

JELLY ROLL MORTON (1890-1941)

Jelly Roll Morton was a member of the first generation of jazz musicians from New Orleans, a key figure in the transition between ragtime and jazz, and is often said to have been the first great jazz pianist and composer. His early years in New Orleans included music lessons and exposure to a wide variety of musical styles, everything from classical performances at the French Opera House to early blues and ragtime and street marches by the many brass bands of the city.

By the time Morton was a teenager, he had worked in the city's red-light district as a pianist, and by about 1908 he began his life-long travels, working in vaudeville as a dancer and comedian as well as a pianist, visiting New York by 1911 and playing in Tijuana, Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Vancouver and points between. During this period, he probably wrote and performed many of the pieces he was to record later. His "Original Jelly Roll Blues," often called the first published jazz composition, was copyrighted in Chicago in 1915.

By 1923, Morton was again in Chicago, where during the next five years he would make his most important recordings. A series of piano solos from 1923 and 1924 were definitive versions of his own compositions, and would have been enough by themselves to establish Morton as a great musician. In 1926, he began a famous series of band recordings, billed as "Jelly Roll Morton and His Red Hot Peppers," for the Victor company. These are probably his most important recordings; they show him to be the first great composer, arranger, and band leader in jazz history.

By the late 20s, Morton was in New York, where he continued to record and to tour extensively through the New England states and the Midwest. He also worked in various clubs until the mid-30s. By this time he was less successful, largely due to changing popular taste in music and the poor general economic conditions of the Depression. He settled in Washington, D. C., where he was in residence at a small club, the Jungle Inn, from about 1936. During this period, he was increasingly down on his luck, and came to feel that he had been unjustly overlooked by the public and by the establishment, particularly the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP), an organization which he felt owed him a great deal of money. He seemed very much aware of his historical importance, asserting publicly that much of what jazz musicians were playing during the 1930s was based on his early work. In 1938, he was interviewed extensively at the Library of Congress by Alan Lomax, a historian who was engaged in documenting the American folk tradition. These interviews give Morton's account of the birth of jazz, and establish him as the first jazz musician who was also an educator.

In the late 30s, Morton made a sort of comeback, recording again and having a number of his pieces published, but by this time he was in poor health. He moved to Los Angeles in late 1940, where he organized a band and a new music company, but in 1941 his health declined rapidly, and he died on July 10th, 1941.