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Morton

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Jelly Roll Morton in Storyville, New Orleans, c. 1903, ©Corbis



The King of the Underworld

The Invention of Jelly Roll Morton

Kristine Somerville and Speer Morgan

U ntil 1910, Jelly Roll Morton had been a roving musician. Emboldened by his financial and critical success in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast and by a string of new piano compositions that he'd penned—"New Orleans Blues," "King Porter Stomp," "Alabama Bound" and "Jelly Roll Blues"—he ventured to Chicago, a city lacking in top-notch piano players. Nothing as rhythmically free, offbeat and melodically intricate had been heard before in the North, and by 1914 he was heralded as the best "underworld pianist" around. He made the corner of Thirtieth and Calumet the heart of the music scene on the city's South Side by holding court there. He sat on the curb and pulled up his pant leg so that his entourage of fellow musicians could view the diamonds glistening from his leg garter. A half-carat diamond glinted from his front tooth when he smiled. He had arrived. He was the fast-talking piano showman who looked as good as he sounded.

Many stopped to listen to this flashy curbside professor whose verbal riffs were as keen as his musical ones. Jelly Roll loved nothing more than offering up the history of jazz. He also loved telling his own story of the New Orleans hustler who had made it in the big city. He was the self-proclaimed innovator of this new musical style. His detractors called him a braggart, a hustler, a self-promoter and a pimp.

Morton's story begins with a precocious youth in a fertile setting—New Orleans at the turn of the century, the cradle of jazz. He was born and raised on the outskirts of Storyville, with its saloons, brothels, music and dance halls and cabarets second in quality and number only to those of Paris. At night the District came alive. As a young man strolling down Basin Street, Jelly Roll would have passed half-dressed prostitutes working their cribs—shanties that held a single bed and a washbasin, where they serviced sailors, dock workers, farmers and businessmen for as little as a dime. Those wanting a more upscale experience could browse the *Blue Book*, a directory of the plush bordellos in the area.

As a teenager, when he worked Hilma Burt's ballroom, Morton's upright piano faced the mirrored wall, and as the tunes unspooled from his keyboard he watched girls dressed in silks and satins sashay around the gilded parlor. From there he moved on to Emma Johnson's Circus House. A screen was placed between him and the tricks the prostitutes were doing for the guests. Wanting to see the show, he cut a slit in the screen and watched the naked dances and exotic sex acts. Jelly Roll learned to vary the tempo and style of his play to suit the performances. Brothels provided the perfect training



Jelly Roll Morton at the Piano, ©Corbis

Carls-
chicago-

[Handwritten signature]



Jelly Roll Morton's home, 1943, The Historic New Orleans Collection

ground for the young musician, allowing him to practice and develop his craft in front of a noncritical audience.

Jelly Roll Morton was born Ferdinand Joseph Lamothe in a comfortable two-story house on Frenchmen Street in the Seventh Precinct, Seventh Ward. The exact year of Ferd's birth (he said 1890, scholars place it closer to 1885) and whether his parents, Louise Monette and Ed Lamothe, were married are unknown. Neither a birth certificate nor a marriage certificate exists. Louise kicked Ed out for carousing with other women, and a few years later she married Willie Mouton, a hotel and club porter. She had two more children, Ferd's half sisters Amede and Frances, who both adored their older brother. He also had a doting godmother, Eulalie, known outside the family as Laura Hunter. Hunter was a voodoo practitioner whose spells, potions and séances were popular in the District, and Ferd had an intense attachment to her, as did many Storyville prostitutes.

When Ferd was five, Eulalie arranged for him to take guitar lessons from one of her old friends, a Spanish gentleman. He was hooked. From then on, he single-mindedly pursued music. At ten he switched to the piano. His godmother found a blues/ragtime musician named Frank Richards, who taught him the rhythms, notes and keyboard attacks of New Orleans blues, music deemed so raunchy by Ferd's stepfather, Willie, that Ferd was beaten with a belt when he practiced at home. Later in life, Jelly Roll recalled that

he could no more stop playing that music than he could stop eating. He moved his lessons with Richards to Eulalie's house.

For the next two years, he lived mostly with his godmother so that he could play the music he loved. When he outgrew what Richards had to teach him, Eulalie hired Professor Nickerson, a teacher at St. Joseph's School, a Catholic college in the city. Ferd's lessons from Nickerson were the last formal education he received. The rest of his musical apprenticeship took place on the city streets, where Spanish street rhythms mixed with the scores of European operas and symphonies. Street quartets performed a capella on corners and in the city squares. He freely absorbed the cultural richness of his birthplace, which for decades would produce some of America's most original musicians.

Ferd's mother died while he was in his teens. His stepfather's last name was Mouton, which he changed to Morton to avoid seeming too "Frenchy." His great-grandmother Mimi and grandmother Laura took him in but insisted he get a job to set a good example for his younger sisters. His uncle employed him for twenty-five cents a week to do menial tasks, but soon he moved on to the Brooklyn Cooperage Company, where he made barrels for three dollars a week.

