagonists.

Regardless of—or, more accurately, because of—their new "official" standing, many Creoles chose to close ranks, emphasizing and valorizing the differences between the two groups in order to strengthen their own sense of cultural identity and supposed superiority. This attitude existed to the extent that Creole banjo and guitar player Johnny St. Cyr could remark in 1938 that "the mulattoes [Creoles of color] were actually more prejudiced than the white people at that time."[17] Creole historian Arthé Agnes Anthony clarifies this situation, writing that

> the [Creole] community . . . refused to be classified with the publicly maligned freedmen and their descendants. Underlying this perception—a view that was carried over into the twentieth century—was a refusal to submit to the dichotomy explicit in segregation: that all Caucasians were superior and all negroes were inferior.

> Rather than accept this view Creoles created a middle ground for themselves; even though they were not legally granted the rights afforded whites by no means would they tolerate categorization with blacks. . . . Creoles sought—and to a certain extent found—if not protection at least comfort in their own world because they were able to exercise a degree of control over it. By avoiding extensive contact with Afro-Americans they were able to separate themselves—at least psychologically—from other blacks, thereby reaffirming in their own minds that they were different from them.[18]

Anthony's work reveals the serious differences separating the two predominant African-diasporic communities in New Orleans and, as we will see, challenges notions of jazz as the product of a unified, Southern black "folk" culture.

TWO "BLACK" MUSICS IN NEW ORLEANS

See, us Downtown people . . . we didn't think so much of this Uptown jazz until we couldn't make a living otherwise.

PAUL DOMINGUEZ,
in Alan Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*

By the turn of the twentieth century, New Orleans' Canal Street had come to symbolize the division between the two groups: blacks lived on one side of Canal, or "Uptown"; the Creoles occupied the other, or "Downtown," side.[19] Given the Eurocentrism of most Downtown families, it seems inevitable that European, particularly French, instrumental music and opera would serve as that community's common musical fare.[20] And it follows that, having been raised on the aesthetics attached to the European art-music tradition, most Creoles ridiculed the Uptown musicians as "unschooled." Uptown players were usually less adept at sight reading musical notation than their neighbors, and they incorporated a number of instrumental effects (blues-inflected slurs, "growls," etc.) that conservatory-trained Down-

town musicians of the time found to be primitive, distasteful, or otherwise inferior.

The condescending attitude toward blacks fostered by some Creole musicians carried well into the twentieth century, regardless of the legal edict uniting the two groups. Alan Lomax's interview with early-twentieth-century violinist Paul Dominguez reveals the prevailing Creole attitude toward their forced interaction with the Uptown music community:

> You know what happen to us musicians—I mean us real musicians from the Seventh Ward where we were all educated in music and *knew* our instruments—when we came in here, we had to change.[21] Why, my daddy, he was recognized king bass player in this town, but he wouldn't play *ratty.* He wouldn't play unless you put his part in front of him, and then he could make a monkey out of the average player of today. Well, he couldn't make it here in the District. He couldn't make a *living!* . . . [Uptown cornetist Buddy] Bolden cause all that [to change]. . . . He cause these younger Creoles, men like [Sidney] Bechet and [Freddie] Keppard, to have different style altogether from the old heads like [Lorenzo] Tio and [Emanuel] Perez. I don't know how [the improvisers] do it. . . . But goddam, they do it. [They] can't tell you what's there on the paper, but just play the hell out of it.[22]

While Creoles grudgingly acknowledged the superiority of the Uptown musicians' improvisational ability and expressive "fire," in all other respects they scorned, or at least viewed with suspicion, their crosstown rivals. This derision only intensified as Creoles saw the demand for their more polite brand of musicking shrink in favor of "hotter," "dirtier" styles. Their forced musical interaction must have struck many Downtown players as particularly galling because most of them did not even consider Uptown players to be "musicians" at all. "Real musicians" (as Dominguez called his colleagues) could read notation, knew the "classics," and sought a "refined" tone, none of which applied to typical black American players of the time.

Legendary Creole jazzman Jelly Roll Morton—one of those musi-

cians cited by both Hamm and Southern as "black"—was notorious for his anti-Uptown invectives. Morton's chronicler, Alan Lomax, defends the pianist/composer's position, arguing that "Jelly Roll's race prejudice was not . . . a singular defect, but a commonly accepted Creole attitude, considered normal by Creoles and non-Creoles alike."[23] Contradictory as it may seem, Morton and his bands borrowed a number of devices from Uptown styles (he was, for instance, a very fine blues player and singer).[24] Still, he invariably chose to emphasize in his interviews the European side (that is, as he saw it, the "classy" side) of his music, as in the following passage:

> There is nothing finer than jazz music because it comes from everything of the finest-class music. Take the *Sextet* from *Lucia* and *Miserere* from *Il Trovatore,* that they used to play in the French Opera House, tunes that have always lived in my mind as the great favorites of the opera singers; I transformed a lot of those numbers into jazz time, using different little variations and ideas to masquerade the tunes.[25]

JAZZ AS A PROFESSION

Of course, my folks never had the idea they wanted a musician in the family. They always had it in their minds that a musician was a tramp, trying to duck work, with the exception of the French Opera House players which they patronized.

