

Plotting His Way Into Jazz History

BY JOHN EDWARD HASSE

IN AN ERA of outsize personalities with colorful nicknames, the Creole musician Ferdinand "Jelly Roll" Morton was a singular artist. Early on, Morton (c. 1885-1941) worked as a roving snake-oil salesman, card shark, vaudevillian, poolroom hustler, gambler and pimp. He chose a sexual nickname—"Jelly Roll"—and wore a diamond in his gold tooth. Late in life he fought fiercely and publicly to cement his place in music. His ebullient "Black Bottom Stomp" makes his case beautifully. It's well worth a listen today—or any day.

What makes Morton an enduring historical figure is not the sensational aspects of his story, but his music. He was the first great ensemble leader, arranger and composer in jazz, his works synthesizing diverse elements of African-American music, and his recordings such as "The Pearls," "Wolverine Blues" and "King Porter Stomp" became a cornerstone of the jazz tradition. His piano style ingeniously transferred early jazz band textures to the keyboard.

In his native New Orleans, Morton got his musical start playing piano in the city's storied brothels. He later bragged that he "invented" jazz—an assertion that was met with derision by many. Yet by the 1910s he was already helping lead the transition from ragtime to jazz as a piano wizard of the first rank who could transform all sorts of music into jazz—embellishing, paraphrasing and im-

provising; smoothing out the rhythms of ragtime; and making everything flow and swing. Despite the odds against him—a black man in a white world, making a peripatetic living as he could, often in the nexus between the underworld and show business—he became one of the music's most important pioneers.

When Morton walked into the Chicago studios of the Victor Talking Machine Co. on Sept. 15, 1926, he had high ambitions. Assembling a crack band of players, mostly from New Orleans, this was Morton's big chance to prove himself and make his enduring mark through records. His ambition was aided by Victor's state-of-the-art technology and masterly recording engineers. With his newly named septet, "The Red Hot Peppers," Morton waxed three pieces, including "Black Bottom Stomp," named for an African-American dance step from the deep South.

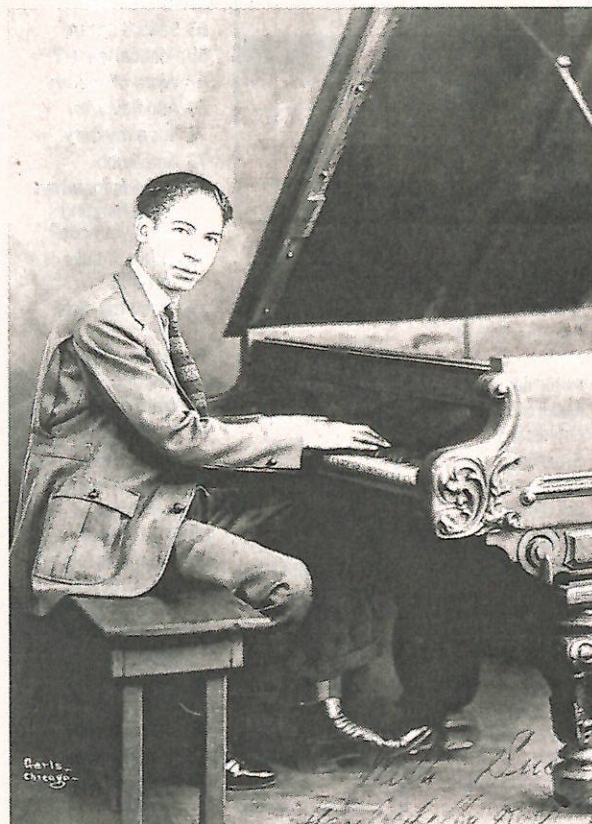
Jazz music's first theorist, Morton took on several problems. In just over three minutes, how do you create interest and drama? In a musical style taking shape, how do you prove the full potential of jazz to integrate the planned with the spontaneous, the notated with the improvised?

His visionary solutions in "Black Bottom Stomp": think architecturally; carefully plot themes and sections, their lengths and sonorities; differentiate an introduction, 10 choruses, a transition to another key, and a coda.

Vary the rhythms to incorporate two-beat, four-beat, a backbeat, and a five-note Black Bottom dance rhythm.

Juxtapose 11 different textural combinations and vary the volume of each: full ensemble, cornet and rhythm section, cornet and trombone, clarinet and cornet, clarinet and banjo, clarinet alone, piano alone, cornet alone, banjo and bass, percussion alone, and trombone alone.

Hire the best musicians; rehearse them methodically; give each certain space to improvise; punctuate the flow with moments of



The visionary problem solving by Morton, jazz's first theorist, led to a bravura recording.

The result? A bravura recording that still packs an emotional punch. The mood is upbeat, optimistic, bursting with energy and exuberance. This is music that makes you want to get up and dance. It rewards close, repeated listening. Whether appreciated architecturally or dramatically, Morton's accom-

plishment is remarkable. surprise, such as the cymbal break in the penultimate chorus; direct their recording session effectively; balance the front-line instruments with the rhythm section. Build drama to an inexorable climax.

plishment is remarkable.

"Black Bottom Stomp" reveals a real composer at work. In this and other pieces, Morton achieved a remarkable integration of improvisation, spontaneity and variety. His 1920s recordings with the Red Hot Peppers reached the peak of the New Orleans style of group embellishment and collective improvisation, with its trademark heterophony and polyphony. Morton's superior musicianship, painstaking preparation, and sense of form and drama set a high standard for all subsequent jazz composers, including Duke Ellington.

"Black Bottom Stomp" is Morton's masterpiece, above all because he brilliantly creates a study in formal, textural and rhythmic variety. The piece is covered in many music textbooks. In 1999, a transcription of his recording—for performance and study—was published in the series Essential Jazz Editions. In 2006, "Black Bottom Stomp" was added to the Library of Congress's prestigious National

Recording Registry. In 2010, the Smithsonian chose to include it in the authoritative "Jazz: The Smithsonian Anthology." The song has been recorded more than 190 times, by musicians around the globe, but my personal favorite is Wynton Marsalis's 1999 interpretation that fills out the sound with a larger ensemble, adds more time for solos, and offers a modern take on musical revivalism. "Black Bottom Stomp" is an American classic.

Mr. Hasse is curator emeritus of American music at the Smithsonian. His books include "Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington" (Da Capo) and "Discover Jazz" (Pearson).