He worked during the day, but at night he veered toward the twenty-four-hour honky-tonks of the District, where he studied the musicians' showman tricks and keyboard stunts. While he and his friends were at the Frenchman's, a famous night spot where pianists went after hours to blow off steam, someone from a nearby brothel came in looking for a piano man. Ferd's friends encouraged him to audition. He was terrified, but as he began to play such crowd pleasers as "Bird in a Gilded Cage" and "Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight," his fear diminished. The women started tossing dollar bills at him, tipping him more in an hour than he made in a week at the cooperage.

At sixteen Ferd was working every evening as a professor in a Storyville brothel, while his family believed that he was still employed at the cooperage. He was making eighty to a hundred dollars a night playing classics, ragtime, Spanish tunes and his own developing compositions. The Frenchman's was his conservatory. After the sporting houses closed, he met up with his fellow professors, who now considered him a peer, and they played and drank from four o'clock in the morning until noon the next day. They showed off the tunes they might have invented earlier in the evening. Music lovers from all over the country came to take in new keyboard tricks and speed-demon pyrotechnics.

Even amid all this musical skill, Ferd stood out. He was also developing his own techniques characterized by robust, syncopated melodies played with his right hand and cheerful, bright chords played with his left. His style was marked by smoothness, clarity and ebullience. He was also becoming famous for his dirty variations of some of the most popular, sentimental ballads of the day and his comical, vaudeville-inspired patter between pieces.

Flush with cash, Ferd started buying custom-made suits, silk underwear and ties. His goal was to have enough fancy duds and jewels to make the other swells around New Orleans envious. His uncle couldn't resist borrowing his nephew's clothes. One night he got drunk and fell into a ditch, ruining Ferd's favorite new suit. The teenager was so upset he beat up his drunken uncle. When his grandmother found out, he was forced to reveal the secret of his nocturnal life. Deemed indecent by both Mimi and Laura, he was turned out of the house, though for years the women continued to accept the money he sent them.

Forced out into the world before he was ready, Ferd wandered the streets of New Orleans, unsure how to even rent a room. He was admired by his peers, coddled by the madams and earning significant money, but his profession was a source of shame for the middle-class family who had now disowned him. For a brief time he went to his godmother's house in Biloxi and performed in the city's Tenderloin district; then he wandered the Gulf Coast cities, working in the sporting houses. On occasion, he traveled back to New Orleans to earn quick money and then hit the road again.

In his business he was discovering that appearance and personality were as important as talent. Ferd cultivated a flamboyant persona with an array of flashy suits and racy talk. He bragged that he had enough tailored suits in the latest fashions that if his friends hung around for ten years they would see a new suit every day. He also had his front tooth crowned with a cap set with a half-carat diamond so that when he performed, the stage lights would glint off the jewel in his mouth. He liked announcing when he arrived in a new city, "I am the king of the underworld—a good pool player, a gambler, with all the women after me." He needed a catchy nickname to enhance the legend and christened himself Jelly Roll Morton; "Jelly Roll" was a name previously used by black vaudevillians with success.

By 1910, Jelly Roll Morton was ready for a larger audience. He moved back and forth between Chicago and New York City before making Chicago his base of operations four years later. Out of necessity he turned his attention to publishing his music. The term "jazz" appeared in print for the first time in 1914, and now admirers wanted sheet music that showed them how to



Big 25 Club, 1949, The Historic New Orleans Collection

play it. In 1915, “Jelly Roll Blues” was the first jazz composition available in score, thus allowing other musicians the ability to play it too. Because he was observant and could play an array of instruments and score music, Jelly Roll began to refine and codify the rudiments of a previously unarticulated musical language—jazz.

He composed tunes more quickly than he could get them written down, so he turned to publishers Walter and Lester Melrose. The brothers’ music store at Sixty-third and Cottage Grove was a second home for the musician, where he worked rehearsing and composing music for four to five hours at a stretch. He was growing tired of performing and saw recording his music as a means of carrying his sound beyond Chicago. The brothers liked having him around. His growing list of hits was producing royalties for them from the sale of sheet music and records. They marveled that he could go home at night and return with a new tune in the morning.

By 1923, no one was writing, publishing and recording jazz as prolifically as Jelly Roll. He was turning what seemed to be casually improvised tunes into an art form. Yet during a time when he at last thought he was asserting himself as the pioneer of this new musical genre, in addition to composing, leading a band and recording his music, he was in fact signing away his future fortune.

In the 1920s, publishing songs was a nascent, unregulated business. The publishers filed the paperwork with the U.S. Office of Copyrights in Washington, D.C., and in doing so made the decisions about the distribution



Jelly Roll Morton in Chicago, c. 1925, ©Corbis

of royalties. The men whom Jelly Roll considered close friends claimed to be co-creators of his work and received 50 percent of the royalties plus half his composer royalties. He never saw the papers that were filed on his behalf. Also, he wasn't worried about money. He lived in the moment. Royalties seemed like an abstraction while the money roll that he carried in his pocket was concrete and seemingly ever refreshed. The Melrose brothers would go on to benefit from other jazz musicians who made similar mistakes in trusting them.

