Jazz: America’s Musical Gift to the World

The music of many different cultures of the American South came together in New Orleans after the Civil War. There were work songs and gospel songs with African roots. There were jaunty marching tunes played by brass bands. There was the sad sound of blues music and the joyful bounce of ragtime.

By the 1880s and 1890s, these threads began to weave themselves into a new kind of music. This new music came to be called jazz. It had strong rhythms that often changed in the middle of a song. Jazz allowed the musicians to improvise instead of playing the same song the same way every time. No one had ever heard anything quite like it.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, jazz grew more popular. Great players like Jelly Roll Morton on piano and King Oliver on trumpet formed popular bands. A young jazz genius from New Orleans named Louis Armstrong came off the Mississippi riverboats to play in Kansas City, Chicago, and then New York. The Original Dixieland Jazz Band made the first jazz record. It became a huge success. The band played in Los Angeles, New York, and even London.

In New York City, Duke Ellington and his jazz band played to sell-out crowds at a famous venue called the Cotton Club. By the 1920s, jazz had become popular across the entire country. F. Scott Fitzgerald, a famous writer, would later look back at this period and call it the “Jazz Age.”

By the early 1930s, Armstrong was one of America’s best-known jazz musicians. He was also a fine singer who helped to popularize a style of jazz singing known as scat. A scat singer sings the tune but uses sounds instead of words. Ella Fitzgerald, who worked with Armstrong, is considered one of the best scat singers in the history of jazz.