

# Doctor Jazz: Jelly Roll Morton

John Szwed

**Hello, Central, give me Doctor Jazz  
He's got what I need, I'll say he has.**

Jelly Roll Morton's life had all the makings of tragedy: born shortly after the chaos of Reconstruction in the racially ambiguous Creole community of New Orleans, he turned against the wishes of his family and crossed class and racial lines to become a leading pianist in Storyville, the sporting district of New Orleans that provided the laboratory for the generation of musicians who invented jazz. But being a piano player, acclaim escaped him because trumpeters and clarinetists, and not pianists, were the recognized stars of early jazz, and it took years for his importance as a composer and bandleader to be appreciated. Then came what the fans of early jazz would later regard as the Fall: the closing of the district by the U.S. government, and the music Morton had helped create scattered across the earth, taken up by the forces of commerce, diluted and refined. Worse yet, Morton had the bad fortune to record his finest work in the mid- to late 1920's, when the fashion in music was turning away from the complex, multi-thematic forms Jelly originated to embrace the much simpler 32 bar, AABA popular songs that the popular younger musicians like Louis Armstrong were playing and singing. Morton resisted this trend for as long as he could, but it cost him an audience and dated him prematurely. Finally, just when a revival of New Orleans music was underway in the early 1940's and Morton was being rediscovered, death deprived him of a second chance at fame.

But Morton never allowed his narrative to drift into the tragic mode. He made it clear by word and example that he wanted to be seen as a winner: jazz was an art, and he was a pianist of the highest order, having developed a style that was rhythmically virtuosic and orchestral in its detail and fullness. He was the first composer in jazz, and a modernist, who found a way to laminate ragtime and the blues, two forms that had grown up side-by-side, each creating its own craze. Morton mocked the stiffness of the ragtimers, and dismissed the blues pianists as "one tune piano players," so by merging the two forms within his own music, he brought them new sophistication and vitality. Jelly Roll borrowed from a wide range of other sources, domestic and foreign, high-brow and low. But unlike the hacks who pieced together songs to cover their lack of creativity, Morton's intention was to "jazz up" these borrowed melodies and rearrange them in new settings. He summarized his approach quite simply: "Jazz is a style that can be applied to any type of music."

What ultimately tilts Morton's story away from the tragic and toward the romantic is that it reiterates the triumph of good over evil, virtue over vice, through the spectrum of race, class, region, art, and nationalism, in a regional version of the story of America itself. It was a story of brilliance and unwavering ambition, of refusal to be buried by the decline of the music business in the

Depression and erased by fickle shifts of popular taste. Late in life, after a period of decline and neglect, Jelly Roll reclaimed his dignity and began a campaign to re-present himself to the nation.

The narrative heard on these recordings comes from those late years. It is not merely fascinating grist for a life history; rather, it is a performed biography whose tone, force, and intent permeated the version that reached print as Alan Lomax's *Mister Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and "Inventor of Jazz."* America's greatest folklorist meets one of America's greatest talkers and musicians; a powerful document emerges that vividly and immediately evokes its times and connects them to our own — the birth of jazz, the origins of a people, the character of a city, and the triumph of art. And it all began when Jelly Roll Morton walked into the Library of Congress and declared to Alan Lomax that he was there to tell the true history of jazz, to set the record straight: "They're stealing my music, and they don't even play it right."

1938: Somehow the word got around among hard-core collectors of hot jazz recordings that he was living in Washington, D.C., "where the shows come to die," as Alan Lomax later put it, and you could see him any night. Morton was the bartender, maitre-d', entertainer, and part-owner of a small, low-ceiling, second-floor club over a hamburger joint at 1211 U Street, D.C.'s black Broadway. Once called the Jungle Inn, later the Jungle Club, Morton's place was at the moment known as the Music Box (though, on the rare occasion that it was advertised, it was also called the Blue Moon Night Club). He held court there, seated at a spinet piano in a smallish room with a kitchen, a jukebox, chairs lined up along the walls, a few booths, and a small oil stove, amid tatters of primitif deco left over from its days as the Jungle Inn — "All genuine bamboo," he'd proclaim to first-time visitors.

What a story he might be able to tell. . . .

Ferdinand Joseph Lamothe was born in or around New Orleans in 1885, though some have questioned that date as five years too early to be consistent with the other facts of his life, and no birth certificate has ever been found. His parents were both Creoles, among the free people of color whose Haitian ancestors had come to Louisiana after the Haitian Revolution. When Ferd was three his father left, and when his mother remarried he took his stepfather's name, Mouton, and later anglicized it to Morton. Rejecting the bricklaying trade for which he was destined, he began performing as a pianist in Storyville at the very moment when jazz is said to have begun, and there developed a distinct style of piano that drew on everything he had heard, from the folk to the concert hall. From 1907 to 1917 Morton traveled across the United States working in vaudeville as a pianist, and singer; while he was in Chicago in 1915 his composition "The Jelly Roll Blues" became the first jazz tune to be published. He moved on to the West Coast where he married Anita Gonzalez, a Creole woman he had known in New Orleans, and made Los Angeles and the Pacific West Coast his base of operations from 1917 to 1923. In 1923 he left, alone, for Chicago where his band, the Red Hot Peppers, made some of his most popular records for RCA Victor between 1927 and 1928, and where his music was published by the Melrose Brothers Music Company. As the Depression set in and the new swing bands won popularity, in 1930 he lost his contract with RCA and cut his ties with the Melrose Brothers, who he said had cheated him out of his money. He married again in 1928, this time to Mabel Bertrand, and they moved to New York City in 1930 where for they struggled to survive for the next five years. A man whose recordings were gems of the New Orleans style, a musician who could rightly claim to be one of the first

generation of jazz musicians, and one of the first performers to tour transcontinentally, no longer had a band and was almost forgotten.

In desperation, Morton moved alone to Washington, D.C., in 1935 to try his hand at boxing promotion, but like so many other business ventures he had undertaken outside music, it went nowhere.

To most of the those who stopped by the club in Washington, he was only an aging, failing dude who had run out of luck. But to jazz cognoscenti, he was as close as they would ever come to the legendary founding figure of jazz, Buddy Bolden. Besides, Morton had challenged Bolden for that title, just as he challenged W. C. Handy, Paul Whiteman, Nick LaRocca, and all the others who dared to claim to have originated the music. His recordings were just enough out of date to make them more mysterious than quaint. This was a man who had been involved with every part of show business, and by various accounts had also been a tailor, a cosmetics salesman, a vaudevillian, a card shark and pool hustler, and had moved easily in the underworld.

His sobriquet advertised him as a ladies' man, and he made his person into a work of art. When he arrived in a new town he dressed to the nines and changed his clothes after each of several strolls through the city, walking with what was described as a hip-winding motion, until he attracted the attention he sought. His clothes-cutting contests were as fabled as his piano challenges, leaving his opponents feeling as raggedy as country bumpkins. The rituals of preparation for his piano performances were something to see, pianist James P. Johnson recalled:

I've seen Jelly Roll Morton, who had a great attitude, approach a piano. He would take his overcoat off. It had a special lining that would catch everybody's eye. So he would turn it inside out and, instead of folding it, he would lay it lengthwise along the top of the upright piano. He would do this very slowly, very carefully and very solemnly as if the coat was worth a fortune and had to be handled very tenderly. Then he'd take a big silk handkerchief, shake it off properly, and dust off the stool. He'd sit down then, hit his special chord (every tickler had his special trade-mark chord, like a signal) and he'd be gone! The first rag he'd play was always a spirited one to astound the audience.

### **Nights in the Music Box**

One of the first to discover him in Washington was Kenneth Hulsizer, a young record collector who saw him as a connection to the Golden Age of Jazz. Sitting with him on nights when the club was almost empty or when young men came in to drink and complain that his records in the jukebox were out of date and corny, Morton would talk about the old days, his life in New Orleans, and the musicians on his records of the 1920's. Time had passed him by, Hulsizer said, and he was bitter about the musicians who had replaced him. None of the contemporary pianists were of any value, Morton told him. Fats Waller? "All that singing and hollerin' he does. I originated that. . . . He just copied me." Duke Ellington? "He ain't no piano player. . . . He's got [Barney] Bigard, a good New Orleans boy, sitting right beside him all the time, telling him what to do. Take Bigard away and Ellington ain't nowhere." Earl Hines? ". . . Flashy. Flashy but not solid. He tried to play more piano than he knew how."