Still, for Jelly Roll the music was going well. With his band Red Hot Peppers, comprised of the best New Orleans musicians he could find in Chicago, he composed "Black Bottom Stomp," a number that embodied the rollicking spirit of the Roaring Twenties. It was a perfect fusion of New Orleans–Chicago jazz. The band followed it up with a string of hits: "Sidewalk Blues," "Steamboat Stomp," "Kansas City Stomp," "Dead Man Blues" and "Someday Sweetheart." With each number he was articulating and building on his style of unpredictable rhythms, silken melodies and an aria-like delivery. During a series of recording sessions, Victor Records captured the orchestral arrangements that set the Red Hot Peppers apart. They were no longer simply a New Orleans band.

By 1925, after working feverishly for two years, Jelly Roll suddenly felt sick, exhausted and nearing a nervous breakdown. He was edging up on forty and felt as if he was getting too old for such a young man's racket. To friends, he seemed disappointed. He was wising up to the lack of royalties. For the Victor recording sessions he had been paid a flat fee. The contract with Victor had been set up so the Melrose Brothers kept all the royalties for themselves. Morton could see that his records were selling but couldn't understand why he wasn't getting a cut. Walter Melrose, a frustrated musician, was adding his own lyrics to Jelly Roll's original compositions and taking most of the royalties. When Jelly Roll found out, he was livid and complained to whoever would listen: "Walter Melrose never wrote a hit in his life. Melrose is my publisher, he inserted words to some of my hit tunes without my knowledge or permission & is receiving royalties." In his opinion thieves like these were ruining the music industry. For the next two decades, Jelly Roll would spend considerable time fighting the corrupt world of music publishing.

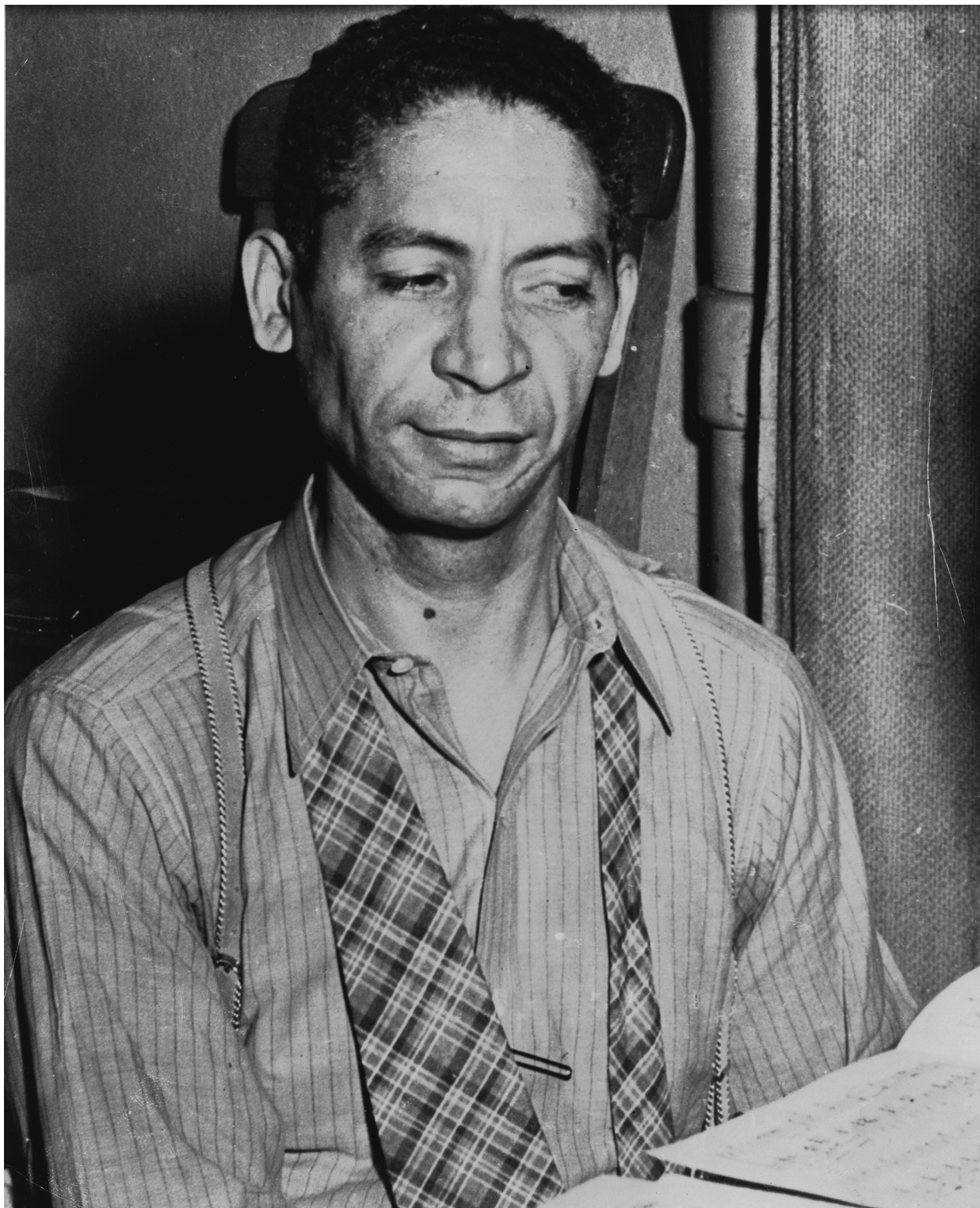
He moved to New York, hoping to conquer it in the same way he had Chicago. But times and taste were changing. New Yorkers didn't go for bluesy jazz, and he was now considered *passé*. For the first time in his life he wasn't crushing the competition or pulling in crowds. Music-goers were

