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**How the Creole Band Came to Be**  
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# HOW THE CREOLE BAND CAME TO BE

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In the two years between the spring of 1914 and the spring of 1916, three ragtime bands consisting of New Orleans musicians began to disseminate the popular-music performing style of their native city to the country at large. The first of these was the Creole Band, which was organized in Los Angeles and toured in vaudeville and musical comedy for nearly four years. It has been referred to briefly by practically all comprehensive histories of jazz, almost always with important inaccuracies concerning dates and activities. The sole surviving photograph of the group has often been published, also usually incorrectly dated (see Figure 1). The performers you see are, in the front row, drummer Ollie "Dink" Johnson, who only worked with the group before it began to tour, leader and violinist James Palao, and guitarist Norwood Williams. Standing in the back row are Edward Vincent, trombonist, often still incorrectly listed as Vinson or Venson, cornetist Freddie Keppard, clarinetist George Baquet, and string bassist William Manuel Johnson.

The second ragtime group was Brown's Band, which, after working as a unit in New Orleans for approximately three years, had a small success in Chicago, then went on to fail in New York City. The third was the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. It had never worked together as a unit in New Orleans, and it underwent some major changes in personnel in Chicago, where it had a larger success for some ten months, coming to the attention particularly of important entertainers and agents. Then, as is well-known, the band went on to New York and the record contracts that guaranteed their preeminent position in jazz history.

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*Figure 1. The Creole Band. Front row (left to right): Ollie "Dink" Johnson, James Palao, Norwood Williams. Back row: Edward Vincent, Freddie Keppard, George Baquet, William Manuel Johnson. Photograph taken in Los Angeles, summer of 1914. Held in the collection of Clotile Palao Wilson.*

This story is something of a simplification. Some New Orleans musicians had already made their marks as soloists or as band leaders outside of their native city. Pianist Tony Jackson appears to have been in Chicago at least by 1911 on a more or less permanent basis and was followed there by Ferd "Jelly Roll" Morton, who arrived on the South Side in 1914. Morton had previously led bands in St. Louis, and perhaps other cities, and also directed a band in Chicago. It was not, however, composed of New Orleans musicians. It is also possible that several other ragtime bands with New Orleans connections were working in Chicago at the same time

as the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, such as one said to have been led by trombonist George Filhe.

The preeminent position of the ODJB no doubt partly accounts for the fact that the story of the group has been told repeatedly and at some length (Brunn 1960; Averty 1961; Lange 1960). The story of Brown's Band has really only been told once and briefly, although very well, on the basis of a good deal of information from two members of the group (Holbrook 1976). The Creole Band has fared less well, despite the fact that it traveled earlier and more widely than the other groups and despite the fact that six musicians who worked with the group lived long enough to be interviewed by jazz researchers of the late 1930s and 1940s.

Perhaps due to the many inconsistencies and discrepancies in the published accounts of the Creole Band, some recent writers fail to mention the group at all or give it short shrift. James Lincoln Collier, for example, despite the provocative title—"The Diaspora from New Orleans"—of the fifth chapter of his book, *The Making of Jazz* (1978), passes them over, and his lengthy recent article in the authoritative *New Grove Dictionary of American Music* (1986) makes only the briefest mention of the group, perpetuating the traditional errors. The two pages devoted to the group by Charters and Kunstadt (1962) are valuable with respect to their New York appearances, but otherwise are often at odds with other information. It says something about the relatively primitive state of jazz historiography that the manager of the orchestra, William Manuel Johnson, who died in Texas in 1972 at one hundred years of age or very close to it, was so little interviewed.

The chief objective of this essay is to fill this gap in our understanding of the first stages of the dissemination of New Orleans jazz. If it be objected that there is no way to be certain that the Creole Band was playing what would be called jazz today, the best response is that there is overwhelming agreement among New Orleans musicians who were playing before 1920 that "jazz" was just a fashionable, Northern name for New Orleans instrumental ragtime. That style undoubtedly took shape in the first decade of the century; this isn't to say that there wouldn't have been important differences between the way ragtime was played then and the way it was played between 1910 and 1920, especially when one considers the important changes in social dance fashions that occurred shortly before the outbreak of World War I.

