

Listening Based Writing Assignment #1

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Music 105 – Jazz Appreciation

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Jelly Roll Morton composed and arranged music differently than his peers; blurring the line between collective improvisation, individual improvisation and notated passages, Morton's compositions are unique to the New Orleans jazz creations in the 1920's. To show the innovative nature of Morton I will examine "The Chant", a composition from his Red Hot Peppers band recorded in 1926.

"The Chant" starts with a highly syncopated brass statement ("A") that seems to be sufficiently chant-like to be considered the namesake for the composition. After the chant theme is repeated the first contrasting material enters at about the 17-second mark. This theme ("B") is 8-bars in length and is repeated. It utilizes a slide in the clarinet that is reminiscent of the African-American vocal aesthetics we discussed in class. The syncopated chant theme ("A") returns at the 32-second mark followed by a third theme. The third theme ("C") uses stop-time accompaniment in support of the cornet and clarinet melodic statements. These melodic statements are presented in a way that emulates collective improvisation. A fourth theme ("D") is stated in the cornet at the 1:04 mark. This theme is played twice, is 16 bars in length, uses stop-time accompaniment in all voices and is reminiscent of the melodies presented throughout the first portion of the composition. The first statement "D" is in the cornet with the clarinet taking the repeated statement. The clarinet statement seems more improvisatory, covers a larger range on the instrument and does so with great agility. Particularly impressive are the unaccompanied solo-break passages at the 1:27 mark. These gestures cover a large range, are highly syncopated and seem to be performed with extreme rhythmic accuracy.

The solos use a 12-bar blues structure and at the 1:34 mark a collective improvisation chorus introduces that form and signals the beginning of the solo sections. The first individual solo belongs to the banjo, played by Johnny St. Cyr with bass accompaniment. This is a much simpler texture than the rest of the recording; the lack of front-line instruments in the accompaniment of this solo draws the listener into the music a bit more. The quieter dynamic allows for closer looks at the specific

performances of the two instruments. The clarinet – played by Omer Simeon - follows with a simplistic solo chorus followed by a more syncopated and adventurous chorus by the cornet player George Mitchell. Mitchell still does not use the wide range we hear in Louis Armstrong but is rather advanced rhythmically. Kid Ory follows with a powerful, yet melodically narrow trombone solo that is almost exclusively in the low register of the instrument. The final 12-bar solo belongs to Jelly Roll Morton himself. Morton's solo has only bass accompaniment and alludes to the musical characteristics of stride piano with a loping left hand and highly syncopated improvised melodies in the right hand.

The whole band joins in at the 2:43 mark with a return of the collective improvisation texture that led to the solos. The composition concludes with two choruses of the 12-bar blues form presented with the melody in the cornet and the clarinet and trombone adding in their colorful improvisation both above and below the cornet.

Morton gracefully interweaves collective improvisation, notated melodies and individual solos to create a compelling “hot jazz” composition. It should be noted too that Morton used eight and 16-bar phrases as well as the 12-bar blues form. He was not limited by thinking that these were mutually exclusive entities. He freely used them all in the same composition freeing the piece from simple category.