JELLY ROLL MORTON,
in Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*

Musicking in turn-of-the-century New Orleans entailed virtually citywide participation. And while the extraordinary vibrancy of musical life in that town was most conspicuously and most famously demonstrated by the frequent parades that wound through the streets, these events constituted only one realm in which musicians developed and displayed their craft. For apart from the parades and the more prestigious concert-hall genres, instrumentalists (male instrumentalists, at least) played whenever and wherever community events called

for their services: on riverboats, at birthday parties, picnics, social clubs, weddings, funerals, in brothels, nightclubs, and stage shows.[26] Repertoire ranged from rags and popular songs to marches, spirituals, and classical fare. And if their music wasn't exactly jazz, one branch of the early jazz musicians' immediate forebears frequently utilized a "ragged" performance style that present-day listeners, musicians, and scholars would consider to be, at the very least, jazzlike. These players relied heavily on "growls," scoops, and other effects derived from blues-style vocalizations while incorporating varying degrees of rhythmic swing and greater or lesser amounts of improvisation.

As I've noted, music played a central role in New Orleans life, and Creole society was no exception. Yet while many Creoles enlivened social events and earned extra money by performing, their community generally frowned upon jazz musicking as a career choice. Indeed, despite all of the music, jazz historian Burton Peretti has suggested that there was an overall paucity of *professional* musicians in New Orleans during the early jazz years. He cites figures showing that "in 1870, among the city's 40,000 blacks, only 7 listed their major occupation as musician in the census survey. This compared to 177 black policemen, 397 cigarmakers, and 249 shoemakers. Ten years later the number of black musicians rose to only 53."[27]

Peretti's comments raise a number of points. First, given that cigarmaking and shoemaking are Creole traditions, it is likely that that community figured more prominently in the census readings than the Uptown population. Second, while fifty-three musicians in 1880 may not sound like a significant figure, it *is* almost eight times the number of the previous decade. Consequently, it seems plausible that, during the height of jazz activity in New Orleans in the two decades after the turn of the century, a reasonably large contingent worked in the city as professionals.

But even if we follow Peretti in his numerical assessments, his conclusions—that economics dictated such low numbers of professional musicians, and that envy from the city's poor and condescension from its wealthy accounted for the lowly social status those musicians suffered—bear reconsideration. To be sure, it was difficult to make a living as a player (it still is). But evidence suggests that, as with most

middle-class white families in the America of the time, it was the "unsavory" individuals with whom one might mingle during the late-night gigs, rather than the financial unpredictability of the full-time musician's life, that marked music as a less-than-honorable profession among New Orleans Creoles.

For one, John Chilton has shown that by the age of thirteen, Creole reedman Sidney Bechet was earning around $15 per week—"a little more than the average wage for a working adult"—and contributing some of that income to his mother and father.[28] Similarly, Johnny St. Cyr recalled that while most players did hold other jobs,

> a musician was paid $1.00 for riding on a truck and playing for five hours, $2.50 if he played a ball, from 8 P.M. until 4 A.M., with one hour intermission. House parties paid $1.50 to $2.00 and you played about five hours—8 P.M. to 1 A.M., or 9 P.M. to 2 A.M. This does not sound like much money today, but it was good money in those days. A popular musician in those days would make a good living.[29]

At the same time, Arthé Anthony has pointed out the degree to which the elitist stance characterizing the Downtown population extended to their views on employment:

> The Creole community was cognizant of the relationship between race and occupational opportunity. Their attitudes toward jobs—those that were respected and those that were not—were influenced by the city's racially determined occupational patterns. Aware of the limited range of job opportunities, Creoles tended to value those jobs that appeared to set them apart from the larger black community.[30]

In line with this thinking, Chilton, Sidney Bechet's biographer, writes of the disposition of Bechet's parents toward their son's chosen—and at that time only—source of income: "no amount of money compensated the family for the fact that Sidney was working regularly in 'the District': such employment was thought of by them as a stigma."[31] Jelly Roll Morton also encountered antagonism from

his family when they learned of his activities (not all of which were strictly musical):

> In those days everybody was playing what they call ragtime, and I wanted to play too. But my daddy caught me trying one day and took off his belt and tanned me good and proper. He said: "Son, if you ever play that dirty stuff again I'll throw you out of here on your ear!" But man, I couldn't no more stop playing it than I could stop eating. So I used to go to the cabaret called "The Frenchman" and boy—I used to really beat it out.[32]

Of course, Morton continued his pursuits, and his grandmother eventually refused to put up with the resulting social humiliation. She rebuked him, "A musician is nothing but a bum and a scalawag. I don't want you round your sister," and Morton was forced to move out of the family home.[33]

These and many similar reminiscences reveal that identity, not economics, was the primary factor in discouraging certain types of musical participation. In this way, Peretti's citing of an unnamed source regarding the highly regarded Creole clarinetist Alphonse Picou—"'He never considered himself a musician as such until he was asked to join the Bloom Symphony,' a Creole classical group,"[34]—tells us more about the favorable attitudes held by Creoles toward European musics (and the concomitant distaste for jazzlike musics) than about the fiscal hardships of that time and place.