Of the four principal kinds of sources used in writing the history of jazz—recordings, oral histories, photographs, and items from the contemporary press—the first is regrettably not available for the Creole Band. As for oral history, one might be pardoned in thinking that the thousands of

hours of taped interviews in the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane would be a very rich resource. The difficulty is, however, that the group was formed in Los Angeles and was never heard in the South; and although the members of the band undoubtedly corresponded with some of their friends and former musical associates in New Orleans, very little trace of that survived. This is not to say that the oral history tapes of the Jazz Archive do not preserve some extremely valuable information about the members of the group as individuals, but with respect to the band as such, other collections have been more valuable.

Since the Creole Band was active principally as a vaudeville act, one might expect to have fairly significant photographic documentation. This turns out not to be the case; as far as I have been able to determine, the band used only one photograph during its entire career. There are, however, quite interesting photographs of the members, singly and in pairs, taken while on tour, as well as a handful of cartoons (see Figure 2). One might well include, *faute de mieux*, in the photographic documentation of the Creole Band the three excellent photographs made of a 1916 group formed in New Orleans for vaudeville appearances and featuring, among others, violinist Armand J. Piron, clarinetist Jimmy Noone, and singer-dancer Clarence Williams. It seems quite likely that it was inspired by the example of the Creole Band (Rose & Souchon 1967, 263; *Footnote 6* (no. 3) 1975, p. 32 [article misdated]; Ramsey n.d. [cover photo mistitled as the "Original Tuxedo Band"]). To these should be added the unique photograph of dancer Mabel Elaine—for whom the Creole Band had provided music on the *Town Topics* tour of 1916—accompanied by Lawrence Duhé's band (Rose and Souchon 1967, 262).

By elimination, therefore, the chief documentation of their work comes from the mainstream white theatrical press of the time—the band did not work the black vaudeville circuits—and consists mostly of bare listings of their forthcoming appearances at one or another theater. While the group received mention in the local general newspapers wherever they appeared, most such references are culled from press releases. As routine as such information is, it nevertheless provides what oral history very rarely does: reliable dates and places. Also, one learns for which vaudeville chains they worked and with which acts they appeared; this permits some evaluation of their position on the show business ladder. Be that as it may, something on the order of 80 percent of the Creole Band's time between August 1914 and April 1918 can be accounted for. Such an itinerary doesn't make very interesting reading in itself, but the main outline can be stated relatively quickly and should be helpful for following the rest of this essay.



Figure 2. Cartoon that appeared in the Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette, November 12, 1915. The reviews were adverse.

The group came to the attention of Alexander Pantages, the then-famous theatrical magnate, after playing at the Leach Cross/Joe Rivers heavyweight prize fight in Los Angeles on August 11, 1914.<sup>1</sup> They were then booked on the Pantages circuit—after an initial trial or shake-down period of three weeks—for fifteen weeks, beginning in Winnipeg and ending in Salt Lake City in the second week of 1915. At the beginning of February, they opened in Chicago at the Grand Theater on the South Side, the only time they played a theater with a substantial, although by no means an exclusively, black patronage. After a couple of try-outs at major Loop theaters, they were booked over the chain of smallish Michigan vaudeville theaters known as “Butterfield time,” probably returning to Chicago for a two-month engagement at the North American restaurant at Madison & State in the Loop. For the rest of that season and for the fall season of 1915 they were booked by the Western Vaudeville Managers’ Association (WVMA), which grouped together several chains of theaters in Chicago, St. Louis, and smaller cities in Illinois, Iowa, and Indiana.

After a New York tryout at a so-called “Sunday concert” at the Columbia burlesque house in Times Square and a scattering of subsequent vaudeville engagements, the band joined the *Town Topics* revue, a show whose indifferent success during a first New York engagement did not keep it from being purchased by the Shubert Brothers and sent on an apparently successful five months on the road. What the show may have lacked in dramatic coherence was more than made up in lavishness of sets and costumes and in a profusion of stars, such as Trixie Friganza (who was replaced by Sophie Tucker) and Bert Leslie.

The *Town Topics* tour was followed by another trip around the Pantages circuit, then by twelve more weeks in the midwestern theaters booked by the WVMA. This takes us to early 1917—the time of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band’s arrival in New York to begin eighteen months at Reisenweber’s restaurant complex at Columbus Circle. Six weeks later, the Creole Band opened again in New York at a Times Square cabaret, Doraldina’s Montmartre, where they lasted only two weeks. After a subsequent six weeks playing vaudeville theaters under the aegis of Marcus Loew, to whom they had been “loaned” by the Shuberts, the band came

<sup>1</sup> The fight actually took place in Doyle’s Arena in Vernon, a small area completely surrounded by the city of Los Angeles. As an independent municipality it was not fettered by the notoriously restrictive Los Angeles blue laws. Goffin (1946) gives the names of the boxers correctly, with the incorrect year of 1911. His information probably came from interviews held with Louis Delille (Big Eye Louis Nelson) in 1944, but is often garbled, either due to failing memory on Delille’s part, or misunderstandings by Goffin. Goffin, for example, understood “Pantages circuit” as “Pantages circus.”

apart between South Station and North Station in Boston, some of the members returning to New York, others to New Orleans or elsewhere.

