

Dixieland Jazz

The year is 1904. A merchant from France has just arrived in New Orleans. As he sits in his room with the windows open, he hears an odd sound coming from the street. As he looks out the window, he sees a long line of black mourners marching toward the cemetery with a casket on a wagon behind them. In that funeral procession is a group of musicians: a couple of trumpet players, a clarinetist, a trombonist, a drummer, a banjo player, and a tuba player. The musicians



are playing a slow, mournful song as they march, and the merchant realizes that they are part of the funeral procession. The merchant forgets about the musical procession until about an hour later. Once more, he hears music and looks out the window. He sees the same procession coming back, but this time the group of musicians, instead of playing a slow, mournful funeral march, is playing a lively song that makes him want to sing and dance along with them.

Anyone who lived in or visited New Orleans around the turn of the twentieth century could have encountered something like this. The style of music known as *Dixieland* originated in New Orleans around the turn of the century and continued there until about 1920. This style of music was played by a group of musicians with the instrumentation listed above. This type of group was originally designed to play for funeral marches and to play a lively, celebratory type of music for the return from the cemetery. However, the catchy tunes that the musicians played as they returned led to requests for them to play elsewhere. Soon, the Dixieland bands began playing dance music in the new and extremely popular dance halls.

For this new style of dance music, the rhythm section—piano, bass, drums, and banjo—would supply the pulse and harmonic background for the other instruments. The other instruments—the two cornets or trumpets, clarinet, and trombone—were known as the *front line*. They played the melody and improvised solos over the chords and rhythms provided by the rhythm section. Generally, one or both of the trumpets would carry the melody of the song. The clarinet would improvise a type of *obligato* or counter-melody above the trumpets, while the trombone assisted in outlining the harmony and playing in a style known as *tailgating* where it improvised over the harmonies, again another type of counter-melody. The most important part of the trombone player's job was to play the main or *key* note of the new chord, thus indicating to the clarinet and cornet players that the chord had changed and identifying what the change had been (since this music wasn't read).

One of the earliest and most important Dixieland bands was run by Charles "Buddy" Bolden. He is the player most often credited with coming up with the standard instrumentation for the Dixieland band. His band was active from the late 1890s through the early 1900s and was followed by other greats, including Joe "King" Oliver and his orchestra, as well as trumpet player Louis Armstrong, Nick La Rocca, and the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, an all-white group that made its first recording of New Orleans jazz in 1917.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Questions for Consideration

1. What were the usual instruments used to play funeral music in New Orleans?

2. Where and when did Dixieland music originate?

3. Where did Dixieland bands begin to play when their music became popular?

4. What instruments were in the rhythm section?

5. What were the cornets, trumpets, clarinet, and trombone known as?

6. What is tailgating?

7. What was the trombone player's most important job?

8. Why was this important?

9. Who came up with the standard instrumentation for the Dixieland band?

10. What was unusual about the Original Dixieland Jazz Band?