looking for something more sophisticated, sleeker, less flashy. Jelly Roll struck them as a throwback to another era and to a foreign place, where sex and music were inextricably linked. In 1928, he found himself in Harlem fronting a house band in a dime-a-dance joint. He had come full circle, once again providing background music for the sex trade. The cash he made at Rose Danceland filled his pockets, but the joint was indeed a step down.

He occasionally picked up odd jobs playing a chain of ballrooms in Pennsylvania and Ohio, though the work was rough, and he couldn't make any money. The old lifestyle was getting harder to maintain. He wasn't receiving any royalties from Melrose, who refused to answer his letters. The Melroses also spread gossip that Jelly Roll could play piano but couldn't write music, claiming they were the ones who had arranged all his compositions. RCA had bought Victor Records and dropped Morton from their list. The blues man was obsolete. What did they need that "moldy fig" for when they had younger men in Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong and Bernie Moten?

Jelly Roll's career as a performer was unraveling. He was reduced to playing hokey prom dances at local colleges. He began killing time in front of the Rhythm Club in Harlem, a haven for underemployed musicians. He told the same old stories and was treated by those who would listen to him as an out-of-date crank. Still, he insisted that they learn from his mistakes: "All you young studs, and you old ones too, better learn these three rules. Write your music out. Send it to Washington to be copyrighted. And then hire a lawyer to see that you get a fair deal. I'm Jelly Roll Morton, and it's me telling you that none of those music publishers are worth the gun powder to blow them to hell."

He was fifty-three; all the battles for back royalties and the drive to keep playing wherever he could get a gig were taking a toll on his health. Nevertheless, he waged a one-man campaign to regain his reputation and career. He visited all the New York City publishers, booking agents and managers, but increasingly there were no jobs or prospects. He also wrote letters to Charles Evans Hughes, the chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court; to James Roosevelt, FDR's son and secretary; and to Thurman Arnold, assistant attorney general in the U.S. Justice Department Antitrust Division. He was calling for an investigation of the music publishing industry. He did not know that Arnold was already collecting testimony from other mostly black musicians, composers and band leaders who had also been denied royalties. Progress was being made, but it was coming late in the day for Jelly Roll.



Jelly Roll Morton at a Bluebird/RCA Victor session in New York City, 1939,
The Historic New Orleans Collection

Medical attention was a luxury Morton could not afford. When he finally did make it to the doctor for chronic exhaustion and chest pains, he was diagnosed with congestive heart failure. Rest was the only remedy offered, and it was a prescription he could not follow. He needed to continue to make auditions if he was going to find work and revive his career.

In 1941, when Jelly Roll learned that his godmother Eulalie had died, he packed his Victor records in his Lincoln and with forty dollars in his pocket drove cross-country to Los Angeles. He would settle her affairs and perhaps start over in a warmer climate. He hoped to pick up a few gigs along the way, but his name no longer had much cachet. When he arrived at her home, he discovered that thieves had run off with her possessions. He did not have the forty dollars he needed to claim the trunks that he had sent ahead from New York City. When offers from the movie studios came in, he was too sick to play for them. He was “as weak as a chicken with no energy.”

With very little money, he resisted going to the doctor for as long as he could. Finally he was forced to pry the diamond from his front tooth to pay for a few days at the Los Angeles Sanitarium. Once the doctors, tests and medicines had burned through his cash, he was sent home briefly and then transported to the Los Angeles County Hospital, the only facility that would take ailing indigents. They didn't have space in the charity ward, so they placed him in the broom closet until a room was available. After eleven days in the hospital, Jelly Roll Morton died on July 10, 1941, of “cardiac decompensation” due to “hypertensive heart disorder.” The assets of the first great composer of jazz amounted to \$100 worth of clothing and fifty-one Victor records.

Unlike many of his contemporaries who started out in Storyville brothels, he left behind scores of extraordinary recordings and a lengthy list of composition credits. His biography, recorded by the Library of Congress, fills over a dozen twelve-inch records. It is considered one of the most important existing jazz documents, recreating for the listener in vivid detail his early days in Storyville, his heyday in Chicago and his declining years in New York City. In the end, they are memories sharpened by loss.

Of course, Jelly Roll had the prehistory of jazz in his head and never tired of talking about it. He held forth on the early elements of the New Orleans style that he cut his teeth on and then the fresh, original melodies, rhythms and chord changes of his own design that he perfected in Chicago.