After nearly six months of apparent inactivity, the Band came together again, with some changes in personnel, for a final six months of mid-western engagements in Butterfield and WVMA theaters. At that point, several members of the band formed their own groups for South Side Chicago cabaret engagements, most notably cornetist Freddie Keppard, whose group, still sometimes using the name of "Creole Orchestra," was at the Royal Gardens or the Deluxe Cafe for the rest of 1918.

This show business saga, so precisely documented in the columns of *Variety*, the *Clipper*, the *Missouri Breeze*, and the *Freeman*, tells us nothing about how and why the group was organized and what may have led up to its organization. The search for dramatically symbolic landmarks that can make easy sense out of the early history of jazz is perhaps not conducive to asking those kinds of questions, and the participants in events may favor in their recollections their moments of glory over the steps that prepared those moments. Something of this sort appears to have occurred in the process of gathering information that began with Bill Russell's research for *Jazzmen* in 1938 (Ramsey and Smith 1939).

In the chapter on "New Orleans Music," from that epoch-making work, Russell wove together information gleaned from interviews with Bill Johnson in Chicago and with Ferd "Jelly Roll" Morton, who, if never a member of the group, was indubitably an expert witness and must have heard them in Chicago in 1915–1916. The account was—perhaps inevitably, given the customary bias in jazz history towards personality—a kind of frame for a sketch of the career of Freddie Keppard, but it was reasonably accurate, considering that the only item that had ever appeared about the group before were a passing mention in Williams (1936) and several sentences in Stearns (1936). What it did not convey, however, was the nature of the act, and what was said about its repertory was rather misleading.<sup>2</sup> Also, the two dates of 1911 and 1913 given for the organization of the band and the start of its vaudeville touring, although only a year or two off, made it difficult to begin tracking them down by the simple scheme of reading the theatrical weeklies with care. The one detail contained in the account that appears to have stuck in readers' memories—to which I hesitate to give renewed vigor by repeating it here—was the story of how Keppard persuaded the band to turn down an

2 "Everywhere they played the old New Orleans stand-by tunes and also other favorites of theirs, such as *Steamboat Blues*, *Roustabout Shuffle*, and Scott Joplin's *Pepper Rag*" (Ramsey and Smith 1939, 22). All three of these titles are deformations of correct song titles; for example, *Steamboat Blues* is probably *Steamboat Bill*.



offer to record made by the Victor Talking Machine Company a few months before the Original Dixieland Jazz Band recorded. He was reported to have said, "Nothin' doin', boys. We won't put our stuff on records for everybody to steal."<sup>3</sup> Given the degree to which the history of jazz has been (and still is) conceived as the history of jazz recording, the effect of this anecdote could well have been to discourage further research. After all, what interest is there in a band we can never hear on record?

A good deal of detail was added in an extremely important interview with clarinetist George Baquet conducted by Frederic Ramsey, Jr. While some of it was merely picturesque—for example, that Baquet, in his days with the band, "sported a fine diamond-horseshoe pin stuck carelessly and flauntingly into a graceful, flowing cravat" (Ramsey 1940)—other points were drastically at odds with the dates provided by Bill Johnson to Bill Russell and published in *Jazzmen*. Firstly, Baquet gave 1908 as the date that the group, organized by Johnson, left New Orleans; Baquet also stated that the orchestra traveled on "'a hustlin' trip all over Dixie,' making money as they barnstormed, 'just like the German bands used to do at that time'" (Ramsey 1941).