Among his other visitors was William Russell, an avant-garde composer and a percussionist for a Chinese puppet theater called the Red Gate Shadow Players. Russell, who would become one of the most important figures in the revival of New Orleans jazz in the 1940's, would continue to track Morton's life for the rest of his own, and produce the mammoth Jelly Roll Morton Scrapbook. Another visitor was Charles Edward Smith, whose *Jazzmen*, published in 1939, was the first American book on jazz, but it scarcely mentioned Morton. Ahmet and Neshui Ertegun, the Turkish ambassador's sons, destined to be two of the most important figures in the recording industry, dropped in from time to time. Murray Kempton, editor of the Johns Hopkins student newspaper and later one of America's great journalists, was a regular, as was William Gottlieb, a writer for the *Washington Post*, who would later produce some of the most iconic photographic images of the jazz life. Alistair Cooke, a young British reporter breaking into broadcasting with folk song recordings borrowed from the Library of Congress for his BBC programs on American history, sat with Morton while getting tips on how to play the blues, which Jelly Roll delivered "in that billiard-ball baritone he rolled out for formal occasions." "If you want to play the blues, boy, take it easy," Morton told him. "Just chords, and cut out that picture-show right hand." Finding Morton in such modest surroundings, Cooke said, "was like meeting the President at a shoe-shine parlor."

There was also Roy Carew, a ragtime composer from New Orleans then working for the U.S. Treasury Department, who befriended Morton, collaborated with him on a few songs, and helped him form his own publishing company, Tempo-Music. Sidney Bechet, the only New Orleans musician who could challenge Louis Armstrong as a soloist, once dropped by to pay his respects. Sterling Brown, a poet and professor of English at Howard University, came by to trade stories and sing a few blues with him, bringing his students along with him on occasion. At the suggestion of Alistair Cooke, folklorist Alan Lomax also dropped in. Of his meeting with Morton, Alan said, "He was trying to make a living in this night club in Washington, and there he was the ultimate host. When you came there he always served champagne . . . at his own expense. A bottle of champagne to the distinguished visitor, whoever that was."

Most nights, however, those who came in to drink showed no respect for the piano player — and complained about the music. Pianist Billy Taylor, then a senior in high school in the District and already playing professionally, came to the club with a group of other young piano players to have a few laughs. To him, Jelly Roll looked sick, old, and feeble, and maybe a little mad. When someone whispered to Morton that there were young skeptics in the house, he turned to the group in Taylor's booth and said, "You punks can't play this." Taylor later allowed that the old man had mercilessly taken them to school — indeed, they couldn't play what he was playing.

Down Beat magazine had also located Jelly Roll, and in May 1937 told its readers in the briefest of notices that he was at the Jungle Inn, one of the few clubs in D.C. that welcomed black and white customers, and was billed as "The Originator of Jazz and Swing." Two months later Down Beat's James Higgins wrote that he had heard Morton at the club, where he was the "out-of-sight bartender and barrel opener, M.C. and bouncer, as well as the club's pianist, where few came to listen." Ironically, even this slight degree of notoriety was enough to condemn Morton among those hot record collectors who relished both tradition and obscurity. Kenneth Hulsizer said he never saw Morton after 1938: by then "the swing and jive boys had discovered him."

## Days in the Archive

Across town from U Street, the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress had been created during President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal in cautious recognition that there existed a unique American culture. But it was recognition given on the cheap. The Archive had no real budget and only a shadow staff. John A. Lomax, the acclaimed folk song collector from Texas, had been made an "Honorary Consultant" and ex-officio director of the Archive a few years before, for which he earned a single dollar a year. When Lomax's son Alan was appointed as Assistant in Charge of the Archive in 1937, he was virtually the entire staff, for which he was paid \$620 a year, about half of what an average laborer was making.

Yet Alan seemed to scarcely notice and acted as though he'd been given the chance of a lifetime. With the imprimatur of the Library, he moved into high gear fast: within the year he had made plans to collect folk songs from sailors, miners, and lumberjacks, given a talk on folk song at the prestigious Cosmos Club of D.C., conducted interviews and written pieces on folklore for newspapers, sung for Senators and their wives at parties (one of his means of making enough to get by), and applied for grants for graduate study in anthropology at Columbia University. Meanwhile, in his job as archivist, he spent his days replying to a stream of letters asking for bibliographies, recordings, the sources for this or that song, answering requests for suggestions of folk songs that could be harmonized and used in school concerts, and responding to parents seeking tips on how to help their children have careers as singers.

New Deal projects, meanwhile, increasingly came under attack from those on the right in Congress, and the work of the Archive, in particular, was seen by some as frivolous, impractical, and politically provocative. When Alan Lomax and the Music Department of the Library of Congress asked for an additional \$25,000 to expand the Archives' activities, the reaction on Capitol Hill was so hostile that much of the budget of the Library of Congress was temporarily suspended. The United States was not yet ready to accept that it had a homegrown culture worthy of study and preservation.

During his years as a folklorist traveling on his own and with his father across America, Alan Lomax had focused on documenting American traditions in their original settings, relatively undisturbed by the emerging commercial entertainment industry, and he had not really considered recording someone like Jelly Roll Morton. Alan and his father had written off New Orleans as "a barren field for [folk] collection. The river packets are gone and with them the singing roustabouts. The police have driven out the 'hoo-doo' dances. And the speaking of Creole is entirely out of style." So while Lomax was initially intrigued by Morton, he detested what he appeared to represent: "He came [to the Library] with some friends of his who knew him, and said he wanted to correct the history of jazz." He said he was the "originator of jazz, stomps, and swing" and he had been robbed of his music. "At that time," Lomax said, "jazz was my worst enemy. Through the forces of radio, it was wiping out the music that I cared about — American traditional folk music."

Still, there was something about Morton. This broke and largely forgotten man presented himself with dignity, eloquence, and grace, dressed in an aging but carefully preserved sharp suit, with a lavish hand-painted tie of silk, matching shirt, socks and handkerchief, a watch fob and rings of gold, and flashed a half-carat diamond in an incisor when he smiled. "I looked at him with considerable suspicion. But I thought, I'd take this cat on, and . . . see how much folk music a jazz

musician knows. The first recording began by [my] asking if he knew 'Alabama Bound.' He played me about the most beautiful 'Alabama Bound' that I had ever heard."

Alan had intended to make only a few records with Morton, but he began to understand that he was face-to face with what he called a "Creole Benvenuto Cellini." If that great Florentine artist with a disreputable past could produce an autobiography under the protection of the church, Alan could surely be Morton's Pope Clement VII at the Library of Congress.

I said, 'Just a minute.' We were on the stage at the Coolidge Auditorium. A bust of Beethoven, and Brahms were up there. We were where the chamber music of the United States was being played. Jelly Roll felt that was just the proper setting for him.... He wasn't the least bit awed by that. I ran all the way upstairs into the office of my chief — Chief of the Music Division — and said, 'Harold, we have an absolute great jam here. I want to get permission to use fifty blank aluminum discs. I think he'll have something to say.' I think they probably cost altogether about \$100, maybe \$200, to record this man. On the way back down I decided to do a full-scale interview. I was at top-speed . . . . I had a bottle of whisky in my office. I put it on the piano . . . . I sat down on the floor, looked up, and said, 'Jelly Roll, where did you come from and how did it all begin?' He then began to play the piano and talk. It came out of nowhere, the fact that he decided to do that. We hadn't agreed on it at all. Sort of half closing his eyes, he gave that immortal definition of his family, and New Orleans.

Lomax had recorded brief life histories before, and had even written a short autobiography for folksinger Lead Belly based on his interviews with him ("Lead Belly Tells His Story" in the 1936 book, *Negro Folk Songs As Sung by Lead Belly* by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax). The idea of oral biography had been discussed by Alan and his father ever since John Lomax had first proposed that interviews with ex-slaves be conducted under government support to create a collective oral history of slavery. Alan had also heard that the Russian folklorists were beginning to write down the autobiographies of folk performers, bringing the singer up to the level of importance of the song or the tale.

What really engaged Lomax was the richness and flow of Morton's story, the nuance of his speech, and the integrity of his narrative:

As I listened to it, I realized that this man spoke the English language in a more beautiful way than anybody I'd ever heard. He had a totally original style. . . . This man who had been associated with gun thugs, living in this very cruel environment . . . proceeded to speak the most fantastically elegant and sensitive English about culture, and character, and so on. . . . A gravel voice melting at the edges, not talking, each sentence bowling along like a line from the blues, like an eddy of a big sleepy southern river, weaving a legend, and as the legend grew, the back seat of the hall filled with [ghosts of] ladies in crinolines, listening. . . ."

Basically, he realized that he had been given an opportunity to make his statement in full. There was nothing in front of him but free time. I was at his disposal. The Library of Congress was backing him. Suddenly, he felt that he had the kind of recognition that he, in truth, knew that he deserved. I think that it made a vast difference to him then. He felt in good courage to start writing again, and start running recording sessions.