By contrast, Uptown families did not seem to view the choice to pursue music as a profession as an unforgivable transgression against the community. As those occupying the lowest rung on the socioeconomic ladder, these performers simply had less (or nothing) to lose by overstepping the social norms observed by their Downtown neighbors. Indeed, Scott DeVeaux has shown that "by the beginning of the twentieth century, the profession of musician was taking its place alongside barber, caterer, and Pullman porter as one of a handful of occupations outside unskilled manual labor open to blacks."[35] But a Creole considering music as a lifestyle faced a much greater likelihood of provoking familial discord, even in those instances, like Bechet's,

in which a musician could support himself or herself comfortably through playing.[36]

SIDNEY BECHET

I have touched already upon the famous Creole reedman Sidney Bechet (1897–1959), but his situation is worth exploring more closely, for Bechet's music and writing intimate some of the earliest interactions among jazz cultures. Though Bechet's status in recent jazz history texts does not equal that granted to Uptown trumpeter Louis Armstrong, Bechet's own contemporaries regarded him as a player of startling brilliance. Bechet was also one of the first jazz musicians to spend extensive time in Europe, ultimately achieving the status of a cultural hero in France. In doing so, he served as one of the primary role models for succeeding generations of European jazz musicians at the same time that he nurtured an environment that would become amicable to the many expatriate American players who made Europe, particularly Paris, their home from the 1920s onward.[37]

Through his autobiography, *Treat It Gentle* (published posthumously in 1960), Bechet left behind a wonderfully rich firsthand account of musical and cultural life in turn-of-the-century New Orleans. *Treat It Gentle* stands as one of the true gems of autobiography—jazz or otherwise—it is a beautiful story, beautifully told. If, as John Chilton has pointed out, Bechet's tale does not always correlate with what we might regard as historical fact, the work does tell us what Bechet would have us believe to be true, and so serves as an invaluable account of his ideals and aspirations.[38] It helps, too, that Bechet played on numerous recordings over many decades, a circumstance that allows for critical discussions of his music making. In this way, he differs from many of his New Orleans–raised colleagues and predecessors; the now-mythical Buddy Bolden stands as only the most notable of the lamentably unrecorded or underrecorded innovators of the early jazz era.

Despite his Creole background, Bechet always remained an "ear" player, staunchly refusing to learn musical notation, an aspect of his musicianship roundly criticized by many of his fellow Downtown

players, with their pride in European-style "professionalism." Jazz historians Lewis Porter and Michael Ullman understood Bechet's inability to read music as a "failing" about which he was "sensitive." But far from being defensive about this issue, Bechet makes it plain in his autobiography that his decision not to read was a conscious one. Such a stance can be seen as evidence of his desire to be linked with what he must have regarded as the more "pure" Uptown style of musical expression.[39] He was not alone in his mistrust of reading. Nat Hentoff and Nat Shapiro quote Jack Weber as saying of early New Orleans clarinetists that "some of them thought that if they learned how to read, it would ruin their ability to improvise."[40] One explanation for this stance may be that the Uptown players, those most inclined to rely solely on their "ears," were by necessity the strongest improvisers, and improvisational ability remained one of the traits that Bechet and like-minded players esteemed most highly in a musician.[41]

Bechet's case frequently reveals such culturally transgressive allegiances, as he maintained a decidedly more Uptown, even Afrocentric, position than the one taken by most Creoles of his day. And this stance extended beyond music; for example, Bechet went so far as to assert, "my grandfather, he was Africa,"[42] and to claim that one of the reasons behind his relocation to France in the early 1950s was the proximity of that country to the African continent.[43]

However, Bechet's position on his racial heritage was neither unremittingly Afrocentric nor uncomplicated. In spite of his apparent Uptown ties, he never disavowed his Creole-French roots, as can be seen in his assertion about the confluence that created jazz: "The rhythm came from Africa, but the music, the foundation, came from right here in France."[44] Indeed, even with someone who often patterned himself after Uptown ways, Bechet could occasionally revert to the virulent racism that characterized Downtown attitudes. Saxophonist Bob Wilber, a longtime friend and student of Bechet's, discussed his teacher's complex, often contradictory, stance toward his own cultural heritage. Bechet, he wrote,

> never thought of himself as a black man. . . . Creoles like Bechet and Jelly Roll [Morton] did not see themselves as black, yet they

were not accepted as white men. This sometimes resulted in strange statements from Sidney, like, "Them Goddam niggers, doin' this and doin' that, and givin' us all a bad name." We once sat down in front of the tape recorder while he expounded on the subject, extolling the virtues of the infamous southern racist senator, the notorious Senator Bilbo, who had connections with the Ku Klux Klan and all the worst aspects of that business. Sidney said, "Bilbo's doin' a good job. He's for law and order. He keepin' all them people in their places."[45]

These outbursts notwithstanding, Bechet's stance on his lineage differed greatly from that of his fellow Creole, Jelly Roll Morton. In the Library of Congress–sponsored interviews with Alan Lomax, Morton explicitly emphasized the European side of his ancestry. He noted, "As I can understand, my folks were in the city of New Orleans long before the Louisiana Purchase, and all my folks came directly from the shores of France, that is across the world in the other world, and they landed in the New World years ago."[46] Similarly, a note from Richard B. Allen, former curator of the William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University in New Orleans, states that Morton often insisted to singer Lizzie Miles that he was white. Allen adds: "She [Miles] had good reason to believe otherwise, having grown up in the same neighborhood [as Morton]."[47]

The differing attitudes of Bechet and Morton toward both jazz and even their own respective Creole ancestries are reflected to a large degree in the music each emphasized. Morton played piano, an instrument closely associated with the European classical tradition, considered himself a "composer," and openly ridiculed musicians who couldn't read notation (though his own skill as a reader has been questioned). Conversely, Bechet, while a composer in his own right (presumably he would play or sing his tunes to someone able to transcribe his melodies into notation), made his mark primarily as an outstanding improvising reed player. And though the clarinet and saxophone originated in Europe, both may more readily approximate the slurs and bends of African-derived blues vocalizations than the piano, with its keyboard organized in fixed, discrete pitches. In fact, Bechet's atti-

tude toward musicking directly opposed European ideals. His playing leaned heavily toward the Uptown, that is to say "unschooled," "low-down," or "blacker" styles, and it is precisely these "rough" techniques that Bechet saw as essential to jazz.