At least part of this information was spectacularly confirmed in an unpublished interview with Bill Johnson conducted in Texas in 1959 by J. C. Avery. The relevant section begins with an account of the opening of the railroad between Gulfport and Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and the first Pullman car train that traveled over the line. It seems to say (the notes are partly in French, partly in English, and not always easy to decipher in a less than ideal Xerox copy) that newspapermen asked the band playing at Tom Anderson's café in New Orleans to go along on the trip. The musicians mentioned are William Tounsil, mandolin; Bill Johnson, guitar; Alphonse Ferzand, bass; Charley "Henderson" (the quotation marks are in Avery's notes), banjo; John Collins, trumpet. Apparently they were asked to travel to Chicago and New York, but no one wanted to leave New Orleans. After their return to the city, they organized a "get-up" band that in 1908 took the train to California, stopping along the way at such towns as Houston, Dallas, Waco, and Yuma. This band consisted of

3 Although it would be out of place to deal with this matter in this essay, the grounds for my hesitation to reinvigorate the Ramsey and Smith story should be made explicit. As one reads it, it sounds like the ignorant and short-sighted reaction of a reputedly hot-tempered and haughty musician. A perusal of the trade press of the time shows that many vaudeville artists were fearful of and resentful about the pirating of their best routines. In any event, there are at least two alternative explanations provided by contemporaries for the alleged decision not to record. It has also been suggested that the offer to record may have been made during the band's first trip to New York City at the end of 1915.

Johnson, mandolin; Alphonse Ferzand, bass (said now to have been from Biloxi); Padéo, valve trombone; Charles Washington, guitar; and Ernest Carquet, trumpet.<sup>4</sup> The group played for a month at the Red Feather tavern in Los Angeles, but did not go to San Francisco. Following this engagement, they are said to have returned to New Orleans, where they stayed for about a year. At this point, there is a certain amount of chronological and geographical confusion in Johnson's account—at least as it is conveyed by Averty's notes—which is not resolved until the mention of the August 1914 Leach Cross/Joe Rivers prize fight at which they were heard by Pantages. (The date, although not mentioned in Johnson's account, is readily confirmed in any major daily newspaper of the day.) It is striking that there has been no mention by Johnson of George Baquet. Although his name may have been inadvertently omitted by Averty, hard-pressed to keep up with Johnson, my interpretation is that Baquet and Johnson were possibly never together until the formation of the group in Los Angeles, and that Baquet was simply passing on to Ramsey what he had heard about the earlier group or groups between 1908 and 1914.

The trip to California in 1908 receives confirmation from a source that seemed to me when I first encountered it somewhat less than credible. In July 1940 William Russell spoke with a certain Mamie Johnson, the middle-aged and "quite big and heavy" madam of a small brothel—in fact, there was only one girl there—on the south side of Third Street in San Francisco. She said that she was Bill Johnson's wife and had a large framed photograph of the Creole Band on the wall of her parlor. (She had told a previous informant that she had beaten Bill up with a gold-handled umbrella when he had been in the hospital after having been shot by a white girl.) According to Mamie, the Creole Band came to California the year that Admiral "Fighting Bob" Evans had been with his "Great White Fleet" in San Francisco and Los Angeles. She said further that the original trombonist of the Creole Band was a certain Pattio, who later lost his mind, and that "Horace Greeley" was an early Creole Band drummer (Mamie Johnson 1940).

Notwithstanding the fact that a well-traveled musician who was, according to many accounts, an inveterate ladies' man could have had many wives, the relationship between Bill Russell's interviewee and Bill Johnson recently received strong support from Johnson's World War I

4 The family name of the trumpeter was written and scratched out three times in Averty's notes before he settled on the spelling "Carquet." But since New Orleans trumpeter Ernest Coycault is known to have gone to California at a very early date, it seems likely that they are one and the same person. "Padéo" is very probably Albert Paddio, the trombonist mentioned by Mamie Johnson (below) and by Jelly Roll Morton (see Lomax 1950, 159).

draft registration, on which he listed his nearest relative as wife Mayme Johnson, 6 Clyde St., San Francisco, California (Johnson 1918). Furthermore, the details concerning Pattio and Fightin' Bob Evans's fleet (which visited the West Coast at the end of 1907 and the beginning of 1908) corresponded with the information gathered from Johnson by Avery. Still, the first firm date in all of this mass of data extracted from oral histories was that of the prize fight.

