

# “Black Bottom Stomp”--Jelly Roll Morton’s Red Hot Peppers (1926)

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*Jelly Roll Morton*

Few recording projects have had as great an impact on the evolution of jazz as this set committed to disk in 1926-1927 by Jelly Roll Morton’s Red Hot Peppers for Victor Records. “Black Bottom Stomp,” especially, emerged from these sessions to define “hot jazz” for younger musicians, such as Louis Armstrong and Bix Beiderbecke, and inspired critics and fans alike in future decades to designate Morton’s music as a wellspring of “mainstream” jazz.

Almost a century after the recording was made, listeners are still amazed at how much artistry Morton, the composer and bandleader, was able to pack into three minutes of playing. The first eight bars are a vibrant introduction. Kid Ory’s slide trombone gives us an initial taste of the Delta blues that gave New Orleans jazz its sensuous flavor. (Ory, like Morton and the rest of the band, hailed from the Louisiana city.) A busy syncopated figure from clarinetist Omer Simeon and trumpeter George Mitchell evokes ragtime, the show music that reigned for a quarter century before jazz’s emergence. Then we hear the theme, built over three simple chords: four blues flourishes, nearly identical to Ory’s lick but broader and melodic, followed by an emphatic ragtime syncopation from the entire band. These eight bars are repeated.

Almost the entire remainder of the number is made up of variations of the theme, built on the same chords. It’s tempting to call them “improvisations,” as jazz choruses and solos are labelled, and what we hear might have originated as ideas improvised by the musicians. But Morton was a composer; like Duke Ellington after him, he carefully molded each section of each number to form a coherent whole. We first hear Mitchell dominating the group with a syncopated horn call, of the type that had defined jazz since Buddy Bolden’s pioneering blasts at the turn of the century. The other players recede into the background, with the exception of banjo player Johnny St. Cyr. The trumpet calls and jabbing banjo chords introduce a new texture to the work, in a prime example of Morton’s ability to create contrast. Simeon’s solo work in the next chorus creates another texture, converting the blues slides into an especially jagged new ragtime rhythm, with banjo still prominent. We are reminded here, too, that this is dance music. Experience in

the dance halls taught these players to ramp up the syncopation and excitement with each early chorus!

Morton's variations, though, are only beginning. At the tail end of Simeon's solo, the rest of the band tapers off into a deceptively quiet new texture. Four connecting bars create a sense of "stop time," which punctuates the music with rests. The next chorus is the most extroverted of them all, as trumpet and clarinet strut in full "Dixieland" mode. This finds the trumpet drifting briefly into the relative minor key (a typical blues effect in New Orleans jazz). Simeon's solo in the next chorus is notable for dropping into the clarinet's lower register, creating another new texture. Even more jagged than his previous solo, this improvisation emulates Mitchell's drift into the minor and once again highlights St. Cyr's relentless banjo chords.

A few blasted syncopated chords, and Morton's piano then takes over. The leader displays ragtime piano mastery, adding new harmonic and expressive elements in the upper register towards the end. Throughout the next chorus, Simeon pipes the syncopated calls that preceded Morton's solo—a splendid example of how the composer introduces and develops new ideas—while Mitchell incorporates stop time into a more melodic trumpet solo. This is followed by a banjo solo from St. Cyr, highlighting both his ability to strum melodically and the instrument's expressive limitations (which would lead banjos to be dropped from swing jazz bands). Notable here also is the emergence of double bassist John Lindsay and drummer Andrew Hilaire, whose "slap" rhythms were vital elements of Morton's sound picture but were obscured by the limitations of acoustic recording in the mid-1920s. (Hilaire, like all jazz drummers, played on a suitcase, since actual drumbeats might cause recording needles to jump off of acetate masters.). Incidentally, the quarter-note rhythm heard throughout might have led to this number being called a "stomp," although titles usually were chosen arbitrarily. (Morton originally called the work "Queen of Spades.")

In the next chorus, Morton finds a fresh way to recombine trumpet and clarinet, with Mitchell proclaiming the syncopated idea in a tight range while Simeon leaps and trills around him. A stop time moment allows us to hear Hilaire's drumming clearly for once. The final chorus fills out the trumpet and clarinet parts, as well the supporting rhythm, providing a somewhat grand conclusion. Kid Ory interpolates a flamboyant trombone break in one measure, reminding us belatedly of his presence. Like most recordings of the era, "Black Bottom Stomp" ends perfunctorily, with a modest four-bar coda, underlining the artificiality imposed by the three-minute time limit of acoustic recordings.

It is also worth noting the slightly sensuous little "tails" added to various phrases, one of many Hispanic-Caribbean musical touches that influenced New Orleans music and were especially championed by Morton. Born Ferdinand LaMothe in 1890, the pianist and composer had toured with vaudeville bands, reaching Chicago, New York City, and Los Angeles. A member of New Orleans's "colored" Creole community, Morton suffered from a reputation as a braggart, pimp, and a man who denied his African American ancestry. The Red Hot Peppers were assembled in Chicago from the large number of musicians who had arrived from New Orleans as part of the Great Northern Migration of African Americans. "Black Bottom Stomp" was among the dozen classic recordings made by the Red Hot Peppers in 1926 and 1927; other numbers featured

alternate soloists, including such notable figures as the clarinetists Barney Bigard and Darnell Howard and the brothers Johnny and Baby Dodds (clarinet and drums, respectively).

Morton moved his band to New York in 1928, but the rising popularity of East Coast jazz styles—leading to the Big Band and Swing eras—along with the Great Depression, forced the composer and his band members into obscurity and poverty. A committed group of admirers, including swing musicians, record collectors, “hot jazz” club members, and influential international critics revived interest in Morton before his death in 1941. His extensive oral history, recorded for the Library of Congress by Alan Lomax, remains a unique portrait of a major musician and the New Orleans musical scene, and the artistry of the Red Hot Peppers recordings continues to inspire musicians today.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.