“Man, I invented all this kind of piano. Man, I invented jazz.” It was a refrain that ran throughout his life, beginning when he was Ferd Mouton roaming the streets of New Orleans to his last years in New York City in a

Last Will and Testament

In the Name of God, Amen, I Ferdinand Joseph Morton
residing at 1008 E. 32nd St.

of Los Angeles State of California

of the age of fifty one years, and being of sound and disposing mind and memory and not acting under duress, menace, fraud, or undue influence of any person whatever, do make, publish and declare this my last WILL AND TESTAMENT in the manner following, that is to say:

First: I give and bequeath to my sisters, Arvide Colos
and my share of the Royalties, and interest in the
Temple Music Co, Washington D.C.

To my sister Frances Morton, now married,
I give and bequeath the sum of one dollar (\$1.00)

Secondly: I hereby devise and bequeath all the rest
and residue of my estate, whether real or personal
property or mixed, to my beloved Anita
Gonzales who has been my beloved companion,
and help-mate for many years, and whose tender
care I sincerely appreciate. This shall include
all Academy royalties, and Southern Music Co, Melrose
Music Company and all property of every kind
personal and otherwise wherever located.

Lastly, I hereby nominate and appoint Hugh E. Macbeth

the executor of this my last Will and Testament to serve without bond.
and hereby revoke all former Wills by me made.

In Witness Whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and seal this 28th day
of June, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and forty one

Ferdinand Joseph Morton (SEAL)

The foregoing instrument, consisting of one page including this one was
at the date hereof, by the said Ferdinand Joseph Morton
signed, and sealed and published as, and declared to us to be his last Will
and Testament, in the presence of us, who, at his request and in his presence,
and in the presence of each other, have subscribed our names as witnesses thereto.

Hugh E. Macbeth

Residing at 1558 W. 37th St. Los Angeles Calif

Stella Alberta Johnson

Residing at 2340 Damon St.
Los Angeles Calif.

FILED IN PUBLIC RECORDS
COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES
CALIFORNIA
JUN 29 1941
BY W. M. O'NEAL Deputy Registrar

Jelly Roll Morton's Last Will and Testament, June 28, 1941, The Historic New Orleans Collection

one-room apartment living in musical oblivion. Morton had always argued that he was the first to capture jazz on paper, the first to publish it, the first to record it and the first to explain how it should be played and appreciated. What he claimed raised doubt in some, but today he is indeed considered the most noted early innovator of jazz.

In his forty-year career, Jelly Roll Morton wrote jazz classics that fans return to time after time. His inspiring, complex works take the listener back to two of the most richly fertile places in America's musical history. He could never have imagined his reputation in years to come or that his sophisticated, complex piano compositions would foreshadow the swing era. Fans speak of his "musical sophistication," his "improvisational finesse," the "Blues-drenched melodies," the "keyboard virtuosity," and perhaps most of all his ability to beguile an audience with the invented persona he called "Jelly Roll."

The following letters from the Jelly Roll Morton Correspondence Series, William Russell Jazz Collection, Williams Research Center at The Historic New Orleans Collection, were written in 1938, during Morton's desperate campaign to recoup at least some of the back royalties for his music. We have edited the letters as minimally as possible: a handful of minor changes have been made in punctuation, capitalization and spelling, and a few lines or brief passages have been deleted in the interest of clarity. The first letter describes Morton's experiences between 1902 and 1915, outlining his time in Storyville and how he came to "originate" jazz music. The second recounts his travels and performances in Texas in 1907. The third states his grievances with the Melrose Music Company with regard to the collection of royalties. The last letter outlines his ideas about trying to help organize benefits for unemployed musicians during the late Depression.

All of these letters show a tired, aging composer creatively and resourcefully trying to find ways to keep working and be remembered for his contribution to the world of jazz. In his letter to James Roosevelt, FDR's son and secretary, he says that he's better at writing music than letters. Still these pages are rich with remembrances of his early days as a jazzman, his disquisitions on jazz style and his struggles to survive when the work had dried up.

Kristine Somerville and Speer Morgan

4/27/38

Jelly Roll Morton
1211 You St, NW
Washington, D.C.

Mr. Earle Cornwall
719 W 99th St.
Los Angeles, Calif.

Dear Mr. Cornwall,

Born in New Orleans, Louisiana, 1885 Sept 20th. Father's name Edward, mother's name Louise, my name Ferdinand abbreviated "Ferd." No brothers, two sisters. It was I that's the originator of jazz, Stomp and Swing, which are one and the same. These names were used to baffle the public that it was something new and different, as jazz really did differentiate greatly from ragtime. The latter is the real corn-fed type, and jazz with its more exciting, accurately exacting non-deviating tempos based on music instead of the dictionary definitions. Loud discordant noises which would have a tendency to injure one's ears with their combustions of collisions that would tend to wreck the brain.

"Jazz" is a style that can be applied to any kind of compositions providing one has the knowledge to transform correctly. It was the year of 1902 that I conceived the idea, probably through force. New Orleans has always been the hot bed for outstanding musicians with the exception of the violin, which was played the same way all over the world. However, all other instruments always strived to play their own individual style. It just was the style that I had which grabbed the world by the throat with a strangle hold.