As I write these words, I am no longer sure when I became aware of the bits of published evidence that would serve to confirm the stories of Bill Johnson and his wife. My recollection is that I was carrying on the investigation on several fronts simultaneously. In any event, during the course of my intensive reading of the theatrical pages of the Indianapolis *Freeman*—and from time to time, notes from local correspondents in towns that interested me—I began to amass a good many references to the Big Four String Band of Hattiesburg and Biloxi, a musical organization led by William Tuncel, a mandolinist. The most detailed of these comes from the *Freeman* and deserves quotation at length:

Mr. Tuncel came to Mississippi in 1890, and began his music career when quite a boy in the city of Mobile. Since then he has traveled through many different states of the Union. He has won the name of being the best mandolin player in the Southern States. Manuel Holly, the bass violinist, is a musical genius. He is of Mobile also, and has spent most of his time on the coast in the grand summer resorts. R. H. Johnson, the guitarist of Biloxi, is an artist, and is getting more like his brother William every day. T. A. Dickerson, the cornetist, is in Jackson. C. C. Henderson, of New Orleans, has won great fame with his banjo. His wife Mrs. Nannie Henderson is a first-sight reader at the piano (Indianapolis *Freeman* July 11, 1908, p. 5).

We should remember that in the Avery interview, Bill Johnson refers to Charley "Henderson," a banjoist, and then to Charles Washington, a guitarist. C. C. Henderson is mentioned in the *Freeman* of March 24, 1908, as a banjoist formerly associated with Tuncel's orchestra (since the fall of 1900), who had left for his old home, New Orleans. Later in the year the same newspaper in its issue of October 17th refers to a C. C. Washington as the guitarist with the four-piece Tramps Orchestra of New Orleans,<sup>5</sup> and two weeks later he is mentioned again in the following words: "C. C. Washington, comedian and all-round athlete, formerly of the Creole Or-

<sup>5</sup> The other members were T. P. Brown, mandolin; E. A. Jones, trombone; and S. Morant, bass violin. The *Freeman* of February 8, 1908, described the Tramps in the following manner: "The Tramps Social Club at New Orleans is an organization composed of performers. . . . They give balls and shows to replenish the treasury in order to assist in caring for the sick and burying the dead." A lengthy listing of officers and members was included.

chestra, of Oakland, Cal., is with the Tramps of New Orleans" (Indiana-*Freeman* October 31, 1908, p. 5). Washington is also listed in the Federal Census of 1910 for New Orleans as a forty-four-year-old musician born in Kentucky, residing at 336 S. Liberty St. (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1910).

It is a reasonable assumption, in my opinion, that Washington and Henderson are the same person. If this be granted, the various citations of Washington/Henderson by Bill Johnson and in the *Freeman* are consistent with a trip by Johnson's group to California around the middle of 1908. The detail concerning Washington's membership in the "Creole Orchestra, of Oakland, Cal." is not easy to explain, in the light of the explicit remark by Bill Johnson in the Averty interview that the band did *not* go to San Francisco. What might have been said, of course, was that although the band went to Oakland, it never made it as far as San Francisco.

Another possibility is this: the Creole Café was a notorious locale in West Oakland patronized by white slummers where, "white and black patrons dine and watch the entertainment" (Oakland *Tribune* October 5, 1920 [held in clipping file at the Oakland Public Library]). While some musicians interviewed in Stoddard (1982) said that the café didn't open until 1919 or 1920, pianist Wesley "Fess" Fields remembered it as one of the three places where he had worked with his band around 1910 (Stoddard 1982, 81). Perhaps, then, Washington/Henderson had on an earlier trip to California played at the Creole Café by himself or as part of a local band.

More substantiation of the California tour came from Benjamin "Reb" Spikes, who is reported as saying: "There wasn't much music in Los Angeles I remember before I went to Frisco in 1907. . . . Will Johnson came here in 1907, playin' bass with his Creole Band. He had Ernest Coycault with him on trumpet. Coycault called himself Johnson because Will and him looked so much alike everybody thought they were brothers. . . . Ernest stayed here 'til he died. . . . They had a valve trombone player named Padio and he came from New Orleans with them. He went to Vancouver, British Columbia, and I heard he died there. A lot of those New Orleans fellas you never knew nothin' but one name. He's still around here if he's alive" (Stoddard 1982, 56).

There is no reason to doubt that other New Orleans ragtime bands, black or white, would have played engagements outside that city during this period. It was not unusual, for example, for New Orleans bands to go to neighboring cities in Louisiana and along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. It is one thing, however, to make a brief excursion to Baton Rouge or Biloxi,

another to leave on tour or to play an extended engagement in a distant place. It may have been on such an occasion that pianist Jelly Roll Morton heard Freddie Keppard play in Memphis in 1910 (Gushee 1985, 396), perhaps associated with Bill Johnson or George Baquet.