What ensued was a performance that lasted for over a month, a recitation of Homeric proportions, with Morton accompanying himself on a piano instead of a lyre. Lomax seated himself on the floor at Morton's feet, a pair of battery-powered Presto disc recording machines behind him so that he could reach back to change the discs — minimizing the breaks and sometimes overlapping what was said on one recording onto the next — but still maintaining eye contact with him: “the best position with somebody who's feeling a little bit insecure.” Despite the grand piano and the concert hall, it was a field recording session in the Library of Congress.

Once they started, Jelly Roll paced his speech with chords on the piano, vamping his way through history, changing keys and shifting into minor as the subject demanded. When he sang he kept time by stomping on the hard floor, every sound overamplified by a cheap crystal microphone on a metal stand. Lomax put him at such ease that at first, Morton kept on talking as the records ended, right through the changing of discs, so that some of what he said was lost. But he quickly adjusted to the four-and-a-half minute limits on each side, and measured his speech and music to match. When he is recalling Buddy Bolden (throughout which he softly plays “Buddy Bolden's Blues” as background music) and is interrupted by a change of discs, he plays an introduction to his resumption of the narrative. Lomax, too, adapted to the epic unfolding before him. The usual direct field interview questions — “When was this?” “What was his name?” — slowly faded as Morton found his rhythm, and Lomax became his audience.

For Lomax these recordings were a breakthrough in method:

I later came to call this process ‘the cultural feedback system,’ where people talk their images into a recording instrument or into a film, and suddenly begin to find that they have importance, what they have to say is significant. All that came out of the Jelly Roll interview. . . . This was the first oral history, and that's how it all began on the stage. Jelly Roll invented oral history, you might say.

Lomax called these sessions the “Autobiography of Jelly Roll Morton,” and went on to make a series of other recorded interviews he also called “autobiographies,” such as those with Aunt Molly Jackson in May 1939 and Woody Guthrie in March 1940. When Lomax first read John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* it struck him that he had been working with people who talked like Steinbeck's characters. Recorded interviews such as Morton's were “almost like an analytic interview (only there is no couch). What I had decided on was a twelve-foot shelf of unknown America recording its life in prose. The convict, cowboy, steel worker, and so on.” It was also a way of reconstructing the lives of whole communities of people. We may never know precisely why Athens was the great city it was, since its origins are lost in time, but New Orleans — the Athens of the New World, as Lomax often referred to it — was still there, with its deep history and its great talkers, and it might yet be possible to grasp its unique efflorescence.

For Morton, it meant putting his story on record, creating history, something he begun to do on paper (see *The Complete Writings of Jelly Roll Morton*). Now he would write in sound the first history of American jazz, and would raise the level of discussion about the music through what turned out to be the first musicological discourse on the music and its originators.

As in many oral accounts, Lomax's story of meeting Jelly Roll was a bit compressed. The actual sessions did not begin until May 23, 1938, but Lomax had decided to record him as early as March, for Morton had already spoken about it to Harold Phillips, a reporter for The Washington Daily News, and on March 19 the paper carried a story that showed that Jelly Roll had already thought through what he wanted to do. He would tell the story of how he created "Tiger Rag," describe funerals in New Orleans, orate "the Black Diamond Express to Hell," and play and talk his way through musical history. Phillips wrote that "He figures that 100 recordings will hardly encompass the projected project." Though Lomax was not mentioned in the article, at least the Library of Congress was turning up in the entertainment pages.

### **L'affaire W.C. Handy**

With the Library of Congress interviews confirmed, Morton was energized to try recording again, and he convinced a group of Washington hot jazz fans to underwrite several recording sessions, one in Baltimore in August, and following the interviews, another under the supervision of Neshui Ertegun for a Hollywood record store's label, Jazz Man Records. Jelly Roll also began a campaign to have his back royalties paid to him, and was writing letters to his Chicago publisher, Melrose Brothers, as well as to the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, and to James Roosevelt, secretary to his father, President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

On May 6, just a few days before his sessions with Morton were to begin, Alan Lomax interviewed the composer and bandleader W. C. Handy, who was perhaps the most widely respected African American in the United States at the time. Handy, a partially blind, elderly gentleman who, without having any remarkable musical creativity, nonetheless had published "St Louis Blues," one of the most popular songs in American history, as well as a number of other blues, and had built a successful music business in the face of every conceivable opposition. In 1941 he would publish *Father of the Blues*, an inspirational autobiography that testified to Handy's belief in his country (the book ended with the words "God Bless America"), and his willingness to persevere in spite of all odds. The book was enormously successful, driving Richard Wright's *Native Son* off the sales charts, and ultimately was chosen to be distributed to soldiers overseas by the Council on Books in War Time.

On the evening of March 26, 1938, Robert Ripley introduced Handy on the popular radio program *Believe It or Not* as "the originator of jazz, stomps, and blues." This was all too much for Morton, for whom Handy was a fake, a second-rate, out-of-date musician, and little more than a shrewd businessman who knew how to capitalize on others' music and present himself as a humble, hard-working Negro. Morton wrote letters to Ripley, *Down Beat* magazine, *The Baltimore Afro-American*, and perhaps other papers, protesting the mantle bestowed on Handy. Roy Carew edited the letter, and it was sent off a few days after the broadcast.

In it Jelly Roll asserted that New Orleans was the birthplace of jazz and that it was he who had first created jazz in 1902, written the first stomp ("King Porter Stomp") in 1906, and used "swing" in a title ("Georgia Swing") in 1907. (Morton was a bit more cautious about the blues, and merely pointed out that he had written "New Orleans Blues" in 1905, early enough, in any case, to precede W. C. Handy's claims). But Handy could not play jazz, Morton said, as he was unable to execute "plenty of figure work in the groove ability, great improvisations, accurate, exciting tempos



with a kick.” What he played were folk songs, hymns, and anthems. Jelly Roll went on to accuse Handy of stealing other people’s music and of not understanding the rudiments and origins of the jazz drum set. He debunked Paul Whiteman’s claim to being “King of Jazz” and questioned the uniqueness of Duke Ellington’s “jungle music.” He pointed out correctly that his own compositions were being played by everyone from James Reese Europe to Fletcher Henderson, and criticized the New York City conception of jazz as being “loud, blary, noisy, discordant.” He demanded that Ripley provide proof for the claims made on his show. Morton concluded, ominously, “Lord protect us from more Hitlers and Mussolinis.”

Down Beat ran his letter in two parts in August and September 1938 and added some fire to his remarks with a cover quoting him as saying one thing he did not say: “‘W. C. Handy is a Liar!’ Says Jelly Roll.” A response from Handy was published in the same September issue of Down Beat under the heading “‘I Would Not Play Jazz If I Could,’ Writes Father of the Blues,” and “W. C. Handy Says Jelly Roll’s Attack is the ‘Act of a Crazy Man.’” Handy’s letter said that, no, he wasn’t a jazz musician; and if he didn’t invent the blues, he at least knew how to write them down and copyright them instead of spending his life complaining about what had been stolen from him. He closed with an old Booker T. Washington allegory about Negroes who, like crabs, pulled those who succeed in climbing to the top of the basket back to the bottom.

None of this was of much help to Morton, even if he was more right than wrong in his claims. He was a leftover hero from another age, and almost no one was interested in his self-promotion and corrections of jazz history. But Lomax saw behind Morton’s self-possessed mask a great artist who had laid the groundwork for jazz as we now know it and was keenly aware that he was on the verge of disappearing from musical history. “Jelly Roll had been deeply hurt. . . . He occasionally let that slip through, but not very often.” Roy Carew said that Jelly Roll simply meant that he had created piano jazz, in 1902, before he first had a band.

Morton may have been wounded by such dismissals, but he was far from humorless about the whole debate: he told Carew that he had once met clarinetist Wilbur Sweatman, who said, “What do you mean by claiming you invented jazz in New Orleans? Don’t you know that I originated jazz in the Ozarks in Missouri?” He would have been even more amused had he lived long enough to know that Leonard Feather, an influential jazz writer and never one to be shy about discrediting Morton and New Orleans jazz, years later recorded an interview with the early New York stride pianist Willie “the Lion” Smith that he modeled on the Lomax/Morton interviews. At one point Feather asked Smith where jazz began. The Lion confidently answered that “jazz was first played in the brickyards of Haverstraw, New York.”

### **Aftermath**

The Morton interviews continued through much of May and into mid-June, with Lomax spending most of the rest of summer on a field recording trip to Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin with his wife, the writer Elizabeth Lyttleton, and then on work with his father and composer Ruth Crawford Seeger on their book, *Our Singing Country*. On December 14 the interviews resumed and were completed, possibly at a different location, since Jelly Roll played guitar on this session. Other interviews with Morton were taken down and recorded by a stenographer.

