

Whorehouse Piano Players of the Mississippi Valley

by Con Chapman

Imagine, if you will, the heartland of America—the Mississippi River Valley—as a woman sprawled out on a bed. Her brain is in Chicago—hold the Mayor Daley jokes—and looks eastward to New York. Her arms are flung out as if she is sated, to the Northwest on the left and to the right, towards New England. The fingers in Boston are numb from the cold, but never mind.



Throbbing-hot Mississippi River delta in New Orleans

Flow down her Rubenesque *decolletage* and you encounter burgeoning breasts in Kansas City and St. Louis, then lower—hips in Oklahoma and Arkansas. By now, you know without my telling you what you'll find in New Orleans.

The conceit is extended and a bit crude, but nonetheless accurate if you figure that jazz, America's classical music, was born in disreputable circumstances in this watershed, in whorehouses running the length and breadth of the region.



Jelly Roll Morton

Going backwards against the flow, but starting from the beginning, there is Jelly Roll Morton in New Orleans. In spoken word accompaniment to *Mamie's Blues*, he reveals that he started out as a “can rusher” in Mamie Desdune's house of ill repute so he could learn how to play songs like “219 Blues.” A can rusher was a kid who took a bucket to the nearest saloon for beer—there being no such thing as canned or bottled beer at the time. (Hence the blues song, “The bucket's got a whole in it, and we can't buy no beer.”)

The can rusher had another responsibility in his job description, however. As noted in “Why We Do It: Rethinking Sex and the Selfish Gene” by Niles Eldridge, birth control wasn't merely a matter of family planning for prostitutes, it was a condition of employment. The prevailing form of contraception was douching, which flushed out (the women hoped) sperm and cleaned up the . . . uh . . . facilities for the next customer. One assumes that the higher class of whorehouse purchased at least two buckets for these very different purposes.



New Orleans prostitute, 1898

Morton claimed to be the father of jazz—a subject on which reasonable people can differ—but the provenance of the music is nonetheless established on its birth certificate. It was born in the whorehouses of New Orleans, precisely because European music held sway among respectable people and in respectable venues, and jazz was made by and for disreputable people.

The bordello origins of jazz have historically impeded its acceptance among educators and acolytes of the genteel tradition. It is possible to sit through a jazz band concert at a suburban high school (I know from painful experience) listening to music by white non-entities for hours on end, wondering when they're going to play some Duke Ellington.



Duke Ellington

As one might expect, this condescension is absent among real musicians, as opposed to untalented educational hacks of the sort played by Richard Dreyfuss in "Mr. Holland's Opus." Paderewski revered Art Tatum, and (as Joseph Epstein so accurately points out) the piano player in a whorehouse was almost always referred to as "The Professor."



Richard Dreyfuss in Mr. Holland's Opus: I'm going to fwow up.

One can move up the length of the Mississippi and find Morton's progeny at various points along the torso I've described. In Oklahoma, there was Jay McShann who came to Kansas City and formed the first band that a young Charlie Parker played in. You can hear him soaring above the ensemble lines, already beginning to sketch out the new harmonies he would forge into bebop.



Jay McShann

Over in Arkansas, there is Roosevelt Sykes, a barrelhouse player who was a prodigious composer of songs that made up in energy

what they sometimes lacked in variety. I have a tangential connection to Sykes; he stayed at my girlfriend's apartment when he came to Chicago in the early 70's to play at a folk and blues festival. I can assure you that none of his piano-playing talent rubbed off on me.



Roosevelt Sykes

Over in Kansas City there is Bennie Moten, he of "Moten Swing," who led the band that would be taken over by William "Count" Basie when Moten died. The style of music that Moten and Basie and their musicians played was a propulsive, riff-based jazz that has been all but forgotten today, but it was the black cake on which the white icing of the Swing Era—Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Woody Herman—was spread.



Basie on piano left, Bennie Moten at right.

One hundred miles away in Sedalia, Missouri, where I grew up, you had Scott Joplin, entertaining cowboys with ragtime music at the end of the cattle drive up the Chisholm Trail in whorehouses that lined Main Street, which divided the black and white sections of town. Joplin had dreams of classical grandeur; he composed at least two operas, *Treemonisha* which was revived during the ragtime craze spawned by Marvin Hamlisch's sound track to *The Sting*, and another which was lost.



Scott Joplin

Over to Memphis, where W.C. Handy, born and trained in Alabama, played (in several senses) in cathouses; reading *Father of the Blues*, his autobiography, one is struck by the fact that he always seems to arrive home at dawn, to his wife's dismay. Handy like Joplin had higher aspirations for his music. He moved his band to Chicago to play in the World's Fair only to learn that it had been postponed for a year (news traveled more slowly in those days). Then on to St. Louis where during one down-and-out period on the banks of the Mississippi he heard the three-line verse that he would fashion into "St. Louis Blues." (He added the striking bridge that made the song so distinctive in a nod to the popularity of the tango.)



W.C. Handy

The trip up the river ends with Earl Hines, like Basie a transplant from the east, who came to Chicago because it was then the capital of jazz in America.



Louis Armstrong, Earl Hines, Duke Ellington

Hines would collaborate there with Louis Armstrong, an exotic import from New Orleans, on a number of enduring pieces,

including their 1928 classic *Weatherbird*. Jazz—the term itself is derived from a slang word that means “to copulate”—had finally emerged into the sunlight of near respectability, and began to be played in refined venues where the beer didn't arrive in a funky-smelling bucket.