A brief summary might be helpful at this point. To two of the musicians in the Creole Band which began to tour vaudeville in August, 1914, there had been an earlier Creole Band. The group formed by Johnson involved a number of musicians, including himself, who had previously worked in William Tuncel's Big Four String Band of Hattiesburg and Biloxi. Baquet may well have combined a recollection of this group—one with which he doesn't appear to have been directly connected—with that of other bands which, inspired by the example of the California trip, made increasingly ambitious sorties from their home base, New Orleans.

It is reasonably certain that two members of the original group either remained in California or returned after a brief visit home: Ernest Coycault and the trombonist, Pattio. It may be an idle question to ask when Bill Johnson moved definitively to California, since he seems to have been something of a rolling stone all his life. In any event, the date of 1909 encountered in several books is not attested by any documents. He was living in Los Angeles when Armontine Carter Palao, the estranged wife of violinist James Palao, arrived there from New Orleans in late 1912, but according to her, he was already there when the Palaos were married in 1905 (Palao 1983). Also living in Los Angeles when she arrived was Bill's sister, Bessie, better known to jazz history as Jelly Roll Morton's paramour and muse, Anita Gonzales. Around the same time Bessie also lived in Las Vegas, Nevada, where her younger brother, Ollie "Dink" Johnson, came from Biloxi or New Orleans to work in the saloon she managed, probably in 1913 (Ollie Johnson 1940). Dink, one should recall, was the Creole Band's drummer before they left on their vaudeville tour. Finally, Mrs. Palao recalled that Norwood "Gigi" Williams was also in Los Angeles when she came from New Orleans. In fact, city directories attest to his presence there from 1911. Williams remembered having played with Bill and Dink Johnson in various sporting houses in Biloxi and New Orleans and in a similar group in Los Angeles (Williams 1940). The first group must have been before 1911, the second, after Dink's arrival in 1913. In the latter part of 1913, James Palao and his wife were reconciled, and he rejoined her and the two children in California. By the end of 1913, then, four of the members of the band were in Los Angeles: Bill Johnson and his brother Ollie, Norwood Williams, and Palao.

Some accounts would have it that the other members of the group,

Baquet, Keppard, and Vincent<sup>6</sup>—were sent for in order to play at the heavyweight bout that took place in August 1914. This seems unlikely in view of George Baquet's characterization of playing at prizefights as a "sideline" for which the band was paid only by passing the hat (Ramsey 1941). Furthermore, the business card and the photograph in evening dress given by Bill Johnson to Bill Russell, and reproduced in *Jazzmen* (Ramsey and Smith 1939, between pp. 32 and 33), clearly point to a group organized for providing dance music, something which obviously took place between Palao's arrival in the latter part of 1913 and the Cross/Rivers boxing match in August 1914.

In filling in the details of this period, a perusal of the Afro-American newspapers published in California proved to be an unexpected boon. The *California Eagle* of April 5, 1914, announced music by the Creole Orchestra for the Easter outing of truck drivers that was to take place a week later at Seal Gardens. On June 13 the same paper advertised the Imperial Band of New Orleans at the Emancipation Day carnival to be held June 18th and 19th at New Germania Park in Playa del Rey. Finally, the music at the Fourth of July all-night ball held at Dreamland Hall was furnished by "Johnson's Imperial Band of Los Angeles and New Orleans."

The name "Imperial Band" may have been common at the time, but its further designation as from Los Angeles and New Orleans links it strongly to one of the leading New Orleans orchestras of the first decade of the century. Following the tendency to assume that the cornetist is the leader of any band, jazz history associates the Imperial Band primarily with the name of cornetist Emanuel Perez. The evidence of a photograph taken ca. 1905 (Rose and Souchon 1967, 164) is that James Palao was the leader: his cap bears that legend. My working hypothesis is that calling the group Johnson's Imperial Band is strong testimony to a partnership between Johnson and Palao. The name "Creole Band" used for the vaudeville

6 There are indications that other musicians, for example, clarinetist Louis Delille (who was later to join the band for the season of 1916–1917) and trombonist Cornelius "Zue" Robertson, had been asked to come to California before Baquet and Vincent. An account given by Jelly Roll Morton (Lomax 1950, 116f. and 143f.) would have it that Bill Johnson, bankrolled by his sister Bessie, took over the band that Freddie Keppard had organized for the Tuxedo dance hall of New Orleans after the killing of saloonkeeper Billy Phillips in March 1913 [the actual date, not given by Morton], and took it to California. According to Morton, the members of that band—which had been reduced from the usual seven pieces to five for economic reasons—were Keppard, Baquet, and Vincent, accompanied by pianist Narcisse "Buddy" Christian and drummer Didi Chandler. While Morton may have been in New Orleans for brief periods between 1912 and 1914, his home base appears to have been Texas for much of the time and his knowledge of events was probably at second or third hand (Gushee 1985).

tours—although on occasion the group was billed as Johnson’s Band—strikes one as more vivid and appealing.