There was also a chronology of Morton's life, a list of New Orleans musicians and their characteristics, details on hoodoo, and thoughts on everyday life in New Orleans. On his own, Jelly Roll wrote out short accounts of a stay with his godmother in Biloxi, circa 1903; trips to Mobile, St. Louis, Memphis, Texas, and the West Coast; a tour with William Benbow's traveling show; lists of pimps' names from New Orleans; an account of his meeting with Earl Hines; and the story of the club he managed in Chicago in 1926, the Elite No. 2 (see *The Complete Writings of Jelly Roll*).

Within days of starting the Morton interview, Lomax was beginning to dream up ways of bringing Jelly Roll and the music of his era back into the limelight. He began searching for others who might share his enthusiasm, and by July he was writing librarians and jazz fans, hoping to find bibliography and discography on Morton. Earlier that year the New York Times critic Olin Downes was put in charge of all of the musical events for the World's Fair of 1939, and he asked Lomax to plan a series of folk sites and performances for the event. Alan quickly developed an ambitious program that was intended to redefine America to itself and to the world. There would be an American folk theater with performances, academic symposia, and performed histories of jazz, popular song, and vaudeville. A giant "main street" would offer a version of the French Quarter of New Orleans; a Pennsylvania Dutch tavern; a Haitian house with cooking, religion, and a history of the Haitian people on display; a Western saloon; a Down East fish house; a Mexican patio with food, music, and dance; a Hawaiian house; an Acadian dance hall; an Appalachian square dance hall; and an African American church and juke joint. In all of it, he stressed, there would not be staged recreations, but lived environments, spilling into the street and the fields around it. Visitors were to join in the cultures, learning to cook and dance and learning the cultural bases on which these arts and crafts were built. And, unlike most of the other exhibits at the Fair, these would be fun, free of commercial influence, and free of charge.

Among the extensive array of performances Lomax proposed to Downes was that Jelly Roll Morton be put in charge of a musicians' jam session:

You may not agree with me that the ragtime-jazz-blues-swing tradition is the most important American contribution to so-called sophisticated music, but at least this tradition deserves a great deal of attention at the World's Fair. I have encountered a Negro here in Washington who might fit into the World's Fair program very nicely and who I think could represent this tradition as well or better than anyone I know. His name is Jellyroll [sic] Morton. He is well along in his fifties and grew up with jazz as it developed in the tenderloin district of New Orleans and spread up the river to Chicago. . . .

I am recording for the Library all of his compositions, all of the folk tunes he knows along with very full bibliographical material. I think the musicologists of the future will find in it essential material for writing the history of American music. Jellyroll is still a great pianist and a fine singer and he has had wide experience in the organization of orchestras, in arranging and composing. He also knows personally everyone who has ever had anything to do with jazz or swing. He might be the ideal person to put in charge of the World's Fair Jam Session, without which, of course, the World's Fair would be musically incomplete.

In the end, a series of bureaucratic tangles and turf wars resulted in none of the musical events planned by Lomax for Downes being approved. The African American juke joint was made a concession for the owners of the Savoy Ballroom, the Dutch Tavern was built and sponsored by the Heineken Beer Company, and, in the cruelest of ironies, it was W. C. Handy who was celebrated at the Fair as a leading contributor to American culture and who then went on to serve as a musical consultant to the next two World Fairs in America. Olin Downes resigned in protest over these and other changes made against his wishes.

Nothing seemed to be working for Morton. Business at the Music Box was worse than ever. Still, he kept at it, renting the club out for a fund raiser given by the Laundry Workers Organization Committee on June 3, and bringing in female impersonators to perform one night a week. He unsuccessfully made the rounds of the radio stations hoping to get them to give him a program to play New Orleans music, and he failed to generate any interest among local musicians and record companies to record his music. His biggest disappointment was the failure of his Inter-Racial Production Corporation, his effort to convince a local film company to use black actors and performers in movies. He planned a midnight grand ball in the Lincoln Colonnade Theater (beneath the Lincoln Theatre on U Street) where local black talent would perform and audition for films, but in spite of his own handbill distribution, almost no one came.

Lomax, meanwhile, continued to work on Jelly Roll's behalf, advising him on copyrighting his music and on the lawsuits he was planning against Melrose Music, ASCAP, and the Music Corporation of America. He began a campaign to get Morton record deals and press to restart his career. Then, sometime in the fall, Jelly Roll was stabbed by a customer following an argument in the club. He recovered from the wounds, but added to other physical problems such as asthma, this incident weakened him even more. By November business was so slow that he and his partner, Cordelia Lyle, closed the club; and though Jelly Roll tried playing at a lounge run by boxer Natty Brown on 13th and H Streets, N. W., he was dropped after a week for lack of business. He was still writing music, and he managed to get publisher Clarence Williams to agree to put his business address in New York City on Morton's music, but the several songs that he did publish failed to sell.

Jelly Roll talked over his situation with Lomax. Alan suggested he move to New York, where World's Fair plans still seemed promising and where possibilities for recording were better. Carew and Lomax helped him pay off his Washington debts, and Morton and his wife, Mabel, headed north in their car on an icy December 24.

Once situated on West 145th Street in Harlem, Jelly Roll began to rehearse a band, but wrote Lomax that the Musicians Union was not anxious to accept him for membership since the numbers of musicians who had come to town hoping to work at the World's Fair were overloading their ranks. Alan promised to come to New York to introduce him to Decca Records executives, but when Alan's wife, Elizabeth, became ill, their meeting was delayed. In March they met at one of Jelly's rehearsals, and by the end of the month Lomax had managed to get him an audition with producer John Hammond with the idea of having the Brunswick Company record him. But Jelly Roll was stricken by a heart attack on April 17, hospitalized for three weeks, and advised to give up playing. When he did finally meet with Hammond, it was suggested that Morton would be better off writing arrangements for the Benny Goodman band. Goodman, however, showed no interest in what Hammond sent him.

Lomax, meanwhile, was trying to interest jazz fans such as Charles Edward Smith to write an article about Jelly Roll in a national magazine to increase his visibility. In September 1939 their efforts paid off when he signed with RCA Bluebird to record eight pieces with a band that included New Orleans musicians such as Sidney Bechet, Albert Nicholas, Zutty Singleton, and Wellman Braud. The session went well, but Jelly Roll was sick. Frederic Ramsey, Jr., a young jazz writer who was at the studio, said that Morton “tried to show that he could outdo the younger men, but emotionally he was walking a tightrope. He was doing a brave thing.” Lomax next set up a number of sessions for him at General Records that lasted from December through January 1940 and that produced some of the best examples of Morton’s older repertoire.

Jelly finally got his chance to even the score with W. C. Handy when he appeared on the Gabriel Heater radio program, “We the People,” on October 31st where he was asked to tell how he came to invent jazz, and then played “Tiger Rag” as an illustration of the “jazzing up” process. In 1940 he made a July 14 appearance on an NBC radio show, The Chamber Music Society of Lower Basin Street, on which he played overtime, forcing the cancellation of Dinah Shore’s performance of a new song by a young Leonard Feather.

Morton traveled around New York and as far as Cincinnati to see what interest he could stir up, but his health was not up to it. When Jelly Roll heard that his godmother had died in California, he hooked his two cars together and set out West alone, hoping to recover any wealth she might have had hidden. After reuniting with his first wife, Anita, he reached Los Angeles, where he tried again to organize a band, set up meetings with movie studios, and open a West Coast music publishing company. But it was too late: he died of heart failure on July 10, 1941.

### **The Interviews**

What had begun as a folklore interview with Morton had turned into a sociological treatise and a historical document, spoken with all the authenticity and color of a Mark Twain. There was an passion for detail in Morton’s narrative that suggests that he not only feared that his own contribution was not appreciated, but that the importance of New Orleans to American culture was being forgotten. Like James Joyce in *Ulysses*, Morton set out to immortalize the Crescent City for those to whom it was lost or never known. New Orleans’ institutions and community rituals were described, its street life evoked with descriptions of the social clubs like the Broadway Swells and the High Arts; the many parades; the very public and communal funerals, with their wakes and feasts and singing, the processions they called the second line, and the fights that sometimes followed; and Mardi Gras, with its costumes and masked balls. (Morton was among the first to describe the rituals and performances of the Mardi Gras Indians.)

There are descriptions of card games, lists of musicians’ names, stories of the witches and ghosts of New Orleans. When he turns to the high- and low-life in Storyville, he lingers over the “tough babies and sweet mamas” (the Gibson Girl, the Horseless Carriage, the voodoo women) and the sports, sharks, and bad men like Aaron Harris “who killed his sweet little sister and his brother-in-law” and who was protected by a voodoo woman whose magic confused the police and the courts. He lists characters such as Sheep Bite, Toodlum Parker, the Pickett Boys, and Chicken Dick, men whose names prefigure gangsta rappers yet to come — names that turned up as graffiti on the walls of the city, hip hop style. He describes their dress, games, and the way they walked.

