

“Tiger Rag”--The Original Dixieland Jazz Band (1918)

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Essay by Tim Gracyk (guest post)*



Original label

Few tunes have been recorded as often as “Tiger Rag.” It is one of the earliest jazz tunes to evolve into a standard.

From 1918 to 1938, countless jazz musicians and entertainers tackled “Tiger Rag,” usually taking it at an astonishing tempo, many using it for a showoff piece. It even evolved into a marching band favorite in schools.

Some of the most interesting and popular interpretations of the song include those by Louis Armstrong (issued as “New Tiger Rag”), the Mills Brothers, Art Tatum, the Benny Goodman Trio, Django Reinhardt et le Quintette du Hot Club de France, Duke Ellington (as Brunswick’s The Jungle Band in 1929), and Chet Atkins.

“Tiger Rag” did not have lyrics originally, but it became so popular that lyrics were written in 1931 by Harry DaCosta. In a Brunswick recording made in that year, the Mills Brothers sing DaCosta’s lines over and over: “*Hold that tiger,*” “*Here’s that tiger,*” and “*Where’s that tiger?*” Few songs have simpler lyrics.

The Mills Brothers had an even bigger success when they recorded “Tiger Rag” for Decca in 1934. They performed it often on radio, and their virtuoso performance of it in the 1932 film “The Big Broadcast” is stunning.

The tune was first recorded by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band (ODJB) on August 17, 1917, but it was the wrong record company at the wrong time. Few copies of “Tiger Rag” on the Aeolian-Vocalion label exist. The Aeolian Piano Company of New York City, new at selling records, lacked the sophisticated distribution networks of the three major companies--Victor, Columbia, and Edison--that dominated America’s disc market at that time. Also, Aeolian-Vocalion discs were struck in a vertical format that could not be played successfully on most phonographs.

ODJB again recorded “Tiger Rag” on March 25, 1918. This version, issued by the Victor Talking Machine Company, sold very well when it was issued in August 1918. It would have

sold even more copies if the nation had not been at war. The Victor company was unable to issue huge quantities of any disc in 1918 since shellac was diverted from the record industry for the making of munitions. In fact, Victor advertisements in early 1919 proclaimed, "Don't blame the dealer for the shortage of Victor products--the Government needed us!"

These New Orleans jazz musicians recorded it again in London in 1919 and in New York City in 1923 for OKeh. The ODJB did not improvise when performing "Tiger Rag." A reunion in an RCA studio on September 2, 1936, led to the release of an "electric" version of their "Tiger Rag"--that is, microphones were used, so the ensemble's sound came across better than what was issued during the earlier "acoustic" recording era.

The tiger in the tune's title refers to the roars and growls produced by that ensemble's trombonist, Eddie Edwards, on recordings and during live performances.

The "rag" in the title gives a nod to the song's upbeat or "peppy" nature associated with ragtime. When the song was first recorded, jazz was often viewed as a music full of "pep and ginger," as one popular song in 1916 puts it. The actual name of "jazz" was changing at this time--it started as "jas" or "jass."

In the sense that "Tiger Rag" was upbeat, fast, and cheerful, it is representative of the earliest era of jazz (or "jass"). Unlike some other numbers popularized by the ODJB, "Tiger Rag" shows no influence of the blues.

Composer credit was originally given on sheet music to D.J. ("Nick") LaRocca, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band's cornet player. Some later editions of the sheet music gave composer credit to the entire ensemble.

Authorship has been in dispute. Jelly Roll Morton claimed that the tune was an adaptation of an old French quadrille that was widely known to New Orleans musicians. In a Library of Congress recording made for Alan Lomax, Morton plays some of that quadrille, and the famous "Hold that tiger" theme emerges. Various New Orleans musicians claimed that the song had been around under different titles before the ODJB recorded it.

The song's popularity increased as time passed. The next notable recording of "Tiger Rag" was made on August 30, 1922, by the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, named "Friars Society Orchestra" on Gennett 4968. It features a remarkable clarinet solo by Leon Roppolo.

The Wolverines with Bix Beiderbecke made a memorable recording of "Tiger Rag" on June 20, 1924, though it was not issued until 1936, five years after Bix's death.

By the end of the 1930s, over 100 recordings had been made of "Tiger Rag." It has gone on to be heard in many films and cartoons when the action required music taken at a very brisk pace.

"Tiger Rag" possibly achieved even greater popularity in England than in its country of origin. When the Original Dixieland Jazz Band recorded it in 1919 during a long stay (over a year) in London, that recording influenced British youngsters hearing jazz for the first time. "Tiger Rag" was widely covered by British musicians, with notable recordings made by Jack Hylton, Lew Stone, Bert Ambrose, Billy Cotton, Jack Payne, and Ray Noble.

"Tiger Rag" was less widely covered by the Swing Era's heyday. It's tempting to say bebop musicians had no interest in it except Dizzy Gillespie led Charlie Parker, Lenny Tristano, Max Roach, and others in a rousing performance of "Tiger Rag" that was broadcast over the MBS Radio Network on September 20, 1947.

Les Paul and Mary Ford enjoyed a hit version in 1952. Dixieland revival ensembles continue to play it.

“Tiger Rag” endured for over a century as a piece for showmanship and virtuosity. Finding interpretations of “Tiger Rag” taken at a slow pace is a futile task. It is not a number that lends itself to soulful interpretations like, say, “Body and Soul.”

The song is always played in an upbeat and playful manner--sometimes frantic! “Tiger Rag” is a jazz standard that emphasizes the “pep” and energy associated with the new music that emerged around 1916 as “jass.”

Tim Gracyk is the author of “Popular American Recording Pioneers: 1895-1925” (Haworth Press, 2000), a book about the early recording industry and about trailblazers whose recordings brought popular music into America's homes. It won an ARSC Award for Excellence in the category of “Best Research in Recorded General Popular Music.”

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