

# “Canal Street Blues”—King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band (1923)

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Essay by David Sager



*King Oliver*



*Early label*

Celebrating New Orleans’ grandest avenue, “Canal Street Blues” remains one of the most popular jazz recordings of all time and one of the most oft-quoted performances of classic jazz repertory. The recordings of the Oliver band have spoken to generations of musicians as a kind of text on how New Orleans jazz ought to be played. New Orleans-style jazz bands old and new often model their performance style after the Oliver band. As one of the 37 universally revered recordings by King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band, “Canal Street Blues” may be the most sublime.

During their two-year reign at Chicago’s Lincoln Gardens, the band consistently drew enormous crowds that made the cavern-like proportions of the hall seem small. Though customers were largely African American, white patrons flocked to the Lincoln Gardens, crowding the upstairs balcony. Young musicians—both black and white—also made a regular pilgrimage to hear the Oliver band to “get their music lessons,” as the Lincoln Gardens bouncer “King” Jones would tease, as he admitted under-age fellows such as Bud Freeman, Bix Beiderbecke, Preston Jackson, Doc Cheatham and others.

In retrospect, the Oliver recordings are considered great documents of authentic New Orleans jazz. But to the members of Oliver’s band, it was all in a day’s work; they were first and foremost a dance orchestra. The music was especially compelling for dancing; the tempos were set carefully and the music pressed forward with the kind of rolling conviction that New Orleans musicians seemed to have invented. Keeping the dancers happy was Joe Oliver’s main concern, not playing hot jazz, or self-consciously trying to create immortal improvised solos.

There was also polyphony—layers of independent, but related, voices—that never seemed to destroy the rhythmic effect, but rather, enhance it. Much of this was due to the inventive lines played by Oliver’s second cornetist, a young man named Louis Armstrong, whom Oliver imported especially from New Orleans for this job. Polyphony of an improvised nature can often result in musical chaos; however, the Oliver band entwined its individual voices expertly. And, they played with the propelling rhythm and sense of abandon for which New Orleans is known.

Oliver had a large library of several hundred so-called stock arrangements—publishers' standard arrangements of the latest tunes that were sent free to working orchestra leaders—and from this repertoire Oliver chose his early-evening sets. After midnight, the band would begin to play its hot repertoire, which included many originals by Oliver. One of these was “Canal Street Blues.”

“Canal Street Blues” is the second title from the band's first recording session, held on April 5, 1923 in the Gennett Recordings recording shed in Richmond, Indiana. “Shed” is an apt description for the stuffy recording quarters on the enormous lot that was home to the Starr Piano Company. Hot and cramped, the frame structure also served as a storage space for the varnish used for piano cabinets. One can imagine the toxicity of the fumes.

The extremely uncomfortable surroundings are a real testament to the Oliver band's musicianship and fortitude. They were used to playing in the cavernous Lincoln Gardens, with hundreds of dancers. At Gennett, they stood in an awkward setup in front of menacing-looking recording horns and a curtain, behind which, recordist Ezra Wickemayer served as their invisible audience. The resulting records are considered masterpieces of New Orleans Jazz and “Canal Street Blues” was the jewel of the bunch.

“Canal Street Blues” consists of two sections or *strains*, of which, the melody of the first has often been misinterpreted due to poor reissues of the original recording. Beginning at :06 seconds in, what sounds like one cornet playing fully throughout each measure is actually a call and response by two cornets; Oliver states the opening motif and Armstrong responds. This is verified in the original copyright deposit manuscript, except that Armstrong's responses are represented by an empty space!

The second strain (37 seconds in) is based on the famous 19th-century sacred song “The Holy City.” But what is really important here is the unity with which this ensemble performs and their collective lilt, swing and conviction. Especially noteworthy is the insouciant and flowing counter melody played on the clarinet by Johnny Dodds.

Nowhere is this conviction more evident than in the fifth chorus, at 1:08, where the ensemble sails into a most deliberate and compelling “riff,” or repeated motif, one that presages the swing bands of the 1930s. The ensemble's gracefulness is further defined by the steady and explicit four-four rhythm from pianist Lil Hardin, the banjo of Bill Johnson and drummer Baby Dodds' woodblocks. Also, at 1:23, Johnson's banjo accompanies clarinetist Johnny Dodds' solo with single-string bass-like figures that would not have been out of place in an old-time country setting; here they also work beautifully.

In addition to the tremendous swing and musical empathy between the players, an ethereal timbre pervades. Throughout the performance there is a harmonious “ring” to the ensemble sound; the band is very well in tune (Oliver usually played on the underside of the pitch) and this contributes to the floating, uplifting feel throughout. The anachronistic two-bar coda (built on the augmented 5th of the key) is perhaps the only reminder that this was recorded in 1923, but it does efficiently, if somewhat suddenly, bring to a close one of the great recorded performances of all time.

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