But the name of Robert Charles gave him pause, and led him to dramatize what in 1900 began as an attempted arrest of Charles on a domestic complaint and ended in a riot that killed many of the black citizens of New Orleans, and inaugurating a long, bloody series of racial clashes across America in the 20th century. It was an experience still so painfully fresh and immediate — Charles lived only a few blocks away — that Morton would not allow himself to recall the song that memorialized the event.

Morton sometimes spoke to Lomax from a position of racial superiority over the blacks of New Orleans, a common self-protective practice of the time among Creoles when dealing with whites. Some observers, themselves speaking from a privileged vantage point, have accused Creoles like Morton of racism and self-hatred. But Jelly Roll's birth certificate would surely have identified him as "Negro," and the indignities and abuses suffered by blacks frame his entire narrative and provide much of its drama. Nor could there have been any doubt about how he saw his position in society when he spoke of playing behind a screen in one of the "parlors" to prevent him from seeing the naked bodies of white women. There was no hint of prejudice in his professional practices, either, since he regularly hired black musicians. New Orleans guitarist Danny Barker also recalls him lecturing black musicians in Harlem on the importance of their music and the need to protect it from exploitation: "they" were beginning to catch on to "our music," Morton said.

### **The Music**

In being called a supreme egotist, Jelly Roll was often a victim of loose and lurid reporting. If we read the words that he himself wrote we learn that he almost had an inferiority complex and said he created his own style of jazz piano because "all my fellow musicians were much faster in manipulations, I thought, than I, and I did not feel as though I was in their class." So he used a slower tempo to permit flexibility through the use of more notes, a pinch of Spanish to give a number the right seasoning, the avoidance of playing triple forte continuously, and many other points. — Alan Lomax (date unknown)

When Morton laid out his theory of jazz, he noted that "jazz is based on strictly music" and claimed that jazz used ideas drawn from operas, symphonies, and overtures: "There is nothing finer than jazz music," he said, "because it comes from everything of the finest class music." When these interviews were first issued for sale on records in 1947, the notes by Rudi Blesh that accompanied them went to some pains to explain that Jelly Roll was attempting to confront the prejudice against non-European-based music that was widespread in 1938 (and remains today in many of our best music departments and conservatories), as well as to mock the then-popular urge to make jazz more like classical music. Morton's defensiveness was only the latest effort in a long line of ragtime and early jazz pianists to explain the seriousness and importance of what they were doing to skeptical musicians. Blesh went further and argued that by the 1940's classical music had itself become debased and commercial, and that the only truly serious music of the times was jazz:

Today, however, the divine right of "serious" music is growing a little thin. One famous conductor performs for animated motion picture cartoons; another plays Fourth-rate imitations of syncopated boogie woogie in the films; while a Wagnerian tenor, the "greatest of our generation," sings Tin Pan Alley trash on the radio.

Today, questions that few dared ask ten short years ago are being asked. Where is the “art for art’s sake” of serious music, once so revered, now a saleable commodity of the music appreciation racket? Where in all contemporary “serious” music is to be found the hot, vital, revolutionary creativity of great jazz music? Where else is to be found the devotion that great jazz players, through decades of want and misunderstanding, have given us in their music?

The cheapening of classical music and its musicians’ patronizing attitude toward jazz had not escaped Jelly Roll, either. Roy Carew said that when someone suggested to Morton that Scott Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag” was not the sort of material that was suitable for jazz, Morton objected: “You see jazz is applied to the tune, and the quality must be in the operator, and 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’d get a cornfield bearing triple-fold. Why? Because that kind of ability isn’t there.”

### **A Discourse on Jazz**

In the shadow of the rapid rise of swing, Jelly Roll felt a calling to lecture his younger colleagues on the first principles of jazz in his conversation with Alan Lomax. A number of swing musicians were still playing his compositions — Lionel Hampton, Bob Crosby, Earl Hines, Glenn Miller, Jimmy Dorsey, and most notably Benny Goodman and Fletcher Henderson, both of whom recorded “King Porter Stomp” and made it into a signature number in their performances. But Morton was not satisfied. Hearing swing bands rushing the beat as they moved through a piece that had begun too fast to begin with, he argued that moderate tempos allowed for maximum variation and creativity, and that holding the tempo steady was very important. Of melody he said, “Always have the melody going some kind of way, and, of course, your background would always be with perfect harmony, what is known today as ‘riffs,’ meaning figures, musically speaking as figures.” (Riffs are the short, rhythmic or melodic figures repeated behind a soloist or the melody over a changing chord pattern.) By the late 1930’s swing bands had elevated riffs to become themes or melodies themselves, sometimes with several running against each other at the same time. To Morton this was a vulgar practice, and one too simple for a serious jazz musician.

A critical part of jazz for Morton was the break — that moment when the accompaniment is briefly suspended and the soloist or melody continues playing. The effect it creates is a release of tension, followed by a reestablishment of tension as the rhythm returns, often with the illusion of acceleration. “Without breaks and without clean breaks, without beautiful ideas in breaks, you don’t need to even think about doing anything else. If you can’t have a decent break, you haven’t got a jazz band, or you can’t even play jazz.” (In Morton’s music, stop-time — when the accompanying instruments do not actually stop, but play the rhythm with especially sharp accents, exaggerating it, as in “The Charleston” — was another variant of the break.)

The most famous (and controversial) of Jelly Roll’s strictures on jazz was the need for “seasoning”: the use of exotic rhythms that he called the “Spanish tinge,” a bass pattern similar to that of the tango or the habañera that he identified as deriving from Spanish people living in New Orleans. He demonstrated this “tinge” by playing “La Paloma,” a song by a 19th-century Spanish composer that uses a Cuban rhythm. But typical of Morton, he felt that for such a rhythm to work in jazz it would have to be transformed by playing it in the left hand while the right hand played the blues: “It gives . . . an entirely different color. It really changes the color from red to blue.” Also typical of Morton,

he suggested that the “Spanish” melodies were unsatisfactory and were, in any case, not played at the proper tempo. The rhythm that he highlighted in this discussion was one that could be heard in ragtime songs, in Broadway tunes, and later in rhythm and blues, and it continued to be a key factor in the development of jazz (see Appendix 1).

In this discussion of the nature of jazz Morton was also attempting to refute the standard textbook definitions and stereotypes of jazz: “. . . Jazz was considered a lot of blatant noise and discordant tone, that is, something that would be even harmful to the ears. . . . Jazz music is to be played sweet, soft, plenty rhythm.” Clarinetist Albert Nicholas said that Morton insisted that they not play loud: “ ‘A lot of these cats,’ he’d say, ‘especially the Northerners, they’re playing double forte from the word go. But if you start double forte, where are you going to go?’ ”

More than any other pianist in the first quarter of the 20th century, Jelly Roll Morton’s compositions were balanced — structurally, rhythmically, and melodically — with composed and improvised sections carefully fitted together, sometimes so carefully that the “improvised” solos were actually written out in advance. His compositions and arrangements for his Red Hot Peppers (1926–1930) were wonders of contrasting texture and form — multi-themed pieces in which every repetition of a melody was varied in instrumentation, rhythm, and dynamics.

In “Black Bottom Stomp,” recorded for RCA in 1926, for example, Morton practiced what he preached, managing to incorporate in one short piece the “Spanish tinge,” stomps, breaks, stop-time, backbeat, two-beat, four-beat, a complete suspension of the rhythm section during the piano solo, riffs, rich variations of melody, and dynamics of volume, all of the elements of jazz as he understood it. The piece is divided in two parts, the first having three themes (although each one is based on the same chord sequence), with all three written out. (The solo trumpet passages that alternate with the whole band in the second theme were written out as well, though they sound improvised, as does the clarinet solo in the third theme.) After a brief interlude and a change of key, a second theme appears, which is then varied by soloists and the full group six more times.

The constant shifting of rhythms and rhythmic devices gives each theme and its variation a lively feel. Every chorus seems fresh and inspired, with a new combination of instruments appearing each time (six different instrumental combinations are used, though there are only seven instruments in the band). Especially striking is the contrast in the last two choruses: in the first of these the whole band comes together but drops the volume to a whisper; when they reach the last chorus they erupt in a musical shout, with the drummer shifting to a loud backbeat. All of this happens within roughly three minutes, and yet it seems organic, every note leading to the next and performed with drive, spirit, and a sense of conviction.

