

“Ory's Creole Trombone”-- Kid Ory (June 1922)

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Essay by David Sager



Kid Ory

In mid-summer 1922, and with very little ballyhoo and promotion, a pair of enterprising African-American brothers brought out this pioneering and essential jazz recording, one that would define New Orleans-style jazz and serve as a model for future performers of that genre. John and Benjamin “Reb” Spikes—songwriters, publishers, vaudeville performers, and owners of a music store and a small amusement park in Los Angeles—were well connected in black show business and well aware of the enormous musical contributions being made by folks from New Orleans.

“Ory’s Creole Trombone”—and its reverse side, “Society Blues”—are commonly referred to as the first jazz record by African Americans. Actually, it is not, for that distinction must go to Wilbur Sweatman and his Jass Band for a Pathe recording made in the spring of 1917. The Ory recordings are the first recordings of black/Creole New Orleans jazz, though, due to their loose feel and hot nature, many think of these as the first recognizable jazz performances on record. They are certainly the first jazz recordings made on the west coast.

In 1921, the Spikes brothers composed and published the song “Someday Sweetheart,” which would become a perennial favorite among jazz bands. When singer Alberta Hunter recorded it for the newly-formed black owned-and-operated Black Swan label, the brothers took special notice of its success. With the growing popularity of “race records”—those aimed at the black audience—the enterprising brothers went into the record business. The newly-formed Spikes Bros. Phonograph Corp. would produce records on the Sunshine label, which would be adorned with an eye-catching design rendered by architect Paul Williams. Their choice of talent included local singers Roberta Dudley and Ruth Lee. For their instrumental accompaniment, the brothers imported, all the way from Oakland, trombonist Edward “Kid” Ory and his Original Creole Orchestra, who would also record two instrumental numbers. Ory, a New Orleans native, had come to California in 1919.

For the recording session, the Spikes brothers rented a small studio run by Arne Nordskog, an operatic tenor who had been serving as a concert manager at the newly opened Hollywood Bowl. Nordskog's Santa Monica studio was crude, even by the standards of 1922; Reb Spikes would later recall that the equipment broke down frequently. Also, the finished pressed recordings were muddy-sounding, not at all like the far-superior records on Victor, Columbia and the Okeh label. The Ory band, Roberta Dudley, Ruth Lee, and presumably, at least one of the Spikes brothers, gathered at Nordskog's studio in the late spring of 1922. Six selections survive.

Kid Ory (1886-1973) was around and playing music during the earliest days of what was later known as "jazz." Growing up on a plantation in La Place, Louisiana, about 30 miles upriver from New Orleans, this young Creole of Color built his first instruments—violins, guitars, basses—out of cigar boxes, tin buckets, thread, and fishing cord. Kid and his young friends would prove so successful that they earned enough money to buy real instruments. Ory eventually relocated to New Orleans and led a band that featured music legends Joe "King" Oliver, Johnny Dodds, Johnny St. Cyr, and eventually, Louis Armstrong. In 1919, Ory left New Orleans for Chicago, and by happenstance, eventually wound up in Los Angeles.

The piece "Ory's Creole Trombone" is in the style of the very popular "Trombone Smear" works of Henry Fillmore, comic ragtime pieces that featured the trombone playing broad glissandos. It has often been compared to a 1904 piano rag by Clarence Wiley, titled "Car-Barlick-Acid," due to harmonic structure and some melodic fragments. Whatever resemblance there is, though, it is fleeting at best.

The performance on this recording is surprisingly mature. Oftentimes, we brace ourselves when confronted or presented with an antique "first of its kind," expecting deliverance of an unintentional caricature. However, no such gaffe is to be found. The style on this 1922 performance is so fully-formed, that it compares favorably to Ory's 1945 recording for the Crescent label on which very little was changed (including three members of the band).

We should note the individuals heard on the recording, as their styles are among the closest to the source of the origins of New Orleans jazz. The warm and passionate cornet of Thomas "Papa Mutt" Carey (1891-1948) offers a rare glimpse into the lineage of black cornet jazz styles. He is neither like Joe "King" Oliver (staid but hot) or like Fred Keppard (animated and volatile). Instead, Carey's delivery is voice-like, singing his phrases with a fast vibrato and an ability to bend notes, all of which lends a violin-like quality.

Ory's regular clarinetist, Wade Whaley, was unable to make the trip to record. His substitute was Oliver "Dink" Johnson, a drummer who had recently taken up the clarinet. Johnson was, incidentally, Jelly Roll Morton's brother-in-law. Johnson recalled, "I was actually a drummer you know. I had always wanted to play the clarinet since hearing Larry Shields with The Original Dixieland Jazz Band. So I borrowed a horn from the Spikes Brothers store and practiced every day trying to sound like Shields." Johnson sounds comfortable on clarinet, betraying nothing that would indicate that this is his second instrument.

Pianist Fred Washington was the only non-New Orleanian in the bunch, being from Houston, Texas. On the six extant Sunshine/Nordskog recordings, he provides a strong backbone to the proceedings, fulfilling the pianist's role as chief timekeeper.

Bassist Ed “Montudie” Garland had worked with Kid Ory back in New Orleans, around 1911, and was regularly working with Ory 30 years later. According to conventional wisdom of the day, the string bass could not be satisfactorily recorded and reproduced on recordings; the instrument vibrated well-below the functional dynamic range of the acoustical pickup. Also, string instruments simply could not provide the kind of powerful attack and sustained tone necessary for the recording horn. Ory, Spikes and whomever was running Nordskog’s recording equipment must not have been concerned—they went ahead and recorded the entire Ory band, including Garland. If we listen carefully, Garland can be heard playing both arco and pizzicato.

Finally, there is Ory himself. His swaggering “tailgate” approach to the trombone has become familiar through his many recordings made during his long career. On this 1922 recording, it appears to be already fully developed: his wonderful countermelodies and propensity to highlight a particular chord member by leaping into it a bit early greet us like an old friend.

The tempo here *is* fast; too fast, some may say. But I think this was out of nervousness more than anything else—Kid Ory suffered terribly throughout his career from “microphone fright,” though one would be hard-pressed to identify those moments on record. On later recordings—starting with the 1927 version by Louis Armstrong’s Hot Five—Ory would play his signature piece at a moderate tempo, but here the band charges through at about 224 beats-per-minute.

“Ory’s Creole Trombone” offers a rare glimpse into the origins of New Orleans jazz and a remarkable insight to this music’s durability and universal appeal.

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