My reasons for trying to adopt something truly different from ragtime was that all my fellow musicians were much faster in manipulations and thought than I. And I did not feel as though

I was in their class. Of course, they all seem to classify in the No. 1 class, men like Alfred Wilson (won the piano playing contest St. Louis exposition 1904), Tony Jackson (world's greatest single-handed entertainer. Could play and sing from opera to blues in its correct formation and knew everything that probably was ever printed), Albert Carroll (with his so soft, sweet non-exciting perfect perfection of passing tones and strange harmonies, cool and collective style), Sammy Davis (with his original ragtime idea, four finger bass and speed like the electrified streamline).

These men set a pace for everyone who entered New Orleans. I have never known anyone to leave New Orleans victorious. The greatest ragtime players came from all over the world to New Orleans if they could get there, because the work in this line was tremendous with fabulous gains.

Jazz music was originated by me in a small desolated back room by day and the saloon part with plenty of daylight. The Frenchman's did its biggest business from 4 a.m. till about 1 p.m. The back room would be lighted early nights, about the same time the saloon light would go on but apparently not used till later. New Orleans was credited at that time as the second greatest tenderloin district in the world, second only to Paris, France. That was before the electric piano days, and every house that could afford it would have what they called their professors. Alfred Wilson, Albert Carroll, Sammy Davis did not care to work, they preferred to gamble. They all had clothes on top of clothes, diamond studs, d. rings, d. suspenders and cuff buttons and garters, etc. Every place they could think to put one or more. Money had no value. For instance Ed Moshay, a very mediocre pianist and big time ladies' man and gambler, died about four years ago. I understand he was broke but left 114 expensive suits of clothes.

Well, when an A-1 had a \$100 night they usually figured they had a terrible night. Tony Jackson was the favorite in the tenderloin no doubt because of his expansive ability and marvelous disposition when sober. I ran second to Tony as far as the tenderloin. We seemed to alternate quite often when Tony

would get drunk, ten to one he would quit. If the job that Tony quit was a higher class place than mine that meant money. I would usually quit my job and take Tony's. Any palooka could have mine. When Tony would decide to work again he would take the one I left. Of course, all were very good jobs.

A few of the following house operators were Hilma Burt, Josie Arlington, Lulu White, "Countess" Willie Piazza, and Gypsy Schaeffer. Champagne flowed more than water in these places and being the favorite brands of the whole city. When getting off at 4:00 a.m. everyone would head for the Frenchman's on Bienville and Villere, the place where jazz originated. The place would jam with attendants to watch the supposed wonderful musician play and comment on what they thought of the different abilities of the artist. The women that could get out of the houses were there, some bedecked with diamonds from their waistline to their head. The sparkling gems sometimes found their way to their shoes for buckles and garters of the lavish, big-hearted, free-spending Madonnas. Very often these money-making, gaudy, big-hearted dames would halt the progress of art and would cause great musicians to become utterly impossible, independent, or lazy through their squandering of their ill-gotten gold on their geniuses, which caused a formation in their minds with supremacy of a king.

From time to time these musicians would lose their money-making machines, whilst money was coming in with a steady flow. They would mostly participate in dope of some kind, mostly opium. When funds would stop and they could not get their drug of the most expensive type, they would resort to the next best, which of course would be of the cheaper variety. Maybe cocaine or heroin. Reefer wasn't in existence in those days. Some would fall to a very low ebb. One or two would finally pass out of the picture if a cure wasn't taken.

My hair is half gray now. Guess I am getting old. I have been located in D.C. for three years. I'm in the night club business. The name has changed from Jungle Inn to Music Box. Yes, I thought about coming to California, and I guess I will carry out my plan. I have been one of the most influential musicians

in California. I was in the L.A. when Harvey Brooks arrived with Wayne Smith's show and anchored. He is a clever pianist, but I was still the boss. I was also politic in L.A. when George Brown was the boss of the colored section. I ran the Big 4 Club at 12th & Central. I worked at the Cadillac Café near the S.P. depot. The attendants were mostly movie stars in 1917.

I thank you very much for your advice to try to advise a way to get help? I think my power will take care of that. I was to open the Cotton Club. It was impossible due to the fact that I was playing at the U.S. Grant Hotel in San Diego. The order went to Johnny and Reb Spikes, whom were partners at the time in a music business. They got the job under misrepresentation. There's no chance in me failing anywhere. Guy Lombardo would be expected tops. I also caused Curtis Mosley to stay in California when he came through Vancouver, B.C. with Slow Kid Thompson. Tennessee Ten and I also started him on his instrument in Houston, Texas, in 1912. I played Ed Solomon's Dance Hall years ago with one of my orchestras, maybe the Black and Tan or Jelly Roll Morton and His Incomparables.

I appreciate all the information that you gave me greatly. Casa Loma copied my style for years but weren't successful. Benny Goodman hung around the Melrose Brothers Music Co. in Chicago while I was rehearsing for the Victor label to make records. If not, I would be listening to my records for food for thought. His most famous number was one of my numbers, "King Porter Stomp." Fletcher Henderson's arrangement, of course. M.C.A. with their millions can make the public accept anyone if they are half good. I was formerly a No. 1 orchestra with M.C.A. I used to own a place in Watts called Leak's Lake, later changed to Wayside Park.