### **The Pianist**

Morton has long been singled out as a composer-pianist whose compositions and piano performances read and sound like orchestral arrangements. Having played for many years without a band, he was able to play both as a soloist and with an ensemble effect. He said himself that the piano should imitate a band, though not everyone has agreed on precisely what he meant. According to Bill Russell, Morton’s idea was that the pianist should play the whole composition with both hands, not just with the right hand and the florid decorations of Eastern stride pianists. Lomax, on the other hand, thought Morton wanted the piano to simulate a band, with each

instrument's voice being presented idiomatically, yet still adding up to an orchestral whole. And true enough, tubas and trombones can be heard in Morton's left hand, trumpet rips and fanfares in his right, along with clarinet trills and glissandos. Even guitar-like chords sometimes appear.

Perhaps Morton's intent lay somewhere in between, for both his piano playing and his orchestra arrangements are completely compositional, at the same time providing space and motivation for individual variation. Morton had taken the forms of ragtime and quadrille and gone beyond them to find a way to set up sectional contrasts within single compositions. His piano pieces were thoroughly orchestral, virtual arrangements with the various instruments' parts clearly audible, just waiting to be transferred to a band. Even the effects of the tonguing and breathing patterns of the various horns were there in his touch and attack and in sonic decay on the piano. Rhythmically, he was able to move easily between swing and straight passages, between swing time and conventional time playing, to provide variation to the rhythmic structure as well as to the melody.

Jelly Roll's piano playing was never fully appreciated in his own time, nor was it for years after his death. But by the 1960's critical opinion of Morton began to quickly shift. Gunther Schuller wrote in *Early Jazz* that Morton actually preceded Earl Hines as the first modern jazz pianist, and that many of Hines' innovations with Louis Armstrong's band had already been used by Morton: the so-called 'trumpet' style of the right hand; the use of octave doublings in the right hand as counterpoint or obbligatos behind soloists; and the breaking of rhythm patterns by cross-accents, syncopations, passing tones, and broken tenths. Cecil Taylor, the most radical of modern pianists, insisted that Morton was an avant-gardist, a point also made by Alan Lomax when he said that long before modernists like Henry Cowell, Jelly Roll used tone clusters as he rolled his elbow on the piano keys.

But there was also something traditional and classical about Jelly Roll's playing. Both of his hands could be used for rhythm in the same manner in which the Eastern stride pianists played, but he also thought of each hand as an independent melodic voice, capable of playing together contrapuntally. Yet by continuing to play in this complex style in an era in which most jazz pianists reserved their left hands for rhythm, their right hands simply carrying the melody, Morton could seem out of date.

When he plays his second version of "Maple Leaf Rag" and "Ain't Misbehavin' " during the interviews, Morton shows himself to have found his own place between the ragtime pianists and younger players like Fats Waller in New York. His "Maple Leaf" is a slower, rephrased version of Joplin's classic rag, with creative variations on the melody and with both his hands used in a more integrated style. And if his "Ain't Misbehavin' " lacks some of the drive and swing of Waller, Morton's left hand has more variety, especially on the bridge of the tune.

The interviews' use of longer playing discs and the relaxed atmosphere that developed between Morton and Lomax offered Jelly Roll his first chance to play for more than three minutes at a time in a recording session; those who only knew him from commercial recordings now could hear him perform even more variations on single themes. In pieces such as "Creepy Feeling" or "Hyena Stomp" he developed each variation in terms of the last, creating a more organic performance than pianists who treated each chorus' improvisation as if it were separate from the theme with which they had begun.



## **The Singer**

One of the pleasures of these recordings is discovering that Jelly Roll Morton was a very good jazz and blues singer. It's especially surprising that he had several singing styles he could draw on: his blues voice was cool and understated on songs like "I Hate a Man Like You" and "Alabama Bound," rather than funky or strident. Even when he moves closer to a 1930's Midwestern shouting blues style on "The Original Jelly Roll Blues," he only implies a shout. He could come up with a kind of 1920's pop tenor voice when he felt like it — on "Pretty Baby," for example — but he was also able to switch to a hotter, more declamatory, more rhythmic style within the same song — in "My Gal Sal," for instance, or "Hesitating Blues," a song better known as "How Long."

Morton could scat sing (as he does on "The Original Jelly Roll Blues") in a style that suggests that it was something he had been doing long before Louis Armstrong's "Heebie Jeebies" became a landmark scat record; or he might meditatively hum his way through a song — the second version of "Winding Boy Blues," for example. And on a vaudeville comedy routine like "The Animule Dance" as he talks over a simple riff he anticipates rap. Through it all, his piano playing is fully integrated with the songs as if they were arrangements. On the last choruses of some of these songs, piano and voice work together to approximate even the sound of the closing choruses of big band recordings of the late 1930's.

## **"The Roll"**

It's tempting to overreach when seeking comparisons with which to establish and clarify interpretations of Morton's character and achievement. Jazz writer Gary Giddins has compared Jelly Roll to Orson Welles, a tantalizing parallel, especially since Alan Lomax himself has often been measured against Welles. Pablo Picasso is another possible candidate. All of them were oversized and often under-funded figures who drew attention to themselves by putting their own autobiographies at the center of their work. They were all high modernists with a taste for creating new forms of art out of low cultural elements, all voracious consumers and reckless connoisseurs who could transform scraps of the old into something new as the 20th century opened wide before them.

Music pundits have stigmatized Jelly Roll Morton as a braggart whose only subject was himself, not considering perhaps that his accounts of jazz history and his own role in it might have been more accurate than not. Without a doubt he was a man of words, indefatigable in his own defense. But in truth, he did not brag that much. There are some factual errors in his story and some overstatements, but considering that he was improvising the history of jazz for recordings that could not be edited, and given that he was speaking to a generation who knew little or nothing about the history of jazz, a music that they as yet didn't understand, his is a generally reasonable, well-considered performance.

Musicians he played with in New Orleans like Albert Nicholas and Omer Simeon said Morton could live up to his talk and that he was the best at what he did. Danny Barker was one of Morton's staunchest defenders, and he became something of his interpreter, often speaking of his presentation of self:

Jelly Roll never spoke of being held back by anyone. He believed in Jelly Roll and was not going to step off for anyone. Those trunks of Hart, Schaffner, and Marx

clothes were his armor against those who would deny him and his importance. The diamond in his gold tooth was testimony to his status, that he was good for whatever he asked for, just as the two or three bulldogs he kept with him were marks of the gentleman he laid claim to being. Jelly Roll was outspoken. See that Diamond Jim Brady? He says, "I'm the so-and-so. John L. Sullivan say I'll whip anybody in the world. Swift and Amour, and all those people, they had railroad cars, so they didn't have to say nothing. They showed it." Jelly Roll came out of that era where you put up or shut up. In the underworld if you're successful you're successful. "Jelly Roll Morton, the greatest piano player in the civilized world." That was one of his words . . . Everybody knew Jelly. That's it. But he's misunderstood. He spoke up when people weren't speaking up. And he could back up what he said.

It is also quite unfair to suggest that Morton claimed to have invented jazz and that he was selfish about sharing credit with other important musicians. In fact, he never truly claimed to have invented jazz, only to have transformed music into jazz. He was also quick to acknowledge other keyboardists and their particular contributions to the history of jazz: Tony Jackson, Sammy Davis, Albert Carroll, Buddy Bertrand, and Porter King were all among his favorites, as were phantom pianists such as Skinny Head Pete, Florida Sam, and three-fingered Mamie Desdunes. It is his account of them and other musicians that helped fans and historians to fill in the history of the piano in this period.

Danny Barker also claimed that Morton did what no other musician dared do at the time: enter the sanctity of the control room of the recording studios and give advice to the engineers. And for that reason, he said, his RCA records were clearer and better defined than others in his time.

All things considered, Barker said,

He was a nice person. He believed in paying you . . . better than [Fletcher] Henderson and [Duke] Ellington. He was always saying, "If I could just get some musicians to play my music." These people didn't know anything about New Orleans and improvisation, and how to bend tones, and the blues notes. They learned all that later with the coming of Armstrong, making these beautiful statements on the horn. Before that, it was kind of tame. . . . He had this abundance of feeling, taking it from things he felt, inside, and giving it to the horns to play.

Whatever else he may have been, Morton was always a gentleman. "He may have been from the bottom, and one of the night people, but he moved among the best." Thorstein Veblen, that great observer of the values shared by the lowest and highest classes of America, would have understood the irony that lay behind that epitaph.

Years later, when Lomax reflected on the interviews he had done, he too recalled this side of Jelly Roll's character. When Morton was away from the mike, it was not his flamboyance that struck him, but his charm and ambition:

An extremely charming gentleman. Very, very intent at that point in his life to make a comeback. One of the most interesting things he was working on then was a plan to change jazz all over America. He had a kind of multiplication of Jelly Roll plan . . . He wrote the president a long letter — this is how to take care of American music. They were going to give Jelly Roll just enough money to organize a band,

and rehearse it in Baltimore. That was going to be such a success that band would split in two. Jelly Roll could take that band, then, to Philadelphia. Then, that band would split in two. By a sort of zygotic process, in about six months he had a Jelly Roll orchestra in absolutely every city in the United States. He was very serious about this, and, of course, if he had [had] a good grant, he probably could have made it happen.