We are lucky indeed that such firmly dated evidence survives, but, of course, it tells us little about the music that the group might have played. Fortunately, Paul Howard, the only musician whose memories of the group before they began to tour vaudeville have survived, was able to give us some information on both general and specific points. “They practiced and practiced there [at the Clark Hotel] every day,” and, in a foreshadowing of the legend concerning Keppard’s rejection of the Victor recording offer, “they didn’t want me to stay around there. I would play any tune that they had.” Howard was also impressed that the band did not play loud, a point contradicted by other testimony, notably from Bill Johnson, that in theater engagements Keppard was so loud that the audience in the first rows was prompted to move further back. A bit further on in the same interview, Howard recalled rehearsals in the home of Lee Larkins at Washington & Central Avenue. Larkins was a friend to musicians, something attested by the presence of a keg of beer at the rehearsals (Howard 1978).

On an earlier occasion, Howard told William Russell that the band played a dance at the Central Labor Council Hall on Maple, between Fifth and Sixth Streets, in Los Angeles, and he heard their first piece, “The Egyptian.” It was the first time he ever liked the clarinet in the low register.<sup>7</sup> When Russell asked what their way of playing was called, Howard replied, “Swinging syncopation. They don’t syncopate music nowadays” (Howard 1969).

George Baquet recalled for Frederic Ramsey the routine the band used for another tune:

They played between bouts. Freddie Keppard, the cornetist, climbed up on a bench, put his derby over the cornet, and the crowd began to sway as he opened with *In Mandalay*. “Get up in the ring and play, get up in the ring,” an appreciative audience howled, and the Creole orchestra took over the arena. The incident was written up in the *Los Angeles Times*, where a cartoon of Baquet playing his clarinet was published (Ramsey 1941).

Baquet contributed a somewhat more detailed account a few years later when he spoke to the New Orleans Jazz Club:

And when we played the then popular number *Mandalay*, Freddie Keppard

<sup>7</sup> The composition is mentioned, never with the precisely correct name, in many places. The actual title is *Egyptia*, an intermezzo written by Abe Olman in 1911. In the orchestration published by Will Rossiter, Chicago, and arranged by Harry L. Alford, the melody of the first strain is indeed allocated to the clarinet in the low register.

our cornetist stood up with his egg mute and an old Derby Hat on the bell of the instrument. The crowd stood up as one man and shouted for us to get up into the ring, and screamed and screamed. When we got down, Mr. Carl Walker, Mr. Alec Pantages' manager, stepped up asking for our card, and asked if Mr. Pantages would send for us, would we come to the theater. A few days later we went to the theater there and played a few numbers for he and his family, including the famous Oklahoma Bob Albright, the noted cowboy singer. So Mr. Pantages jumped up on the stage and asked us to form an act, he did not care what, so long as he had that music. So, going into a huddle we formed a plantation act with a comedian, the character of Old Man Mose (Baquet 1965).

It was tempting to follow up the leads provided by Baquet, especially in the earlier *Down Beat* article (Ramsey 1940), and Bill Russell spent some time looking in vain through the files of the Los Angeles *Times* for the cartoon. In fact, the account of the incident in the *Times* was hardly complimentary:

#### DISGUSTING EXHIBITION MARRED THE FIGHT

by Harry Carr

While waiting for Rivers and Cross, some one connected with the management had an unhappy inspiration to allow a company of negroes, perpetrating a vile imitation of music, to enter the ring and insult the audience by very obviously begging for coins (Carr 1914).