For instance, of his first clarinet teacher, Creole George Baquet, Bechet remarked,

> Baquet was a hell of a fine musicianer; he played awful fine. But he wasn't exactly a real ragtime player. What he played, it wasn't really jazz . . . he stuck real close to the line in a way. He played things more classic-like, straight out how it was written. And he played it very serious. . . . When Baquet played it, there wasn't none of those growls and buzzes which is a part of ragtime music, which is a way the musicianer has of replacing different feelings he finds inside the music and inside himself . . . all those interpreting moans and groans and happy sounds. There wasn't none of that in the way he played. I don't know if it was that Baquet *couldn't* do it, all I know is he *didn't* do it.[48]

Bechet respected Baquet's smooth and "straight" Downtown-style playing but felt that it lacked the "interpreting sounds" preferred by Uptown stylists. Similarly, Richard Hadlock's descriptions of his lessons under Bechet suggest that his teacher believed that a jazz musician finds his or her "voice" by learning to manipulate pitch and timbre:

> "I'm going to give you one note to play today," he once told me. "See how many ways you can play that note—growl it, smear it, flat it, sharp it, do anything you want to it. That's how you express your feelings in this music. It's like talking."[49]

BECHET AND THE BLUES

The most notable means Bechet found to express his sense of identity musically was, significantly, through that very un-European musical form: the blues. The blues have been described as "revenge," a response to the incessant trials and tribulations of a group living under

relentless racism.[50] To be sure, there is a sense of revenge about the blues. The music and lyrics can function as an act of defiance toward the dominant values, laws, and rules that would keep a people exploited. And, by creating their own aesthetic precepts, many New Orleans musicians did, consciously or unconsciously, turn their backs on those practices that both white and Creole society deemed "cultured," demonstrating as they did this that those in power are not necessarily the wisest, most creative, or most imaginative.

But the term "revenge" does not adequately describe the full range of the blues, for revenge remains, by definition, only a re-action. Participation among the blues-based, Uptown-style musicians, listeners, and dancers attracted peoples of disparate cultural lineages and opened the possibility for new senses of community. Their musicking constituted, therefore, a generative action in its own right. Through the blues, like-minded musicians from both Uptown and Downtown could imagine, and even configure, a world comprising different (and not merely inverted) relationships among cultures. This phenomenon helps to explain why jazz practices became ever more closely monitored by the white arbiters of taste as the music attracted increasing numbers of white participants. Any alternative to the prescribed notions of identity (and, therefore, possible action in the world) would be seen as threatening to those whose interests it serves to maintain the status quo. It shows, too, why the blues were, and remain, a powerful draw for groups of people exploited or otherwise disenfranchised, regardless of racial heritage.[51]

Dwight Andrews has suggested that "the blues form evolved unfettered by any aesthetic obligations outside of the African-American traditions and the community it was destined to serve."[52] But while the musical and cultural gap separating blues from European models remains wide, no African-diasporic communities have ever existed in total isolation. The blues, after all, went unheard in Africa until it reached there via recordings, and blues legend Howlin' Wolf even cited white "hillbilly" star Jimmie Rodgers as a formative influence.[53] Even the predominantly white-owned record companies played a role. They decided what material would and would not be recorded and released by such seemingly "pure" blues artists as Robert Johnson and

Bessie Smith, both of whom knew and performed the full range of popular musics of the day. These points aside, Andrews is right to celebrate the sense of self-empowerment that accompanies blues making and the possibilities that that sense opens.

Recordings abound of Bechet playing the blues, almost all of which achieve a degree of that very elusive quality called "soul" attained by few others. He belongs to a group of "jazz" and "blues" players—oftentimes the boundary where one genre ends and the other begins is blurred or erased altogether—whose playing speaks of joy as well as, indeed, in spite of, pain.[54] Musicians as seemingly disparate as Bechet, Mississippi John Hurt, Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, Hampton Hawes, Big Joe Turner, Johnny Hodges, Louis Jordan, Ray Charles, Taj Mahal (Henry Saint Claire Fredericks), Wynton Kelly, Lester Bowie, Ornette Coleman, and, for that matter, Jaco Pastorious and Dr. John (Mac Rebennack), gain not only a certain amount of "revenge" but also, more important, a sense of dignity, affirmation, and, ultimately, identity that flies in the face of those who would insist on a perpetually "downtrodden" people.

These are not "angry" or even consistently "sad" blues; rather they represent, in Bechet's own words, "what you'd send to your son in trouble if he was on earth and you was in Heaven."[55] Bechet's approach to the blues parallels his theory of effective autobiographical narration, wherein the good stories need to be told "the long way."[56] His celebrated 1944 recording of "Blue Horizon" demonstrates this philosophy put to practice.