His story had convinced Lomax that jazz had been developed within a small community of people, that it was only a very few talented individuals had introduced jazz into the fertile ambiance of New Orleans. In a word, they were a folk society:

I realized that Jelly was telling me the history of jazz, because jazz was a neighborhood project. Only a few individuals in this small, sleepy town were involved in evoking the music of jazz out of the broad basis of American Negro folk song. The Downtown Creoles could play their notes, but the Uptown boys had much to teach them. As Papa Big-Eye Nelson told me: "You had to put the cryin' in your clarinet."

Morton saw his mission to be one of correcting music history and elevating this small community of musicians to their rightful place:

There was as yet no serious jazz criticism or jazz history. Jelly Roll was attempting to find a basis for such criticism and history. It was also a time in which the music that had been created first by black musicians was being taken away from them by the "amusement industry." Suddenly everyone was calling themselves jazz musicians. He himself had his rights to his music pirated away, and the contributions he made to the orchestration of jazz had been formalized in swing for millions of dollars to be made, while he himself had faded from the picture. It had been done by the tricks and gimmicks of the newly forming public relations industry.

Morton watched this new industry at work, seeing it inflate some reputations and bury others, all the while creating fads and crazes with over-the-top sales pitches. His response was to become his own PR agent, taking his languages and stories from the streets of New Orleans and bringing them vividly to life for a national audience. When Al Rose, a New Orleans radio personality and author, visited the club in D.C. and found himself the only customer that night, he and Jelly Roll were able to talk about New Orleans in the old days and reflect on how some second-rate musicians were being lionized by the press. A few days later Rose joined Morton for a trip to a Salvation Army store, where he wanted to buy a cheap piano. When he found what he was looking for, Jelly paid a man in the store to pry all of the ivories off the keys for him. "That's public relations," Jelly said. "I take these up to the club, and I sign these for people. I give them to them for souvenirs." Alas, Rose said that the ink soon faded from the ivory.

As Lomax saw it, the changes that occurred in jazz were not just a matter of commerce: "America was in love with jazz," he said, but loved it as Europeans — as a people raised within a different aesthetic. The consequence was that they attempted to make changes in the music, beginning with tempos and organizational detail, and wound up with whites replacing blacks in the musicians' chairs. . . . It began as a bit of conflict and irritation and moved on to corruption." It was not so much the corruption of entertainment as a commercial enterprise, for New Orleans had been

commercial as all hell; but it was rather “a forced change in Afro-Creole Southern context when the music reached Chicago and New York and lost its regional quality to become a nationalized music, much as had country music when it was popularized.”

New Orleans provided all the evidence Lomax needed to see what had happened. Jazz music had a pronounced vocal quality to it: “The musicians seemed to be singing through their horns, emoting through them, not merely playing with pure tones as in the European classical tradition,” but using moans, animal noises, calls, and children’s cries. There was bodily response to the music, among the dancers and the seated audience, and also among the musicians. When Jelly Roll stomped on the floor during the recordings at the Library of Congress, it was his attempt to keep the body within the music, to mark off the differences between European and African-derived traditions of music performance. The recording process had not only denied the listener a means of observing the age, race, and gender of the performers, it also standardized musical procedures and removed the body in ways that buried style and aesthetic. New Orleans drummer Baby Dodds said that when he recorded with Morton’s trio, Jelly Roll sometimes stomped so loud that it sounded as if they had two bass drums. And when he heard Morton’s orchestrally oriented piano playing, with the various horns assigned to his left and right hands, Lomax saw Morton as hewing to an ancient African form of musical organization — with multiple leads spread among instrumental voices, with overlapping parts, all of it undergirded by a strong polyrhythmic sense.

But Morton, according to Lomax, was not only looking backward: he was also challenging the assumptions of Western music theory:

Jelly Roll was a great program music composer. Half his things were dramatizations. . . . ‘The Animule Ball’ and so on. We’ve been told that music is some sort of abstraction, but the people that I know out of my folk experience who make music don’t feel that music is an abstraction. I don’t think that Jelly did, either. I think he was thinking of sounds he had heard. He was able to recall all those sounds at the Library of Congress. I wanted to ask him, I’d say, ‘What were they singing then?’ and he would remember, and play it, and sing it. He wasn’t afraid of the whole idea of being natural about what music is, that it really comes from life. I think being afraid of the programmatic approach is a mistake with people like Jelly Roll Morton, who was a people’s composer, using the stuff of his environment. He took the marching band and orchestral styles of New Orleans and put them into his compositions for the piano. Almost the first thing he told me about was second lining, singing at wakes, and his involvement with that tradition. That’s what made him sound different.

Lomax was also fascinated by the role of the Creoles in the making of jazz. He saw Morton as practicing the Creole tradition of using cultural elements from any tradition that was handy and appealing. The jazz band as Morton understood it was constructed from European and African elements, and Jelly Roll had underlined this multicultural nature of New Orleans. It was French, Spanish, and English, but also African and American Indian. It was in that sense that New Orleans was a Caribbean city.

New Orleans was the only place in America, socially speaking, where you had many, many independent black musical organizations that played for funerals and for the benefit of the community, marching in the streets from 1860 forward. I think that is the

most important thing about New Orleans. The fact that this was a town where the blacks were sticking up for themselves in the street with uniforms and parades, and able to make a statement.

As I listened to Morton's story, I realized that I had never heard any American Negro speak of 'music lessons.' This was a privilege of the Creoles. They kept all they could after the defeat of the Reconstruction period. If they didn't have the vote, they were, as Jelly Roll said, "very organization-minded."

Some have accused Alan Lomax of being a "moldy fig," one of those fans who in the late '30's and early '40's saw swing (and later bebop) as weakening the African American contributions to jazz. Like many of the jazz revivalists at the time, Lomax saw a parallel between folk music and early jazz, both being indigenous, emergent musics of the working classes, and both in danger of becoming corrupted by values imposed from the pop and high arts. But he had witnessed both sides of the social and economic equation and had seen people with few resources having their own creations appropriated, reshaped, and turned into American popular culture by powerful forces with different cultural assumptions and predispositions. More than a matter of personal taste, Lomax was making a judgment about inequality and the forces at work on the aesthetics of American peoples.

In just a few years you get the amazing kind of swing from Kansas City with bigger orchestras. But those people were all playing basically unison. The unison principle had taken over from the polyvoiced principle. And it's been that way ever since to the great detriment, I think, of the development of music. ... I mean, New Orleans gave an incredible vision of new possibilities. And unfortunately the white world couldn't handle them, and so the music went white in various ways until the blacks were then taking off from the whites based on the whites' interpretation of the jazz, rather than from their own. And they thought that these old handkerchief heads down there in New Orleans were nothing, but they couldn't hack that [music]. Nobody has hacked it since. Nobody. There's nothing like it still. Nothing, nothing.

### **Mister Jelly Roll: The Book**

After the Morton recordings, Alan Lomax began to produce a series of successful radio shows for CBS, entered graduate school, and continued his field recordings for the archive. He left the Library of Congress at the start of World War II to join the Army Signal Corps as a radio producer. As the war wound down in 1945 he was still thinking about Morton and was considering publishing the interview. Like most of the interviews he had done, it was intended for archival use, not for publication or commercially issued recordings.

The chief of the Music Division of the Library of Congress, Harold Spivacke, told Alan that he hoped he would think about doing something with the recordings. Spivacke had to write at least two letters a day explaining that the recordings were not available to the public because of the cost of copying the discs and of having to deal with copyright and other legal obstacles. He also feared that the Library would be entering into competition with RCA Victor, for whom Morton had so often recorded. Either the Library of Congress would have to issue a "scholarly" edition of the recordings (which they were loathe to do because they wanted nothing to do with problems of copyrights and

royalties — though they had already been in touch with Morton's estate about the matter), or someone else could make commercial recordings of them.

But at that point Lomax was only interested in writing about Morton: "I later spent five years trying to make my audience and my readers hear him as he talked. It took about five years to polish Mr. Jelly Roll from the records into book form." This meant finding Morton's relatives, who were spread across the country, and going to New Orleans in 1949 to interview whatever key figures were left who could fill in the details of the picture that Morton had given him.

Lomax talked with such musicians as Johnny St. Cyr, Omer Simeon, Alphonse Picou, Leonard Bechet, Albert Glenny, Paul Dominguez, and Big Eye Nelson, and he went back to previous interviews he had done with Bunk Johnson, Pops Foster, and Sidney Bechet — the latter two having been guests on his radio shows in the early 1940's. His interviews show that he had a good working knowledge of the musical scene in New Orleans over the previous three decades and had gathered a stock of stories about the principal figures. They also indicate that his interests extended way beyond Jelly Roll as he sought out details about living conditions, racism, local history, and folklore in general; he was especially interested in knowing all he could about the reality of such characters memorialized in song as Robert Charles and the sexual dynamo Stavin' Chain (alluded to in Jelly Roll's song "Winding Boy").