All the Art Tatum and Teddy Wilsons don't even phase me. They all come here. They all know where to find me. They have the greatest respect for me, and they don't come for fear of being shown up. I am the one that educated Chicago, Detroit, New York, New Orleans, Los Angeles and they all know it. I have a contemplated organization that is supposed to be coming up.

If it does, and the men are half as good as any of the other bands, I shall take back my former position in first place. Nine out of ten of the goofy tricks were stolen from me: clown director, flashy dresser, witty sayings, swing dancing, band clowning, etc. First washboard, bass fiddle, drums on records. I produced the first flyswatters right in Los Angeles. The first great tenor sax in the U.S.A. was my material, Paul Howard in L.A. Don't worry. All my statements will be authentic.

I differ with you that the old times tunes such as maple leaf would sound out of place. You see, jazz is applied to the tune, and the quality must be in the operator. Therefore you have the most effective jazz tune in the oldest kind of tune. On the other hand, pick the latest and hottest jazz number and give it to Toscanini to play and see what you get. You get a cornfield bearing triple fold. Why? Because that kind of ability isn't there. The latest tune would sound out of place to the present day jazz. A great jazz pianist has the semblance of a whole jazz orchestra. My value is always noticed more when I have lots of competition. Wilson and Tatum haven't learned to play jazz so far. They are what we in New Orleans called great ragtime players.

Very Truly Yours,
Jelly Roll Morton

1938

Washington, D.C.

David played on his harp, Gabriel blew his trumpet, William Tell shot the apple off of his son's head, but they played no jazz, I'm sure. Neither did George Washington Williams. This was just about the only way this poor little fabricator could ever get his name in some kind of publication is to mention someone's name like mine. The probabilities are that he would never have been able to get an audience on his own.

My first invasion in Texas was in 1907. I made every pig pen from Orange to El Paso. There wasn't a pianist in the state that could play doodle-de-do. Most every city, town, and hamlet had what was known in Texas as a reservation or tenderloin district. Gee, it sure was easy pickings with no opposition. Every place was heaven. I would jump from town to town. There were no pianists to carve so I just carved all the pool players that showed their heads above the water. I kept through to Mexico, Arizona, California. In the towns where the reservation was not very good, I would usually stay long enough to stage a big dance. The music was by Jelly Roll Morton himself, nothing else. Ducats 25 cents; if I caught a holiday Ducats were 50 cents. When I gave one of my grand dances at the Turkey Trot "quero," some stool pigeons had me picked up and jailed. Had to stay in for Xmas.

I was told that I was one of those smart guys and was trying to take all the money out of Texas. In 1910 I was on my return when I found anyone could play anything, but none could play jazz. In Galveston I met Ver Adams from K.C., not so good, played theatre. Houston, Sammy Davis of New Orleans, marvelous ragtime player, playing Loftus theatre. Fred Washington played for Josie Sassa's house in reservation. I was indeed to stay, things looked so good. I accepted a job in reservation for Thelma Denton a few doors from Josie Sassa's. Finally took all her trade. Miss Denton was forced to expand. Washington played ragtime, no jazz. Now in California. I took my show on to San Antonio to play. I believe the name was Alcazar theatre.

The only pianist in the whole town was the one who played at the theatre that resided in Zipp's Alley. The same place all professionals headed for. Carrie Huff, she lives in New York. I stayed in San Antonio off and on for about six months. Reservation was good. She played theatre style ragtime. I used to give the Sylski girl a few ideas on piano. Visiting their house with her brother Tom, I was told Roach was to come from Boston Conservatory. I met him. He was very sad, very easy to carve.

The only brass men that had any kind of note was Sid Isles on trumpet and Jim Mills on trombone. Isle's band was a brass band that played about once a year, 19th of June. He played ragtime. It was about that time that I introduced Curtis Mosby to a set of drums and started him on his way. That was his first attempt.

I had the largest band that was ever attempted in Texas at that time, seven pieces and was terrible. There wasn't a horn to be seen in San Antonio at that time. I don't remember even seeing this in George Washington Smith. Age doesn't have anything to do with a special kind of ability. David played on his harp but not jazz. There wasn't a chance of one of these hillbillies getting off. They could not even catch on. The chief object was to make all the noise they could. I placed all of those country boys in position. If they did know anything, they would be afraid to lift an eyebrow. This gent must have eyed me in the standing room and heard me play and then inquired my name. Texas was just the same as any place to me. When the King was in town, the subjects took lessons.

5/13/38

Washington, D.C.

Charles Evans Hughes

Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court

Your Honor,

As a last resort I thought I would inquire of you to be directed to the right channels of protection, which I don't seem to be able to find.

I have written musical compositions under my name, published by Melrose Music Co., Chicago, in the neighborhood of thirty numbers. Several were considered very big hits. My name appears on the compositions, contracts on a royalty basis.

I have been unable to collect royalties on any of these tunes since 1929. Most of these tunes were on all the best mechanicals, orchestration's sheet music, and every form of the present day output of financial gain all over the world.

I wrote Mr. Melrose some time ago. His response was not satisfactory with an understanding that I would get no money. These tunes may be traced through the copyright department, Library of Congress.