"BLUE HORIZON"

Bechet most often relied on his loud and brash soprano saxophone sound in performance, but he used "Blue Horizon" to feature his warm, woody clarinet playing.[57] Accompanying him here are Sidney DeParis on trumpet, Uptown–New Orleans bassist Pops Foster, pianist Art Hodes, drummer Manzie Johnson, and trombonist Vic Dickenson. Although Bechet receives credit as the composer of "Blue Horizon," that recording exemplifies less a composed blues song—with melodic "heads" serving as bookends for a string of solo statements—

than it does a complete blues performance, a distinction that I will clarify below.

Bechet begins in the lower, chalumeau register of the clarinet and slowly unfolds his statement over six choruses. The manner in which he shapes each successive twelve-bar harmonic cycle—gradually manipulating dynamics and range, pushing toward the last chorus for his loudest playing and most sustained upper register work—typifies his "story-teller" approach.

In particular, Bechet's work here displays an extraordinary use of musical "space," emphasizing sustained notes and extended silences to add dramatic weight to his phrases. Recollections of his former students confirm that he focused on this aspect of playing. Richard Hadlock, who studied under Bechet, recalled that his teacher would admonish him: "Always try to complete your phrases and ideas. There are lots of otherwise good musicians who sound terrible because they start a new idea without finishing the last one."[58] Bechet's suggestions reveal one of the ways in which he formed his highly rhetorical style; recall his advice to Bob Wilber: "It's like talking." He relies less on long strings of eighth-note lines, such as one would find in Swing and bop styles, than on the exploration, even delectation, of sound in itself.

We've seen that an essential trait distinguishing a jazz musician from a typical Downtown musician of the time is the incorporation of what Bechet described as the "interpreting moans and groans and happy sounds." "Blue Horizon" overflows with such sonorities, as Bechet colors and shapes each phrase—indeed, virtually every tone—with a long, slow, rising glissando, a gentle "scoop" from below, a "fall" from above, or a throaty growl. Of course, it is just these devices, the slurs, rips, and buzzes, that bear some of the most African-related traits of early jazz.[59] Bechet's famous wide and rapid vibrato further accentuates the flexibility of pitch and dramatic flair characterizing his playing, a technique he applies liberally throughout all his performances and one that would have put off most of his more traditional Creole colleagues.

These Uptown-derived "scoops" and exaggerated vibrato would become Bechet's trademarks and exert a tremendous influence on other players, particularly on alto saxophonist Johnny Hodges.[60] Signifi-

cantly, those musical gestures fell out of favor during the rise of bebop in the 1940s as musicians began to favor "thinner" vibratos (or none whatsoever) and more "centered" pitch articulation. This shift was a response in part to the bop era's emphasis on faster tempos and greater use of "extensions" (ninths, flatted fifths, thirteenths) but also to a desire to sound less "melodramatic." Scott DeVeaux has pointed out the ambivalence of bop-era players to such blues stylings, noting that "as brash New Yorkers with an attitude, they were keenly aware that the blues embodied a certain social inertia, a rural passivity, that they were determined to overcome."[61]

The boppers' take on blues-oriented players may have been somewhat misplaced, for Bechet was no "hick." He experienced and enjoyed at close hand cosmopolitan French life, with its abundance of fine wines, rich foods, and available women, far more frequently than most of the bop hipsters ever came close to doing. Nor was he a reactionary, never denying the necessity of stylistic changes in jazz, always believing in the need for each generation to tell its own stories.

> You know, there's this mood about the music, a kind of need to be moving. You just can't set it down and hold it. Those Dixieland musicianers, they tried to do that; they tried to write the music down and kind of freeze it. Even when they didn't arrange it to death, they didn't have any place to send it; that's why they lost it. You just can't keep the music unless you move with it.[62]

Bechet suggests here that to ensure the survival of a viable—which is to say expressive, relevant, and entertaining—musical style, players must not only draw upon the past but also give sound to the present while moving toward an imagined future. Not until the emergence of Charles Mingus and Ornette Coleman as band leaders in the late 1950s and early 1960s did jazz styles shift again to reincorporate the overtly expressive slurs, glisses, and scoops that were common in earlier jazz eras.[63]

"Blue Horizon," like most of Bechet's recordings, clearly illustrates the "problem of transcription" pointed out in recent scholarship dealing with non-European musics. The excruciatingly slow glissandi and

other gestures so crucial to this style simply resist reduction to notes on a page. The fact that Bechet himself never relied on notation may contribute here. Rather than seeing discrete notes, Bechet necessarily approached playing more broadly in terms of sonorities, and these did not necessarily—in fact rarely—fit into centered, stable pitches. Similarly, his rhythmic conception in this performance seems less bound by equal subdivisions. To be sure, all musicians stretch or contract note values to some degree, but Bechet's gestural blues playing lends his phrasing a freer quality than one would hear from a more "linear" jazz player, Clifford Brown, say, or the early John Coltrane.[64]

In fact, this loose aural/oral sense seems to inform the piece as a whole. As I've remarked, "Blue Horizon" lacks the sort of clearly stated head-solo-head arrangement that frames most jazz. The only hint that Bechet may have had an actual "tune" in mind comes in his return to a brief melodic fragment in bars nine and ten (the V chord and IV chord respectively) of each chorus, though he never plays these fragments the same way twice. And while the contour of his phrases and gestures follows the cycling of the blues form, a larger musical narrative guides his work, as his playing pushes toward a multichorus resolution rather than through a succession of self-contained twelve-bar cycles. That is why I've suggested that we consider "Blue Horizon" a performance rather than a song whose melody can be fixed onto a lead sheet and played one way this time and differently the next. The entirety of Bechet's long-term blues trajectory looks toward, well, the "horizon," and, in many ways, is the piece.