As luck and a certain amount of persistence would have it, both a laudatory story and a cartoon—presumably the one Baquet remembered—were found in the somewhat less classy but widely read *Examiner*:

After promoting boxing in Los Angeles for some twelve years, Promoter McCarey pulled a new one on the populace by installing the Creole Orchestra at the ringside, and what those colored boys didn't hammer out of "seven pieces" wasn't worth calling for. The "Road to Mandalay" was traveled in a way that would have brought spasms of joy from old Al Jolson. Without knowing the ace of spades from the ace of clubs we are willing to bet a few iron men that the cornetist and slick trombone juggler came from that dear old New Orleans. . . . Johnny Arrozay and Patsy Riley essayed to box ten rounds between "This is the Life" and "Mississippi Dreams." Thirty minutes of fast tangoing without a slip to a "draw" decision (Walker 1914).

The cartoon by Hal Stephen (1914) appeared on the next day. Most of it is devoted to the boxing, but in the upper right hand corner is depicted Battling Brandt (referred to in the *Times* report) dancing to the music of three caricatured black musicians. The middle player is indeed a clari-



netist, flanked by a cornetist and a string bassist. It is hard to imagine the musically well-schooled Baquet, a handsome Creole, taking much pleasure in the cartoon, as much publicity value as it may have had for the band.

The two other Los Angeles dailies that I was able to consult commented briefly on the music. The reporter for the *Record* wrote:

The New Orleans Creole band enlivened proceedings by rendering a number of ripping good ragtime selections. The crowd seemed to enjoy the music, but there was far too much delay between the time the preliminary boys vacated the ring and the first appearance of the main event principals (August 12, 1914, p. 9).

And the *Tribune* reported:

The "Creole Orchestra," ably aided by Battling Brant, whiled away the "watchful waiting" periods (August 12, 1914, p. 12).

The *Tribune*, which had generally good theatrical coverage, confirmed the story of discovery by Pantages, with the omission of the middle man remembered by Baquet, Carl Walker.

Last week at Vernon, during the progress of the Cross-Rivers engagement, Alex Pantages discovered a new vaudeville attraction, a colored ragtime band with a style of comedy-music all their own. The vaudeville magnate believes he has secured a unique attraction, and to try the public opinion of the act before sending it over the circuit will present the band here as an added attraction with the week's show (August 7, 1914, p. 5).

Here the vaudeville history of the group begins, and here we will conclude for the time being.

The main points that emerge from this sketch of the "pre-history" of the Creole Band are that there were a number of sorties made from New Orleans (including Hattiesburg and Biloxi in the broad region influenced by the metropole) before their career in the national limelight began. It seems likely, lacking evidence to the contrary, that these earlier groups were providing dance and entertainment music, but not a theatrical act. There is also nothing to indicate that the groups of Afro-American musicians mentioned here—Tuncel's Big Four String Band, the Imperial orchestra, and the string band at Tom Anderson's—were the only ones to begin to spread the New Orleans manner of playing ragtime around the South and the rest of the country.

It seems clear that there was never any concerted decision to form a large group and attempt to crack big-time vaudeville. The nucleus of the

band—the Johnsons, Norwood Williams, and James Palao—went to California at different times and for different reasons, only some of them, perhaps, musical ones. The best-trained and most versatile musician, Palao, joined forces with Bill Johnson, a gregarious and resourceful manager with considerable musical experience (he was forty years old already), and invited Keppard, Baquet, and Vincent to join them in the spring of 1914.

Most indications are that the chief drawing card of the group, at the beginning and for the duration of their vaudeville career, was ragtime music played in a recognizable New Orleans style. Nonetheless, they presented themselves as a traditional plantation darky act. Armontine Palao, the wife of the leader of the band, said that she only saw the band in action once, when they were at the start of their career. She was distressed by the fact that they were dressed like field hands in overalls, straw hats, and red bandannas. As good as they were, she said, they shouldn't have had to dress that way (Palao 1983). If we are to believe Baquet, this was their own choice, but hardly a free choice in view of the limited roles permitted black performers in vaudeville at the time. One doubts that they could have succeeded in any other way.

In retrospect, this choice was momentous so far as their place in history is concerned. The reputation of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band was based on its brand of hot dance music, not on the performers' abilities as all-around vaudeville entertainers. Otherwise put, the product of the ODJB, enhanced by the superlative recording technique of the Victor engineers, could be disseminated in a matter of months to millions of dancers. The Creole Band on the other hand, beginning as a New Orleans dance orchestra transplanted to California, attained national fame as a vaudeville act. Perhaps their greatest misfortune was that when they decided to break up they continued to play in various new combinations in Chicago, not New York, and consequently had no easy access to the recording industry. Be that as it may, the journey from the Biloxi of 1908 to the Chicago of 1918 was by any measure a remarkable one.

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