I have spoken to many attorneys from time to time. I was made to understand that nothing could be done at any other place, only Chicago.

I have recently gained some authoritative information that Mr. Melrose has his catalogue up for sale for \$75,000. He had one offer (according to information) from Joe Davis of N.Y.C. for \$50,000 but refused.

I am financially unable to go to the scene to try and protect my interest which would mean much to my dependents and myself. I would like to know what would become of my rightful property. That is why it takes courage to write to you, real-

izing this is not in your department and not able to find any laws that are able to protect me due to financial condition, which has been tremendously embarrassing. If action isn't taken immediately, I fear it will be of no use as I understand his intentions are to live in Europe. I anxiously await your direction, which I am sure will prove justifiable.

Very Truly Yours,
Ferd Morton

Names on compositions:
Ferd Morton
Jelly Roll Morton

Ferd Morton
1211 You St, NW
Washington, D.C.

Mr. James Roosevelt
c/o White House
Washington, D.C.

Dear Sir,

I conceived an idea some time ago when Vitaphone caused the theatre musicians to lose their jobs. My contemplated plan at that time was that the Union would order every musician, organized orchestra or band to eliminate their services until the house musicians were restored back to their positions. Pictures could not survive without music. This plan would probably still hold good if it were carried out.

My present plan:

(1) Organize as many as four orchestras to play benefits for said organizations. Orchestras are to be paid Union scale. Two to four orchestras to make monster benefits. Profit monies are to be used to build up organizations.

(2) Very large dance halls, theatres, parks, etc. that could be had by donation or on a small percentage would be the proper places for affairs to be held. You may select any one you choose to handle monies.

(3) Advertising must be extensive to assure success such as newspapers, streamers, window posters, hand cards, stickers, etc.

(4) Profits will be used for instruments, uniforms, transportation cars, bus, expenses for advance men for road engagements. Publicity is to be taken along.

(5) All musicians must qualify, be disciplined, must strictly take orders from leaders. Leaders take orders from their

superiors, etc. Bullies, reefer or dope fiends, disorganizers, agitators or any trouble makers will be dismissed on a minute's notice.

(6) Instead of one orchestra making two, it would be best to have two or not more than three to assure double strong attraction, with not less than two weeks advertising. Every orchestra is to have from two to three entertainers permanently as singers, dancers, novelties, etc.

(7) This is contemplated for a nation-wide hook-up, starting with probably one office. It will no doubt expand to maybe eight or ten offices throughout the country. It is to be handled purely as a booking office. Every orchestra will operate on their own power and finance. After once started through guidance and booking of office, there will be no conflict with the Union as scale and upward will be paid. A certain fixed percentage will be paid to the office for handling. Lot of novelty orchestra organized that would be new, to inspire the public.

(8) All good bands are self-sustaining, some with tremendous results. My idea was that a government loan could make this possible and must be paid back at intervals affixed after being started. All orchestras and members must pay for their uniforms, instruments, advertising, transportation, bric-a-brac, etc as all successful ones do. There have been successful leaders and musicians suppressed by the activities of Union steamroller methods which gets work for no one, but puts you out of commission when they choose to and in such a mysterious way that there is no chance to get ahead nor tales of what happened. All you know is that you are not supposed to be a Union man, and there's no one who will work with you. They may need a job ever so bad, their family may be starving, and they cannot get work. The Unions have fear of the devil in approximately all musicians except officials which I deem most powerful.

For your information I would advise you to get a book of by-laws from Local 802 New York City so you may have an op-

portunity for careful study, and in the meantime you may be able to get some musical magazines, namely *Down Beat*, *Tempo*, *Metronome*, *Variety*, etc. You may gain a lot of information that may prove quite valuable. There are no doubt 100,000 musicians out of work. Many have from two to four dependents. I am sure it would not take very long to get this plan started, since I am very familiar with this kind of business. About thirty-five years in it, probably in every capacity with the exception of symphonies or operas. I spoke to a lot of musicians, including a few names that cannot get support. They all seem to be for it, hook-line-and-sinker. I intended to try to get it started without asking assistance but know it would only be like trying to swim across the Pacific Ocean in a storm.

This was my reason for trying to get in touch with the proper authorities and feeling as I do about the Hon. Roosevelt. I believe one of the chief objectives is to get the subjects on a higher scale. I no doubt would be able to give you this plan in a much more authentic way if I were in a position to think slowly and question any part of the plan that would be misunderstood.

I have traveled with my own orchestras, made records for practically every reputable firm such as Victor, Brunswick, Columbia, etc. I have written music for Will Rossiter, Melrose Music Co. and made piano rolls for Wurlitzer Co. Imperial, P.R.S. and have played at more places than I will ever be able to remember. I hope you will understand my humble way of putting things. If you do, I am sure it will be a lot of help. I appeared on a program in a Brooklyn School as a guest artist through Miss Bessie Bearden, when your father first ran for president. Miss Bearden was a headquarter manager for Congressman Joseph Gavagan.

I don't have much knowledge of composing letters, better at music.

Very Truly Yours,
Ferd Morton