

Dixieland Jazz Era

The Dixieland jazz era was the real “beginning” to jazz music as we hear it today. New Orleans, Louisiana is usually referred to as the birthplace of jazz, as this is the city in which Dixieland was first heard.

During the early 1900s, Dixieland was in its initial stages of development. Dixieland bands consisted of five to eight musicians. These musicians played instruments in many different combinations. Popular instruments in Dixieland bands included piano, bass, clarinet, trombone, banjo, cornet (similar to trumpet), trumpet, saxophone, harmonica, and drums. Dixieland maintained its popularity into the 1920s, when it was eventually taken over by other forms of more “mainstreamed” jazz. Dates for the Dixieland Era would be approximately 1900 – 1920s.

The roots of Dixieland come from a mix of blues and ragtime. One of the first Dixieland ensembles, known as “The Original Dixieland Jazz Band” rose to quick fame in the early 20th Century. The driving rhythms of Dixieland were not so pleasing to the public at first, however: crowds were sometimes hostile to the Dixieland groups because they could not understand the swinging, ragtime sound. People soon, however, began to appreciate the music for its danceable beat.

The style of Dixieland is indeed one that is quite recognizable. The group normally plays in a fast and furious style, with the drummer and piano or banjo player pounding out a heavy, strong beat. The high notes, played by the trumpet or cornet, saxophone, clarinet, or harmonica, were all improvised; that is, the melodies changed each time the pieces were played.

Words to Dixieland pieces were sometimes included by performers. More often than not, however, words were omitted in favor of instrumental parts. Lyrics to those songs which did include words were not concerning any particular subject. Lyrics could express feelings of joy or feelings of sadness equally as often as the other.

It is during the Dixieland era that perhaps the most famous jazz composer to ever live came to the forefront: Louis Armstrong, a trumpet player from Chicago, had a particular penchant for the driving rhythms and fast-paced music found in the Dixieland idiom.

Featured Dixieland Jazz Composer: Louis Armstrong

Louis (pronounced Loo'-ee) Armstrong was born on August 4, 1901, in New Orleans, Louisiana, the birthplace of jazz. He is considered the most important improviser in jazz, and he taught the world to swing. Armstrong, fondly known as "Satchmo" (which is short for "Satchelmouth" referring to the size of his mouth) or "Pops," had a sense of humor, natural and unassuming manner, and positive disposition that made everyone around him feel good. With his infectious, wide grin and instantly recognizable gravelly voice, he won the hearts of people everywhere. He had an exciting and innovative style of playing that musicians imitate to this day. Throughout his career, Armstrong spread the language of jazz around the world, serving as an international ambassador of swing. His profound impact on the music of the 20th century continues into the 21st century.

As the young Armstrong began to perform with pick-up bands in small clubs and play funerals and parades around town, he captured the attention and respect of some of the older established musicians of New Orleans. Joe "King" Oliver, a member of Kid Ory's band and one of the finest trumpet players around, became Armstrong's mentor. When Oliver moved to Chicago, Armstrong took his place in Kid Ory's band, a leading group in New Orleans at the time. A year later, he was hired to work on riverboats that traveled the Mississippi. This experience enabled him to play with many prominent jazz musicians and to further develop his skills, learning to read music and undertaking the responsibilities of a professional gig.

Armstrong's fame and popularity continued to climb throughout his lifetime. He was, perhaps, the first musician to use *scat* in his singing. Scat singing is characterized by the use of syllables rather than actual words, like doo, wop, de, da, etc. Armstrong played in some of the largest and most respected venues of performance in the nation. Among them were places like the Cotton Club in New York City.

Armstrong was also one of the only early jazz musicians to tour extensively throughout Europe, bringing the sounds of American jazz to the continent of Mozart and Bach. Even in the last year of his life, Armstrong maintained a busy life, as he loved performing for what he referred to as his "beloved public." Up until a few days before his death, on July 6, 1971, he was setting up band rehearsals in preparation to perform for his beloved public.

It is worth noting that Armstrong is also one of the only jazz musicians to cross between nearly all the jazz genres: By the end of his life, he had moved from Dixieland to swing, and even beyond that.