Crucial to the effectiveness of this approach is the subtle accompaniment provided by his colleagues, who act as a sort of congregation/choir to Bechet's "preacher." Beginning in the third chorus, each rhythm-section player, in turn or in tandem, supports the clarinetist's blues rhetoric with some sort of pedal point (right-hand tremolos in the piano, steady roots bowed on the bass, subtle snare drum rolls). Their contributions serve to generate a remarkably relaxed intensity, enabling the soloist to take his "story" to the next dramatic level. Manzie Johnson's understated drumming lends particularly subtle and effective support. By 1944, when this track was recorded, contempo-

rary drumming styles had turned busier, most noticeably through left-hand snare-drum interjections and "bombs" dropped by the right-foot/bass drum. By contrast, Johnson seems content to provide a firm but unobtrusive pulse throughout.

The horn players too, though remaining in the background, provide crucial backing to the soloist, following his narrative thread. Trombonist Vic Dickenson enters in the second chorus with a simple background two-bar riff figure. Trumpeter Sidney DeParis enters in the following chorus, harmonizing with Dickenson for twelve bars before improvising a light counterpoint to Bechet. Both horn players lay out for the fifth chorus. But as Bechet's solo peaks in both register and dynamics in the final twelve bars, the horn players reenter with their most animated counterpoint, underlining the climax of the clarinetist's performance. Bechet clearly stands as the focus of this recording, but the work of the others enables him to make the most of his prodigious skills. Though not virtuosic in the "showy" sense, "Blue Horizon" represents a masterful performance, demonstrating a deep understanding of blues rhetoric, an ease of expression, and a cooperative spirit from all of the players.

"WAITING TO UNDERSTAND WHAT THE OTHER MAN IS DOING"

Bechet made it clear that his joy and creativity were piqued when playing among musicians like those mentioned above who were his peers in improvisational-interplay abilities. And it was the continual challenge of creating sounds that complemented and inspired bandmates that he found to be most satisfying.

> That's the thing about ragtime. . . . It ain't a writing down where you just play what it says on the paper in front of you, and so long as you do that the arranger, he's taken care of everything else. When you're really playing ragtime, you're feeling it out, you're playing to the other parts, you're waiting to understand what the other man's doing, and then you're going with his feeling, adding what you have of your feeling.[65]

In this regard, Lewis Porter and Michael Ullman rightly suggest that "one of the great tensions in [Bechet's] life was between his natural competitiveness and his lifelong desire to assemble a collectively swinging, New Orleans band. He never quite succeeded. . . . But he never gave up!"[66]

Examples of Bechet working within a more classically New Orleans polyphonic approach run throughout his work, from his 1924 recording of "Texas Moaner Blues" with Louis Armstrong and trombonist Charlie Irvis, to his outstanding Blue Note sessions from two decades later such as "Old Stack O'Lee Blues" in which he interweaves lines with fellow clarinetist Albert "Nick" Nicholas.[67] We can even hear Bechet's love of interplay on his 1941 self-accompanied multitracked performances (the first of their kind) of "Blues of Bechet" and "The Sheik of Araby."[68] These recordings display a complex moment in Bechet's jazz ideals: while proud of his acclaim as the first to explore the most recent recording technologies, Bechet's comments on these sessions make it clear that the spirit of jazz exploration was somehow lost in the overdubbing process. For he esteemed not only the musical texture of counterpoint but also the engagement with like-minded—yet not "identical"—musicians in order to mutually challenge, inspire, and surprise. As Bechet remarked in the 1950s, "In the old days there wasn't no one so anxious to take someone else's run. We were working together. Each person, he was the other person's music: you could feel that really running through the band, making itself up and coming out so new and strong. We played as a group then."[69]

The degree to which jazz behavior gradually drifted away from this New Orleans musical-social ideal can be seen in this passage from Ralph Ellison's 1958 paean to the late nascent-bop-era guitarist Charlie Christian:

> There is . . . a cruel contradiction implicit in the art form itself. For true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from uninspired commercial performance) springs from the contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, rep-

> resents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in an endless chain of tradition.[70]

Bechet would not have seen group play as a "cruel contradiction" but rather as an arena of mutually satisfying cooperation and the very foundation for his love of playing music. To be sure, musicians did push each other; rivalries (some not so friendly) did spring up. But Ellison's essay illustrates a profound shift in jazz aesthetics in the rise of the soloist and, specifically, the public "cutting contest" in the period just before and through the bop era, a type of battle very different from the sort of mutual challenging for which Bechet strove.[71] Ironically, this shift in emphasis was facilitated, though almost certainly unwittingly, by the tremendous strength and beauty of Bechet's (and, obviously, of Armstrong's) playing. Of course, as Ingrid Monson has noted, even in bop and post-bop styles, interaction and cooperation remain crucial to effective and satisfying musical experiences for musicians as well as their audiences.[72] Monson's work serves as a much-needed reminder that jazz is, at its best, an arena in which very close musical and personal relationships are formed and tested. Still, there can be little question that the "cutting" mentality played an integral role in "separating the men from the boys" in bebop's formative years, and that mentality did and does survive.[73]

One could argue that the stance taken by Bechet and other Creole musicians who modeled themselves on Uptown styles did resonate in one important sense with that taken by most early bop-oriented musicians in the 1940s. For both sought to create an alternative to a mainstream, dominant (white Protestant and/or Francocentric Creole) society of the time, challenging those African-diasporic communities that saw integration and assimilation of European and Euro-American ideals as the most fruitful means to redress power imbalances.