Lomax said that he first began writing the Jelly Roll book in his own words and then realized that the story as Morton and his contemporaries told it would be the only way he could do it convincingly. He was not worried that readers might see Morton merely as a braggart and self-promoter, because behind the "boasting and clichés," he told Time magazine in 1950, "he was the most original figure in the golden decade of hot records. His records (beginning with his piano rolls of 1920 on to his Victor orchestra sessions in 1929) are always ahead of the best records of other musicians of the same years."

The tone of the book was defined in part by the illustrations by David Stone Martin, the former art director of the Tennessee Valley Authority and assistant to Ben Shahn in the Works Progress Administration, whose spidery calligraphic lines initiated the stark, noirish look of jazz iconography in the 1940's and 1950's. When the book was published there were over a hundred reviews, all but one of them laudatory, if not glowing. The exception appeared in Britain's Melody Maker by Leonard Feather, who implied that Lomax had been duped and wrote that instead of Cellini, Morton was more a mixture of Ananias and Baron Munchausen, two legendary liars with very different motivations.

Louis Armstrong, on the other hand, praised the book as well as Morton's music in the New York Times, promising to go right out and buy yet another copy and Carl Sandburg promoted it sensationally in the Chicago Sun Times as "the life story of a wicked and powerful man who was mad about music, a tale interwoven of wild melody and riotous sex." The book's sales were strong, and it almost reached the best seller list. Alan's friend, leftist British playwright and folk singer Ewan McColl, wrote him that Mister Jelly Roll was a revelation, a "collaboration with life, and the two of you together have produced a work of art. In short — you have . . . produced the first great work of Socialist Realism."

The title of the book is worth looking at again: Mister Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and "Inventor" of Jazz. To call him "Mister" was Lomax's insistence on

respect for Morton, contrary to the demeaning manner then mandatory in the South. “Fortunes” calls up the role of chance in Morton’s life, the circumstances and adventures that characterize his life, and the tradition of the picaresque novel. “New Orleans Creole” is a racial identifier, of course, but one that in this case is used with a different purpose, as it calls attention to a community of artists. “Inventor,” coming as it does after “Creole” in the title, may signal that jazz came into being through creolization, the unique process through which historically unrelated cultures come into contact and form a new, emergent culture. By putting “Inventor” in quotes, Lomax is not so much slighting Jelly Roll’s claim as he is quoting Morton’s business cards and posters, and offering a nod to his skill at public relations.

It is also part of Lomax’s effort to present Morton’s boasting and self-aggrandizement in a sympathetic light. Like a novelist, Lomax attempts to lead the reader toward understanding a situation in which Morton’s claims could be believable. Even if “inventor” might still be a way of raising doubts, the book as a whole suggests that he believes Morton, that he is the inventor. And if jazz is not a thing, but a method — a way of styling music, as Morton argues — then his claim to be the inventor seems to have greater merit, since he was the first to theorize the music, formalize it, play it, and write it.

In a remarkable passage on pp. 99–100 of *Mister Jelly Roll*, Lomax attempted to sum up the meaning of jazz in America and its relation to New Orleans and the Creole community:

Jazz became many things — frenetic, destructive, hysterical, decadent, venal, alcoholic, saccharine, Lombardish, vapid — it has enriched stuffed bellies; it has corrupted the innocent; it has betrayed and it has traduced; but everywhere and in all its forms, something jazz acquired at the moment of its origin has profoundly touched all its hearers. What was this thing that set folks dancing and smiling from the slums of New Orleans to all the capitals of the earth?

“We had all nations in New Orleans,” said Jelly Roll; “But with the music we could creep in close to other people,” adds Dr. Bechet. . . . Jazz was the hybrid of hybrids and so it appealed to a nation of lonely immigrants. In a divided world struggling blindly toward unity, it became a cosmopolitan musical argot. This new musical language owes its emotional power to the human triumph accomplished at the moment of its origin in New Orleans — a moment of cultural ecstasy.

Two neighborhoods, disjoined by all the sordid fears of our time, were forced to make a common cause. This musical union demanded that there be not merely acceptance and understanding, but respect and love on both sides. In this moment of ecstasy an interracial marriage was consummated, and the child of this union still jumps for joy wherever jazz is hot. Perhaps it is so wherever people share their treasures and a truly fresh stream of culture begins to flow. Such moments of cultural ecstasy may occur prior to all great cultural movements just as seeding precedes birth.

These lines tell us more about Lomax than they do about Morton, as they focus on his desire to put art into the center of humanity and return us to the magic of creation. But in doing this, he also joins Morton in making New Orleans a magical city, and a prime metaphor for what America might yet become.

## **A Brief Discographical History of the Library of Congress Recordings**

Once the recording of the Morton-Lomax interviews was completed, a few copies of the 54 twelve-inch master discs were requested, and sets were dubbed for William Russell and a couple of other collectors. Later, two other sets were made from those copies. But after 1939 the masters remained in storage at the Library of Congress. After Morton's death in 1941, art historian and jazz writer Rudi Blesh's boutique record company Circle began negotiating with the Morton estate to bring out a limited number of sets of the recordings (according to Blesh, Morton had left instructions that certain of the big recording companies were not to have access to his interview). An agreement was reached for Circle to issue a "dignified set of all useable sides": "dignified" because some of the recordings were said to be pornographic and some of the others, repetitious. Lomax was not in favor of issuing the rougher songs from the session, not so much because of their obscene content but because of their violence.

Finally, in 1947, Circle began pressing some 200 sets of 45 twelve-inch 78 rpm recordings culled from the May and June Lomax-Morton sessions. These were placed in twelve albums (or chapters, "like a book," Blesh explained, and sold by Circle — mostly by subscription — under the title of *The Saga of Mr. Jelly Lord*. There was no noise reduction or speed correction, and, in fact, each of the discs seemed to have been copied at too slow a speed.

The interview was edited into album form by the famed art collector and historian Harriet Janis, who changed some of the records' titles and rearranged the order of the interviews to produce a new narrative. The edited version began, for example, with Morton proclaiming that jazz began in New Orleans and it continued with the story of "Tiger Rag."

Then, in the early 1950's Blesh had the original 78 rpm recordings transferred to the newly developed long playing format and issued them commercially with his own notes — but still in the same format and with no speed correction. In 1959 Riverside Records attempted to clean up some of the recordings while retaining the previously edited sequence and released them in twelve long playing albums with notes by Martin Williams.

Some years later, Philips Records asked British engineer John R. T. Davies to produce the interviews, for which he prepared a demonstration master, but the project was never completed. In the early 1970's, however, Classic Jazz Masters Records of Sweden and Swaggie Records of Australia had Davies reduce some of the noise on the Circle recordings and reedit them to restore them to their original recording order, and both companies produced a set of twelve LPs for sale. "Highlights" of these releases were later issued by Affinity Records in the UK.

Throughout all of these reissues, various errors surfaced, including repeated passages, missing lines, omissions of whole songs, and jarring and erroneous splices. Three of the original Library of Congress 78 rpm records were never issued. Labeled "New Orleans Street Bands," they also contained commentary on Morton's days in Los Angeles around 1917 and were accompanied by Morton on guitar instead of piano. Nor was the material that was felt to be obscene ever issued.

After compact discs became available as a recording format, Solo Art Records began a CD reissue of the interviews to be released in 1990 in a yet again reedited order, but never went beyond the first volume. Finally, in 1993, Rounder issued four speed-corrected CDs that included



only the songs and piano pieces, some of the talk that related to them, and the songs that previously had been censored.

### **Acknowledgements**

These notes draw on the books and articles listed in the Select Bibliography, letters, notes, and interviews in the Alan Lomax Archive, and on the transcript of the Jelly Roll Morton Symposium (Tulane University, May 7, 1982) housed in the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University. Special thanks are due to Bruce Boyd Raeburn, Bess Lomax Hawes, Nick Spitzer, Matthew Sakaheeny, Morton Marks, Jack Stewart, Jr., James Dapogny, Lawrence Gushee, Danny Barker, Bill Nowlin at Rounder Records; Dan Morgenstern and the staff at the Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University at Newark; Anna Lomax Wood, Ellen Harold, Don Fleming, Nathan Salsburg, John Tam, and Bertram Lyons at the Alan Lomax Archive; and Peggy Bulger, Michael Taft, Matthew Barton, Jennifer Cutting, Judith Gray, and Todd Harvey of the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress.

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