But bebop and Bechet differ in their ideals in many other significant ways, most noticeably so in the attitude taken by each toward their respective audiences. Unlike bop performers who expressed their unity by withdrawing into a hermetic subculture marked by exclusivity on

many levels, Bechet and his cohorts sought to openly proclaim and celebrate their sense of comfort and community to all those who would hear.[74] Bechet's circle looked upon a large, diverse, and joyful audience as a musical and professional achievement, a marked contrast from bop ideals wherein widespread popularity could be (and still is to a degree) perceived as "selling out," even by those who pushed to have their music recorded and sold. For Bechet, playing the blues was not merely the individual musician's expression of an "inner self" but a simultaneous exploration, revelation, and narration of a community looking for, and becoming, itself. Coming from a relatively "foreign" Creole background, such musicking is not simply a playing about a people but a way of playing a new jazz/cultural identity into being.

This idea of allowing the music, the musicians, and the audience to "find each other"—in a sense, to define a socially shared moment—should not be understood as an endless jazz "orgasm," or "enormous present," as Norman Mailer describes it in his account of the post–World War II "white Negro" hipster world.[75] Mailer saw late bop-era jazz musicians—black and white—and their listeners as engaging in a nihilistic rejection of bourgeois ideals, forsaking the middle-class world for a string of never-ending "kicks." Disregarding for now the question of whether the musicians and audiences ever really did "drop out" as fully as Mailer proposes, this view misses two points crucial to an understanding of jazz as it was conceived by Bechet and his circle, if not by jazz communities in general. First, if Mailer's essay is useful in depicting some of the listeners and hangers-on of the post–World War II jazz scene, we should remember that the performers themselves—that is, the individuals around whom this purported hip scene revolved—worked diligently to acquire the skills on their instruments necessary to project the apparent "disengaged" affect. One does not simply pick up a horn and play from one's beat/hip soul—at least not if one wants to hold an audience for any length of time (though this may be a difference between Bechet's conception of jazz freedom and that of some of the less "entertainment"-minded practitioners of the 1960s avant garde). Second, and more important, though Bechet does look outside of his "birth" culture (i.e., Creole) to

Uptown, more African-rooted ways of musicking and acting, he is claiming, even refiguring, a strong sense of lineage and tradition, a concept very different from Mailer's depiction of jazz life as a seemingly rootless existence. Bechet's assertion, "My story goes a long way back. It goes further back than I had anything to do with. My music is like that," illustrates only one such manifestation of his position.[76]

NEW ORLEANS JAZZ AS "FOLK MUSIC"

Duke Ellington once wrote of early jazz:

> *Call* was very important in that kind of music. Today, the music has grown up and become quite scholastic, but this was *au naturel,* close to the primitive, where people send messages in what they play, calling somebody, or making facts and emotions known. Painting a picture, or having a story to go with what you were going to play, was of vital importance in those days.[77]

Ellington's depiction of early players, though perceptive in its recognition of the rhetorical richness of their style, seems to cast the New Orleans musician as a type of "savage" straight from the backwater "jungles" of the South. His comments reveal just how deeply the identities of even the earliest Swing-era musicians differed from their predecessors (even Ellington, with whom Bechet played and for whom the reed player had great admiration!).

Jazz scholar Bernard Gendron has recently located a similar perception toward New Orleans players in a branch of 1940s jazz criticism that painted early jazz as a "folk music," or at least one possessed of a folklike authenticity. For these writers, as Gendron notes, "the transition from New Orleans jazz to swing represented the disintegration of an authentic folk culture" into a watered-down commercialized bastardized version of the "real thing."[78] Yet as "natural" as the early players sounded to Ellington (a middle-class, African-American pianist/composer from Washington, D.C.) and the white critics of the 1940s, or, indeed, as natural as they sound to us now, these musicians had to learn to sound that way.

Sidney Bechet, for instance, was clearly talented (he was overheard playing at the age of six by a number of Creole players who were astonished at his prowess even then). But music—much less blues stylings—did not just flow from him. Bechet's own words of advice to Richard Hadlock on approaches to practicing his instrument (cited above) demonstrate that the reed player had given a great deal of thought to the ways in which musicians achieve a style that sounds both expressive and natural. In other words, Bechet and others like him (Morton, Keppard, Ory, Bigard, Wellman Braud) were not just "emoting" through their instruments; each had to experiment in order to develop the technique, time feel, and devices that would be heard as emotional by their various audiences.

Their example illustrates the fundamental lesson to be learned from Albert Murray's outstanding *Stomping the Blues.* Murray suggests that blues/jazz playing on a level such as these players achieved is far from a natural "folkiness." Rather, their playing is "precisely an artful contrivance, designed for entertainment and aesthetic gratification; and its effectiveness depends on the mastery by one means or another of the fundamentals of the craft of music in general and a special sensitivity to the nuances of the idiom in particular."[79]

Moreover, the blues—the form and aesthetic with which Bechet is most associated and in which he developed many of his most profound recordings—represented a relatively "foreign" form in his Creole neighborhood. Bechet had to seek out and learn the blues idiom from his cultural "rivals" or, at the very least, from Creole musicians who were themselves rebelling against their cultural norms. And though Bechet played "for the people," even he writes, "I can remember back in New Orleans when people who first heard our music just didn't know what to think. They'd never heard anything like it in their lives; they didn't even know how to dance to it. . . . But they learned the music, it made itself important to them; it made them want to learn."[80] Clearly, this desire to learn the music was as true for Bechet himself as it was for his audiences.[81]

All of these circumstances problematize LeRoi Jones's (Amiri Baraka's) famous hypothesis that early "Negro" jazz musicians simply mirrored and expressed their own cultural ideals while early white jazz

musicians rebelled against theirs.[82] Jones/Baraka and like-minded critics overlook those important early New Orleans Creole players who rebelled, though in different ways and to differing degrees, against their culture just as they claim Bix Beiderbecke and his Northern white crowd had rebelled against theirs. Although one may argue that early jazz drew some white participants because of its taboo coding of "otherness/blackness," we have seen that contentions suggesting that this allure separates a clear-cut "white jazz" from an equally unambiguous black counterpart does not hold true. For one must consider the very complex perceptions of identity as experienced by Uptown and Downtown cultures in New Orleans. Indeed, the very concept of "blackness" was contested and redefined at this time, not only by legal decree but by and among musicians and their audiences as well.

It appears ironic, too, given certain "folk" arguments surrounding early jazz, that many of these players were, at heart, quite "progressive." Bechet, for instance, claimed repeatedly that jazz should change as musicians respond to a changing world, and he practiced his preaching by at least exploring (if not enjoying) technological advances in mass mediation: not only recording but multitracking!

Contrary, then, to popular accounts, early jazz players were not simply "folk musicians" unconsciously expressing the realities of "black life in the South." These individuals were not merely playing the music of "their people," because in flux at this time was the very notion of who exactly was one's "people," an evolution accelerated by the oftentimes painful confluence of differing attitudes and ideals regarding racial and musical identity. In this light, we need to reconsider any historical narrative that identifies jazz as a wholly natural, serendipitous, and joyous intersection of schooled, literate Downtown Creole musicians with the unschooled but fiery Uptown Black improvisers, creating a unified African-American musical form. While such theories are not altogether false, they brush aside the crucial reality that individuals from these two very different communities often had to endure difficult moments in which musicians and their audiences found themselves engaging with ideals and musical aesthetics that were at odds with their "birth" cultures. The two groups did eventually move closer together, especially after the massive migration to urban areas

in the North in the 1920s when professional and practical circumstances necessitated they do so. However, this coming together was often a contentious one and, ironically, was facilitated by Northern whites who would recognize no cultural distinctions and who simply labeled all of these individuals as "black."

Finally, we should note that this complex racial circumstance has not completely disappeared to this day. Mary Gehman's work on the subject demonstrates the ongoing cultural ambiguity facing individuals and communities in New Orleans. Her thoughts on media representation (or nonrepresentation) of this phenomenon mirror similar trends in jazz historiography and are worth quoting at length.

> Today [1994] in New Orleans the press and other media use the terms "black" or "African-American" to refer to anyone of African descent. Technically then, there is no more distinction between Creole and American blacks. . . . But to anyone who observes New Orleans social, political and racial patterns, it is very clear that "Creole" is a term used frequently by blacks among themselves for those who carry on the names, traditions, family businesses and social positions of the free people of color, and as such that they continue to face some of the same issues at the end of the twentieth century that their ancestors did two hundred years ago. Light skin, European features, long straight hair or wavy black hair and a French surname earn some blacks privilege and status above others among whites, yet they also evoke disgust and anger among darker skinned blacks with English surnames who feel discriminated against by such favored members of their own race. Though rarely discussed in the media or other open forums, this intra-racial situation affects the politics, social order, jobs and businesses of the city in many ways.[83]

The binary racial opposition of black and white is not a "natural" one; it is socially and culturally constructed. The many jazz histories, however well meaning, that depict the genre wholly in terms of these categories necessarily overlook this unique and important cultural moment in New Orleans. In doing so, they miss one of the primary responsibilities and most productive possibilities of historical writing: to help us to understand how things got the way they are by imagina-

tively but carefully exploring the ways things once were and opening new possibilities to the ways things might yet be. The alternative only reduces individuals and historical communities to impermeable if internally mutating constructs and hampers opportunities for increased understanding across, and even within, cultural boundaries.

I raise these points not to erase differences among peoples (that would simply create yet another "universalist" jazz narrative) but rather to show the multiplicity, interaction, interdependence, and fluidity—and not mere biology—of cultural and musical identity. Like the assessments by American-studies scholar Sieglinde Lemke of the influence of African art and artifact on modernist painters, jazz, as we know it, "could never have been conceived but for an act of cultural transgression."[84] To present early jazz musicians in any other way not only distorts the realities of turn-of-the-century New Orleans but demeans the efforts of those individuals whom we now laud rather automatically as "early greats." For the example of Creole musicians reminds us that, far from a quaint Southern folk tradition, jazz cultures, even in the genre's formative years in New Orleans, entailed an oftentimes conflicted interaction that ultimately helped to shape and express new senses of personal and communal identity in and beyond jazz.